

The Central Question

You are holding a small book with an old-fashioned title. It might seem like a messenger from the past, or from no time at all, like one of those books you pull off the shelf at a musty old retreat house.

That's pretty much what I'm aiming for. The shelves at your local bookstore are bulging with titles addressing urgent, transitory concerns, but this book intends a different pace. I want to examine a more timeless and universal question, one basic to the human condition, and to address it with more timeless wisdom.

That kind of wisdom is certainly not my own. I am too caught in my own time to attempt timelessness, not to mention having a pretty short stock of personal wisdom. But I hope to pass on, as accurately as I can

understand it, a consensus that grew and flourished among Christians from the first century onward. This was a consensus regarding how to do the most important—perhaps the only *really* important—thing we can do: to live in Christ.

This is the early Christians' wisdom, not mine. I hope not to say anything original. If I do, ignore it.

What is this human condition, this timeless question? To take the most global approach, we could say that it is the riddle of why none of us feels really at home in this world. We're not consciously aware of this uneasiness every minute, of course; with enough entertaining distractions, we can hold it at bay. But still it's there all the time, just under the surface, a murmuring unease. Almost unheard but still persistent, it rushes in the background of our lives like an underground river.

It can take different forms with different people. For some, there's a vague, haunting feeling that we're always disappointing others; for others, it's that everyone else is always disappointing us. A lot of us feel like the whole rest of the world is in on a joke we're not getting, and we just smile awkwardly and pretend to go along. Some of us are burdened throughout

our lives with guilt for a severe and genuine evil we committed. Others feel peppered daily by twinges over a host of minor offenses, pursued as by a cloud of mosquitos.

For all of us, I think, there is a recurrent sense of loneliness. Ultimately, we *are* alone, humanly speaking, on this hurtling earth. Even in the most jovial and affectionate of families—and I speak from blessed experience—there remains a melancholy awareness that each of us is still fundamentally alone, encapsulated in skin like a spaceman. Even when enjoying those whom we love most, we are looking through a pane of glass, and all the urgent longing of our hearts can't break through.

We modern Christians have a ready and confident response to this dilemma. We say that of course this is so; it is because, as St. Augustine said, God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together, as St. Paul put it. When we draw near God, and only then, do we find our place in relation to the world. It is like going up the spoke of a wheel to the center, and when nearest him we find ourselves closest to everything else he has made.

Here is communion. In God's presence we discover ourselves able to love one another, to be vessels of heroic love, even toward our enemies, even unto death. We find all creation in harmony around us, as responsive and fruitful as the Garden was to Adam and Eve. The peace that passes understanding informs our every thought.

All this sounds pretty good, right? So why are we doing such a crummy job of it?

Why are we modern Christians so undistinguishable from the world?

Why are our rates of dysfunction and heart-break just as high? Why don't we stand out in virtue and joy? Does anyone *ever* say, "We know that they are his disciples, because they love one another"?

How come Christians who lived in times of bloody persecution were so heroic, while we who live in safety are fretful and pudgy?

How could the earlier saints "pray constantly," while our minds dawdle over trivialities?

How could they fast so valiantly, and we feel deprived if there's no cookie at the end of the in-flight meal?

How could the martyrs forgive their torturers, but my friend's success makes me pouty?

What did previous generations of Christians
know that we don't?

That's what this book is about.

A Challenging Answer

A modern Christian may well feel perplexed by the questions at the end of the last chapter. We think, “But we know what the answer has to be: Jesus is the answer.” So we try each day better to love and follow him, and yet the life we lead would not readily be described as “victorious.” To tell the truth, we don’t even attempt anything that strenuous. We know we can’t do it. So we do the best we can, getting by, sometimes befuddled and disappointed, turning to God for consolation.

This spiritual cycle was depicted in a devotional story that came my way by e-mail. In it a young mom was reflecting on her tendency to grump and gripe, such that one day even her toddler said he didn’t want to be around her. “I wish I could make a whole-life resolution” to do

better, she said, but she knew that she would inevitably fail. “I’ll make *lots* of bad choices, I’ll sin *a lot* more. My heart is heavy with this reality.”

Then, turning to the hymn “And Can It Be,” she quoted the line, “No condemnation now I dread.” Because grace has been poured out on us, she explained, we no longer have to feel burdened by our inevitable falls. We can go on trying and failing and forgiven, comforted by the limitless nature of God’s grace.

Most of us modern-day Christians will nod at this story; it sounds so right and so reassuring. But let’s imagine we could hand this e-mail to a Christian of another era, perhaps from the fifth or sixth century, living in the Middle East. We’ll call her Anna. As she reads over this anecdote, she’s perplexed by the sudden turn at the end. Oh, plenty of it sounds familiar: being grumpy, having failings, wanting to do better. She has three kids herself, and a husband who runs a busy olive press. Some of these stresses are timeless.

But how does “No condemnation now I dread” address that situation? She wants real help to change, not just consolation. And she expects that real help, through Jesus’ promise of

the Holy Spirit. For her, this story omits that practical hope, and trails off in anticlimax.

One thing about the anecdote particularly perplexes Anna. Why is this mother mainly concerned with condemnation? For Anna, the problem is not so much the final reward of sin, but the natural daily result of it—the way it distances her from God. Her whole life is a journey toward union with God, and nettling daily failures are like rocks in the path, hindering her from drawing closer to this great love. Sins are all the little actions and inactions that serve our selfish impulses and that can be so hard to resist—even, ahead of time, hard to detect. Anna gets frustrated with these failures, not mostly because they earn a future penalty, but because they block her today from what her heart desires: to see the glory of God reflected in the face of her beloved Lord Jesus.

Just fixing the final-condemnation part won't solve her problem. Resigning oneself to continual failure, then stamping "Debt Paid" at the end of the bill, sounds like a depressing prescription. What Anna wants instead, and what she expects, and what she steadily progresses toward, is a truly transformed life, where sin is being conquered every day.

So for Anna it's not gloomy dread of condemnation that's the problem. Sure, that's what our sins deserve; yet God desires not the death of a sinner, but that we turn from our wickedness and live. His seeking, saving love is beyond question. At church Anna's husband, Theodore, a deacon, chants prayers emphasizing God's unceasing mercy. Many of her church's hymns conclude with the line, "For you alone are the lover of mankind." God the Father is likened to the father of the prodigal son, someone whose forgiving love is never ending, never deserved. Anna and her fellow-worshippers see themselves as the harlot who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, or the thief on the cross, who did nothing deserving yet was "saved by a single glance" of Christ, as one hymn says. So God's seeking, saving love is something Anna never has to doubt.

No, the problem isn't with God, it's with her. God continually calls to her, but she doesn't always want to listen. His love is constant, but she doesn't receive it consistently, or sometimes even willingly. This is because God's love is a healing love, and healing isn't always comfortable. It heals in a surgical sense, and the scalpel can hurt. It's more comfortable to avoid those

times of authentic confrontation with God, which can rattle us so deeply.

Yet God is unwilling to leave her as she is, confused and mired in sin. To receive God's healing Anna must examine and admit her failings, the things she'd rather ignore or dismiss with "I just can't help it," or "God accepts me anyway." She must not just resolve to do better, she must actually do better. She must expect that there will always be new layers of unexpected sin under the old ones, and that she will never outgrow the identity "sinner." Yet there is peace, joy even, in admitting this truth. After all, Jesus came only to save sinners; the righteous, he said, can take care of themselves. All the cloudy layers of sin inside Anna are something that God already knows about and sees through, and he loves her and wills to save her anyway. There is no need for shame.

Nor is there reason to slack off. Anna must take seriously Jesus' charge to "be perfect," and daily ask for grace to perceive her sins and fight against them. Otherwise she will block the love that God constantly streams toward her, and her healing will be delayed. There is a fearful danger here. A habitually hardened heart can even cease caring about God, and cast away the

gift of salvation. Look at Judas, who received bread from Jesus' own hand, and yet betrayed him for money. Could love of prosperity, or social climbing, or vanity gradually drag Anna away from Jesus as well?

Every morning she prays for help to be vigilant, humble, yielded; every night she prays for forgiveness, reviewing the day's mistakes and asking for strength to do better tomorrow. She is like an athlete in training, striving toward a prize, as St. Paul said. In the company of her fellow church members, mutually forgiving and supporting one another, fasting together, listening closely to the words of the worship services and cultivating constant interior prayer, and by talking privately with her pastor about her struggles, Anna can draw closer to her beloved every day. It's a thrilling prospect, the work of a lifetime, which proceeds in glory in the next.

So Who Cares?

Sounds nice, but why should we be interested in Anna's approach? Christians today experience and express their faith in many ways. Isn't this just one more? Why should we care how Anna and Theodore lived, prayed, and understood the Scriptures? They lived a long time ago, after all; don't times change?

It's because times change that we should especially take notice of that which stands the test of time. The voice of Christians of the early centuries deserves our special attention, indeed special respect, because they had an advantage we don't. Those believers lived closer to the time of Christ, in the same cultural milieu and using the same pool of languages. They were descendants of the first believers, the first martyrs and missionaries; the history of the

church was the history of their own family and neighborhood. They wrote the Scriptures, in fact, and so they were able to understand them better than we can. Imagine giving today's Paris newspaper to a native of the city, and giving it to an Alaskan 1500 or 2000 years from now. Whose interpretation will be more accurate?

There's a further reason to listen to these early Christians: What they believed was held consistently, over a very long time and over very long distances. That's a supernatural feat on the order of a miracle. We modern Christians have come to expect that theology, morality, and worship will shift dramatically over the course of a decade or two, and between one neighboring congregation and another. We're not even ashamed of this any more, or concerned about how truth could be so splintered.

Yet, despite daunting problems of language, distance, and persecution, the early Christians had a unity in faith that endured across many continents and lasted for many centuries. Better than "multicultural," it was "transcultural," arising with resilience in all times and places that the gospel spread. In fact, that was the simple test by which the fifth-century monk St. Vincent of Lérins said we could tell the true

faith from falsehood: “that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.”

No single local example of the early church was perfect, of course; people were as much sinners then as now. Yet this radiant and consistent faith, a gift of God, kept emerging, kept persisting everywhere throughout the Christian world.

We modern Western Christians are often unaware of this part of our faith story. Many of us know the Bible, then skip a thousand years to the medieval era, or fifteen hundred years to the Reformation, leaving the initial period a blank. We do the same thing geographically, picturing Christianity as a faith restricted to western Europe.

But Christianity began in the Middle East and spread in both directions at once, and our history takes place in eastern Europe as well, and in Asia, India, and Africa. Its richness stretches all the way back to the first century, and is filled with vibrant heroes, preachers, events, and miracles whose stories we have never known. We modern Christians are victims of amnesia; we have forgotten the powerful tale of where we came from, and this wisdom that our older sisters and brothers knew.

How did this happen? Answering that question requires a detour through history, and a further question: Why did this happen here, but not everywhere? In much of the eastern hemisphere the faith practiced still resembles that of Anna's day. Why would things change so much in western Europe, yet stay the same elsewhere?

Let's begin by thinking about how change happens—what enables it to occur, and what limits it. Change is possible when the source of authority approves change. In the early church, the leadership model was one that diffused authority among everyone, everywhere, in all times, as St. Vincent proposed above. This made it very difficult to change—there wasn't a central office building where you could send letters of protest, or hold a demonstration; it wasn't even much use to boot out a church leader and elect a new one. The faith was expected to be something that arose among all believers everywhere, under the living guidance of the Holy Spirit. Church leaders didn't develop or edit the faith, but were like museum guards, responsible only to protect the treasure and pass it on intact. What happened in one city had to harmonize in all essential things with what happened in the next city; it must also harmonize with great-

grandmother's memory. When it requires everybody's key to open the cabinet and rearrange the shelves, rearranging happens very rarely.

Naturally, there were disputes, some very intense. But the model for resolution was the one seen in the fifteenth chapter of the Book of Acts: leaders of equal rank meeting to argue and pray through to consensus. What's more, council decisions didn't become final until they were carried back home and the common people agreed to receive them. If the hierarchy went astray, the laity would defy them; in the fourth century St. Basil described the old and sick standing in snowy fields to worship rather than entering churches led by heretical priests.

This communal faith, rising from the grass roots and accumulating over time, was itself the final authority. Not a person, not a list of rules, but a living, abiding faith—the evidence of Jesus' promise, "I will send the Holy Spirit and he will guide you into all truth."

Not that people always remained faithful to this treasure, of course. Just as in ancient Israel, when people began to wander God would appoint leaders to call them back to the historic, communal faith. No one would announce

instead that new situations require fresh responses, and I'm just the guy to tell you about them. Anna's congregation would recognize such words as an invitation to madness, if not spiritual suicide. The current age will always blow with confusing winds, and they are never authoritative. No innovator can be smart enough to reinterpret Scripture or to cook up new theology all by himself. The person who thinks he is has fallen into tragic delusion. No, it was in returning to the common faith that they would once again hear the Holy Spirit's voice.

Think again about those leaders, those early bishops and teachers, and how they were like museum guards. In western Europe there was a subtle shift: Leaders became more like museum *curators*. They gradually moved into a larger teaching and interpreting role, and the common people assumed a role that was correspondingly more receptive, and less that of equal participants in a broadly rooted, self-authenticating faith. The practical effects of this shift provoked strong resistance from Christians in the East, culminating in the Great Schism of A.D. 1054, after which Christians in western Europe and elsewhere went their separate ways.

The path of the eastern Church from that point forward is mostly unknown to Western Christians, but despite conquest and persecution at the hands of Crusaders, Muslims, and most recently Communists, the lack of a mechanism for change has kept those churches remarkably unchanged. Not that these sister churches were entirely populated by saints; human failure and power struggles abounded there as elsewhere. But the treasure was preserved, even during eras when its resources were neglected. Since no one had authority to rewrite the prayers, morals, doctrines, or spiritual disciplines, visiting a healthy worshiping community in this tradition today can be like stepping back through time.

Our story in western Europe is more familiar. When the Reformation arose five hundred years after the Great Schism, it was prompted partly by renewed controversy over the top-down leadership model. But at this point the once-universal idea that there existed a common deposit of faith had been lost. The hope of returning to a simple, Bible-based faith was now complicated by the need for someone to explain what that faith was. Soon many gifted leaders were offering differing interpretations, and

followers aligned with one or another as they found them most convincing. Instead of one leader there were multiple leaders, and there was no longer a common, grass-roots faith.

The next step was that, if each person can decide for himself whom to follow, each person can decide for himself what the faith is. The splintering was complete. And since the current generation is always the one making these decisions, it seemed that the most innovative, up-to-date ideas were the most correct ones. It was assumed that the newest ideas are the truest ideas, a notion that would astonish Anna's husband, Deacon Theodore, who leads worship with prayers that are already centuries old.

Thus the early church's understanding—that the faith was an organic thing that sprang up from all people in common—was gradually forgotten. The expectation that an individual believer would submit to this mutual faith, and submit to the accumulated witness of previous generations, was lost.

However, the loss is not irreversible. These early Christians wrote constantly. They wrote sermons and evangelistic tracts, theological treatises and debates, guidelines about how to