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Love and Commitment

Love Is Never Sure Apart from Commitment

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As the study group convenes in the bookstore coffee shop, John watches their faces closely. Was anyone offended by last week's discussion? He is relieved to find a warm friendliness and banter as they all get their drinks and snacks and sit down. They scoot their chairs in close to the table and exchange good and bad snippets of the past week—car problems, a letter from a long-lost classmate, a computer glitch solved. John smiles and thinks, We come from different backgrounds and hold different views, but we can talk about them freely and accept each other. We're experiencing love right here, at least the friendship type.

John begins the discussion. "Tonight we're going to explore the idea love is never sure apart from commitment. *We'll look at the teaching of Jesus in a portion of Scripture, Mark 8:34-38."*

Annette looks suspicious. "What do you mean, love is never sure *apart from commitment?"*

"I mean that even if a loving relationship starts out, it can't be continued, sustained or nurtured without commitment."

"Well, my boyfriend and I are committed to each other," Annette responds.

John wonders if there is a little uncertainty in her voice. He says, "Most people have a yearning to be deeply committed to someone or something. So we're going to look at what Jesus said about commitment. And we'll ask whether atheism or New Age spirituality can provide a sufficient foundation for commitment."

Lightly, but with an edge to his voice, Simon responds, "So now you're telling me that I can't make commitments because I don't believe in God."

John answers, "Well, many atheists are very committed to their atheism. Or they're really passionate about political causes. But it seems to me that a big part of atheism is autonomy."

Simon looks puzzled. "And by autonomy *you mean . . ."*

"That we are not accountable to anyone or to any moral values outside whatever personal code we decide on for ourselves. Nothing in atheism requires us to commit ourselves to anything. If there is no God, in fact, there is nothing worth committing ourselves to, nothing we would call most worthy."

Simon starts to speak, but Julia interrupts. "Maybe that's true of atheists, but lots of people who follow New Age spirituality are committed to causes like the environment and holistic health and peace and justice."

"That's certainly true and commendable," John says, "but why *do they feel so committed? If you hold to the all-is-One principle, why would you want to change anything? It seems to me that you'd have to either give up your philosophy or give up your causes."*

Julia protests, "But if everything is divine, if it's all part of God, then of course we should honor the earth and try to save the planet. And—"

Mike speaks up. "I want to say something about commitment. It seems to me that younger people don't understand commitment. At least not long-term commitment." His voice rises. "They change jobs,

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change churches, change spouses, change . . . well, I won't even say what *all they change. What ever happened to consistency?"*

Everybody (except John) starts talking at once. Julia says something about her former husband. Simon says something about his former boss. Annette says something about Leave It to Beaver. *Mike says something about patriotism. People at other tables glance over at the group and look away.*

John holds up both hands. "Hold on. I think at least we all agree we would like *to commit ourselves to something worthy." As everyone quiets down, he says, "Let's talk about that idea, and perhaps we can shed some light on our questions."*

Committed to a Cause

Like members of John's study group, many people take commitment for granted. They are not aware that other worldviews fail to motivate or sustain commitment, and that commitment and love are inseparable. Jim Elliot and Nate Saint were two Christian missionaries who became martyrs trying to take the gospel to the Auca Indians in South America. Their story is portrayed in the film *End of the Spear*. They and their fellow missionaries were committed to the eternal and temporal good of these people. They were even willing to give their lives if necessary. Jim Elliot wrote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Amazingly, the families of these martyrs not only forgave the murderers but chose to live with them and help them in every way. Years later Steve Saint, Nate Saint's son, came to be baptized by the same man who had murdered his father. They traveled around, speaking of the reconciliation and forgiveness of Christ.

William Wilberforce, whose life is portrayed in the film *Amazing Grace,* was a deeply committed believer in Christ and a member of

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the British parliament from 1784 to 1812. His commitment led him to his great cause, the abolition of slavery. It took more than thirty years for him to see the accomplishment of his goal. Christian theologian and minister John Wesley wrote to Wilberforce that unless God had raised him up for this cause, he would be overwhelmed by the opposition he would face. Because of his faith in Christ, Wilberforce was able to fight against injustice and oppression. He loved his neighbor—the slaves—as he loved himself, because he loved God.

Gary Haugen, president of International Justice Mission, says that there are more slaves today than in Wilberforce's day. Haugen and his staff of three hundred are committed, because of their faith in Christ, to bringing slave holders to justice, freeing slaves, working for structural social change to prevent more abuse, and becoming involved with victim aftercare. Both of these antislavery movements were begun by Christians who were moved by oppression to commit themselves to a worthy cause.

There is within people a deep yearning to commit to that which is most worthy. People will protest for or against a war. They will become public advocates for or against immigration policies, abortion or same-sex marriage. Many are passionate about personal or public causes. They believe that their views are right. Yet in light of widespread relativism, when two-thirds of people (in the United States) believe that there is no absolute right or wrong, it is surprising that people can be so sure of their positions. How can they speak about justice or injustice, right or wrong, when they say they don't believe in any such thing? In practice, or at least in words, relativists act as if there are objective values, while in theory they deny them.

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Sufficient Reason Why

In his classic study *Habits of the Heart,* sociologist Robert Bellah of the University of California at Berkeley had his team interview people throughout the United States concerning their commitment to friendship, marriage, community life and political life. Bellah's striking conclusion was that although many people in our North American society considered themselves committed to other people and community and political life, they had great difficulty articulating *why* they were committed, except for their own selfish benefit. His book is a haunting one that deserves our attention. If we are to be committed to someone or something outside ourselves, is there a sufficient reason why?[1]

In his inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." The statement resonates with many people as true and profound, but *why* is it true and profound? If we are accountable only to ourselves, why should we do things for others if it is not to our own immediate benefit?

We could restate the concept any number of ways: "Ask not what your spouse can do for you; ask what you can do for your spouse." "Ask not what another can do for you; ask what you can do for another." The call is similar to Jesus' teaching that is known as the Golden Rule: "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12). Where can we find a motivation for this other-centered, committed love? Certainly not in atheism or New Age spirituality.

It is difficult to see how atheism or New Age spirituality gives us any basis to judge or hope for anything as *most worthy,* or gives us something worthy of our passion, or gives us any clear

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guidelines for living. Unless there is something of real value, something most worthy, then commitment as well as love are undermined.

IMPLICATIONS OF UNBELIEF

Leading postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida grasps the implications of unbelief. His philosophy is opposed to *logocentrism,* the idea that there is any meaning or purpose to life. He doesn't believe that there is any "transcendent signifier" or infinite reference point (as Sartre called it) or any sense to the world coming from outside the world (as Wittgenstein called it). For Derrida, there is no fixed point by which we can judge what is right or wrong, just or unjust. Yet—inconsistently—he maintains that the reason for deconstructing texts is that "deconstruction is justice." But we can know what is just only if we have a fixed and transcendent standard to identify it. Derrida is committed to uncovering injustice, but he has no basis in his philosophy to define justice. He wants commitment but denies any ultimate basis for commitment.

Another postmodern philosopher, Richard Rorty, gives up on belief in God and comes to the conclusion that there is "no neutral ground" by which we can judge that the Holocaust was evil.[2] He maintains that the basis for ethics is "sentiment."[3] But what makes one person's sentiment—say, that of a Nazi or a terrorist—better than another person's sentiment? In Rorty's system, there is no objective way to make that judgment. I don't think he would be against pragmatic commitment to many diverse causes, but I think he would oppose the idea that any cause was intrinsically or objectively better than any other.

Forms of New Age spirituality rooted in the Theravada or Buddhist tradition discourage passionate commitment to anything.

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Desire is the source of all our problems. We want money, power, sex or relationship, but when we don't get what we want, we experience pain and sorrow. The Buddhist answer is to cure the headache of desire by decapitation—to eliminate it. *Nirvana* in Sanskrit means "to extinguish" or "to blow out," as in blowing out a flame. The flame of desire must be blown out. Thus it would not be appropriate to be passionately committed to any cause. A person should not be unduly attached to anything.

Jesus does not want to extinguish desire but to purify it and then raise it to the highest possible degree. We are to seek first God's kingdom (Matthew 6:33). We are to passionately hunger and thirst for righteousness, and we will be satisfied (Matthew 5:6). Jesus himself showed passion. He wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) and at the grave of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35). He experienced great joy after the successful ministry of seventy of his disciples (Luke 10:21). Jesus was angry when the religious leaders wanted to prevent him from healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:5). Jesus was a man of deep passion, and he encourages such passion in his followers.

According to Hindu philosopher Shankara, there seems to be no basis for valuing human dignity or human rights. He says, "Who are you? Who am I? Whence have I come? Who is my mother? Who is my father—think of all of this as having no substance, leave it all as the stuff of dreams."[4]

Os Guinness elaborates further in his book *Unspeakable: Facing Up to Evil in an Age of Genocide and Terror:*

> This view of ultimate reality means that neither traditional Hinduism nor traditional Buddhism shows the slightest concern about human rights. . . . Entirely logical within their own frames of thinking, Hinduism and Buddhism regard the

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> Western passion for human rights as a form of narcissism as well as delusion. R. C. Zaehner, who followed Radakrishnan in the Spaulding Chair of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford University, underscored their logic bluntly: "In practice it means that neither religion in its classical formulation pays the slightest attention to what goes on in the world today."[5]

Such a world-denying quality makes it impossible to consistently address social issues.

Others in New Age spirituality value passion, but it is difficult to see what they can be passionately committed to. If there is nothing distinct from ourselves, how can we be committed to it? Passionate practices could lead to altered states of consciousness, but their purpose would be to take you out of this illusory world rather than to incline you toward commitment to anything or anyone in it.

When Susan, the ex-New Age college professor, would experience problems in a relationship, her response was to never remain committed but to leave the relationship because it was causing a spiritual disruption. She believed that if you had a problem, you changed your choice and created a new reality. Most of her friends during that time in her life were single or divorced. None of her friends really believed that it was wrong to leave a spouse. Constantly picking and choosing different pieces of ideologies allowed her to live any kind of life she wanted to live. She could do whatever she wanted to do. But she didn't really see that in this way she could not pursue a sustained, committed relationship.

Many in New Age and Neo-Pagan spirituality are committed to the environment. But if you believe the world to be nondistinct and illusory, why should you be concerned about separate species, trees or plants? New Age author George Leonard says in his book

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The Transformation that one Western myth that needs to be questioned and set aside by those pursuing Eastern philosophy is the "myth of the separate species." He says that there is only one species on this planet, and that is life on earth. He also questions the "myth of the separate ego." When people recover the Eastern way of thinking, Leonard says, they will do away with Western psychology's obsession with our own ego and realize that "consciousness has no skin."[6]

If we are to take the principle of nondistinction seriously, then how can we be concerned about separate trees in the Brazilian rain forest? How can it be important to fight for the preservation of distinct species like the humpback whale, the cheetah or the snail darter? New Age philosophy pulls the rug out from under the very positions its adherents so passionately proclaim.

Caring for Creation

On the other hand, there is a strong biblical basis for caring for the environment.[7] Genesis 1:26-28 provides what some call the Cultural Mandate because in these verses God calls humanity, both male and female, to exercise dominion or rulership over the whole creation—fish, birds, livestock and every other living creature. Some in New Age spirituality claim that this passage has given Christians the excuse to rape and pillage the earth. Certainly we can point to believers who have abused the earth. But to see that this is not what the biblical mandate means, we need only read a little further, to Genesis 2:15: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."

First, it appears from this passage that the man was made for the Garden rather than the Garden being made for the man. Second, the words translated "work" and "take care of" emphasize the im-

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portance of serving and caring for the creation rather than destroying it. In any case, I want to stress that some of the things people in New Age spirituality are committed to, such as environmentalism, are undermined by their own worldview, but that there is a biblical basis for upholding these same concerns.

Both atheists and New Age practitioners are passionately committed to many issues. But if all is matter or all is somehow illusory, how can you judge anything as more worthy than another thing except by personal or corporate preference? This contradiction will appear repeatedly throughout our study. G. K. Chesterton, in his book *Orthodoxy,* points out how philosophies often undermine themselves by asserting contradictory ideas:

> All denunciation implies a moral doctrine of some kind and the modern skeptic doubts not only the institution he denounces, but the doctrine by which he denounces it. Thus he writes one book complaining that imperial oppression insults the purity of women, and then writes another book, a novel in which he insults it himself. As a politician, he will cry out that war is a waste of life, and then as a philosopher that all of life is a waste of time. A Russian pessimist will denounce a policeman for killing a peasant, and then prove by the highest philosophical principles that the peasant ought to have killed himself. A man denounces marriage as a lie and then denounces aristocratic profligates for treating it as a lie.
>
> A man of this school goes first to a political meeting where he complains that the savages are treated as if they are beasts. Then he takes his hat and umbrella and goes to a scientific meeting where he proves that they practically are beasts. In short, the modern revolutionist, being an infinite skeptic, is

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> forever engaged in undermining his own mines. In his book on politics, he attacks men for trampling on morality; in his book on ethics, he attacks morality for trampling on men. Therefore, the modern man in revolt becomes practically useless for all purposes of revolt. By rebelling against everything, he has lost his right to rebel against anything.[8]

Switching the Price Tags

Whether we like it or not, we are constantly making commitments. Some things rise toward a position of ultimate concern while others fall to a lesser place.

It is said that some thieves once broke into a store. They did not steal anything, but they did switch the price tags. An eight-hundred-dollar television was priced at twenty dollars, some imitation jewelry became five hundred dollars, and so on throughout the store. The next day people paid those mistaken prices.

In the same way, people switch the price tags on the things they value. Petty things assume enormous importance while genuinely important things receive little attention. There is a continuing need to switch back the price tags so that first things are first, second things second, third things third and so on.

Placing a True Value on Everything

Jonathan Edwards, considered by some Americans to have been our greatest philosopher and theologian, argued in his book *The Nature of True Virtue* that true virtue is placing a true value on everything.[9] It's not enough to *say* what our priorities are; we must actually *live* that way. Some believers in Christ use the acronym *JOY*—Jesus Christ, Others, You—to indicate the priorities we ought to have.

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Edwards argued that virtue is a matter of proportion. It's not enough to place first things first; we must ask how much they *deserve* to be first. It's not enough to place second things second. We need to proportion our commitment to the degree each concern deserves. If Jesus is first, how weighty is our commitment to him compared to our other commitments? Where does our family rank, and to what degree does that commitment deserve our attention?

COMMITTED TO LASTING LOVE

Love is never motivated or sustained or fulfilled without a conscious commitment to do so. Love for a friend will not continue without commitment. Love for a spouse will not last apart from commitment. A community will never last unless its members are committed to it.

The things we love most passionately shape the way we live and the kind of person we become. Puritan writer Henry Scougal said, "The worth of a soul is determined by the object of its loves." A life passionately lived for that which is most worthy is the fullest kind of life possible. Fullness of life comes not through the number of our years but through the quality of that which we love. An anonymous poem says:

> We live in deeds, not years
> In thoughts, not breaths
> In feelings, not in figures on a dial.
> He lives most who thinks most, feels most nobly, and acts
> the best.

THE ONE OF INFINITE WORTH

If we seek to love that which is highest, we must look to the One

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who is of infinite worth, feel passionately about him and his cause, and act faithfully. People differ on what is worthy or not worthy. If there is an infinite, personal God who created us and redeemed us, then he deserves our allegiance. We are not our own; we are bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). It is he whom we are to love with mind, heart, soul and strength (Mark 12:30). We are called to renew our minds (Romans 12:2), hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6) and obey what Christ commands because we love him (John 14:15). We are called to think, feel and act for him. It is because he loved us that we are to love others. Such radical love is not sustained without a conscious commitment.

We can see how commitment sustains love in a marriage relationship. All marriages have difficulties. The degree of commitment determines the longevity of the marriage. Ruth Graham (Billy Graham's wife) was asked if she had ever contemplated divorce. Her answer was, "Divorce? No. Murder? Yes."[10]

At the altar we make a promise to love, but what enables us to sustain that promise through times of strain? The answer is commitment. I have often said that my confidence in my wife's love is not rooted in her relationship to me but in her relationship to Christ. At times my only hope is that she loves Christ more than she loves me, and Christ loves me more than she does at that time. A passionate love for our Lord is a precondition for sustaining our love for our spouses, friends or neighbors.

The apostle Paul wrote that people have a tendency to worship and serve created things rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). Whenever we take something or someone in God's creation and make it an object of *ultimate* concern, we give that person or thing the place that only God should have. We *worth-ship* it, and it becomes an idol. Material things, money, sex and power often domi-

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nate people's values, but other more innocuous concerns can also usurp God's place in worship. For example, we can pursue the god of self-image, attempting to feel good about ourselves even as we pursue ungodly patterns of living. When our strategy fails, we may turn to drugs, alcohol or sex in a quest to feel better about ourselves.

Another commonly worshiped idol is the god of conformity. It is easy to be afraid of being different, out of the mainstream or not in accordance with the mood of the community, nation or age in which we live. In Washington, D.C., the dominant value is power. In Hollywood, it is fame. On New York's Wall Street, money rules. In other areas, complacency, relativism and indiscriminate tolerance are dominant forces. To go against the reigning value in any area is to risk rejection. Some people pursue the god of affect, attempting to feel great all the time and becoming disappointed when they feel low. Again they may turn to artificial means such as drugs, alcohol or other addictions in an attempt to attain the high they do not feel otherwise. Another god people worship is the extraordinary. This idol makes them easily bored by the ordinariness of life, but heroism in significant moments is forged in the small, everyday choices we make.

Widespread relativism in our culture undermines clarity about what truly deserves our commitment. We are unsure of what, if anything, is most worthy. It is difficult, if not impossible, to sustain loving relationships without a clear idea of what we are committing to and why we are doing it. Without commitment, love becomes unsure. To the degree that we dispense with fixed moral norms, our personal, corporate and national commitments become hesitant and tentative.

Recovering our commitment to our Lord involves not only re-

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gaining a vision of the truth about God but also a sense of his goodness and beauty. When we grasp the winsome attractiveness of God, then we can rekindle a white-hot passion for the incomparable beauty of our Lord.

Pick Up Your Cross

When you are faced with doing something that you know to be right but is still difficult, the cost will always be too high—unless you have a sufficient reason *why* you ought to do it. If you do not know why you want to get in shape, exercising will be too painful. If you do not know why you want to lose weight, saying no to food will be too difficult. In order to carry through on any commitment, we must have a sufficient reason why. The *why* must be sufficiently motivating to sustain our commitment. It is not enough to have a reason; the reason must be compelling.

Jesus does not merely command commitment; he gives us compelling reasons why we ought to act accordingly. Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34 NRSV). If you claim to be a disciple or a follower of Christ, then he requires self-denial, saying no to yourself. The self-denial that Christ requires does not mean saying no to being a distinct, individual person—a *self*—as New Age spirituality demands. Christ's self-denial does not mean saying no to the "*new self*" that is created in the image of Christ (Colossians 3:10). The self-denial of Christ means saying no to our sinful desires—what the Bible sometimes calls the *old self*.

William Barclay explained self-denial as enthronement of God in place of self:

To deny oneself means in every moment of life to say "no" to

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> self and "yes" to God. To deny oneself means once and for all to dethrone self and to enthrone God. To deny oneself means to obliterate self as the dominant principle of life and to make God the ruling principle, more, the ruling passion of life. The life of constant self-*denial* is a life of constant assent to God.[11]

The word for *deny* in the Greek text of the New Testament (Mark 8:34) is *aparneomai,* which means "completely disown." It is the same word used with respect to Peter's denials of Christ (Matthew 26:34, 70, 72, 74). Pastor John MacArthur draws this comparison:

> That's exactly the kind of denial a believer is to make in regard to *himself*. He has either to disown himself or refuse to acknowledge the self of the old man. Jesus' words could be paraphrased. "Let him refuse to have any association or companionship with himself. Self-denial not only characterizes a person when he comes in saving faith to Christ but also as he lives as a faithful disciple of Christ."[12]

The metaphor that Christ uses next makes the difficulty even more overwhelming. We are called to pick up our cross. The cross is a familiar symbol to us. As you drive through any major city, look for how many times you see the shape of the cross on churches. Sometimes the cross is a mere ornament worn on a necklace. But the cross in Jesus' day meant something very different: an agonizing form of execution that the Romans used exclusively for foreigners.

Jesus' command to take up your cross would have shocked his hearers. Today it would be as if he said, "Unless you pick up your electric chair or carry the rifle to be used in your firing squad or carry the noose to be used at your hanging, you cannot be my dis-

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ciple." Death on a cross was excruciating (a word drawn from the Latin word for *crucifixion)*.

The Romans reserved the cross as a form of punishment for those in foreign-occupied territories. Cicero said that the cross should not even be named by a Roman citizen. It was a graphic deterrent to rebellion against Rome.

Not many years before Jesus came to Caesarea Philippi, where he said these words about taking up your cross, one hundred men were crucified in that very area. Before that, around 100 B.C., eight hundred Jewish rebels were crucified in Jerusalem. After the revolt following the death of Herod the Great, two thousand were crucified under the Roman proconsul Varas. There were many crucifixions on a smaller scale. Some estimate that during the lifetime of Christ, there were thirty thousand crucifixions under Roman authority. So "to take up your cross" meant "to be willing to start on a death march . . . to be willing to suffer the indignities, the pain and even the death of a condemned criminal."[13]

Saving by Losing

Knowing all this, why would anyone choose to answer Jesus when he calls, "Follow me"? Jesus gives a sufficient reason why we ought to say no to self and endure the cross. He says, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:35 NRSV).

If you try to be your own savior, to pursue your own pleasure and do things your own way, to pursue any of the false gods mentioned earlier, then you will lose your life. Not only will you lose your life eternally, but you will lose the satisfaction of life here and now. From Jesus' teaching, we are aware of the specter of eternal

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judgment that hangs over us; but we are less aware that choosing the way of self-salvation means losing life's fullness in the present.

John Piper argues that "God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in Him."[14] God's glory and our own self-satisfaction meet in exactly the same place. Following God's glory is the way to eternal joy and present joy. You might argue (along with Augustine, Pascal, Jonathan Edwards, C. S. Lewis and others) that all sin is exchanging a higher satisfaction for a lesser one. For instance, pride is saying no to God's joy in order to say yes to taking pleasure in yourself. Covetousness is saying no to God's joy in order to take pleasure in acquiring material things. Certainly there is pleasure to be found in pursuing lesser things, but sooner or later the pleasure fades and then is lost. My favorite quote from C. S. Lewis is this:

> Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink, sex, and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child, who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.[15]

We do not even desire our own greatest happiness. Giving your all for secondary things such as alcohol, sex and ambition is saying no to infinite joy. On the other hand, by saying yes to first things like the infinite joy offered us, we can rightly enjoy secondary things in the way God intends.

THE SELF-INTEREST OF SELF-DENIAL

Pursuing your own selfish ways may lead to pleasure; but with the law of diminishing returns, it ultimately leads to despair, decay and addiction. On the other hand, if you lose your life for the sake of

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Christ and the gospel, you will save your life eternally and gain abundant life now.

Self-denial turns out to be in our self-interest. But self-interest is not the same as selfishness. The central choice is for Christ and the gospel; we benefit only as a side effect. We are lost in wonder, awe and praise as we behold Christ, yet we are assuredly happy.

We are perhaps most joyful when we are unselfconscious. It is not selfish to behold the Grand Canyon and experience awe. It is not selfish to enjoy a valued friend and lose yourself in conversation with that person, yet still be filled with joy. You are not being selfish or self-oriented, yet these experiences are in your self-interest.

Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Faith in Christ is not opposed to *life* but to *sin*. Faith in Christ is not opposed to the creation but to the Fall of humanity. Our faith is life-affirming and creation-enjoying. Following Christ is the way to the fullness of life, while rejecting Christ is the way to losing out on life in all its fullness.

All sin is life-taking in the sense that it drains life from us. To be sure, some Christians are so focused on the Fall or on the possibility of sin that they come across as negative toward life and creation. But we can have faith that is life-affirming and creation-enjoying without minimizing the Fall or the danger of sin.

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The Best Investment

After Jesus said that people must lose their lives for his sake in order to save their lives, Jesus went on to ask, "What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" (Mark 8:36-37 NRSV). Jesus calls us to weigh our values. What kind of investment do you want to make? What if you gain everything—money, fame, power, sex—

and lose your soul? Who would make that kind of investment? It is better to give up everything temporal—time, money, even life on this earth—in exchange for that which is eternal and has infinite value and cannot be lost.

Choosing otherwise would be foolish, yet people make that choice all the time. They constantly find that the things they desire are not adequate to satisfy them. So they get a new car, a new house, a new vacation spot or a new spouse. Sooner or later the newness wears off, and they continue from thing to thing, person to person, always seeking but never finding ultimate satisfaction. They want more from life but do not know where to find it. C. S. Lewis expressed the dilemma—and the way out of it:

> This principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and the death of your whole body in the end; submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.[16]

No Need to Be Ashamed

Jesus concluded his call to commitment by saying, "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38

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NRSV). There is no need to be ashamed of the gospel; it is the "power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). God is not ashamed to be called our God (Hebrews 11:16), so how can we be ashamed to be identified with him?

We do not need to be ashamed of the gospel intellectually. It is hard for the heart to passionately embrace what the mind doubts, but Christianity has an advantage. Many of the foremost thinkers of all time have been believers. The best minds the world has known—people such as the apostle Paul, Augustine, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and C. S. Lewis—have given in-depth answers to all the classic objections to Christianity. The Lord has given us enough of the top minds that we might not despair, but not so many that we might presume. Our goal is not to gain intellectual respectability but to find out what is true. The cross is still a stumbling block to the pride of intellectuals; humbling themselves is the hardest thing for many of them to do.

Many more believers need to be made aware of the solid intellectual foundations of their faith. Some are in a state of doubt, fearing that the next question might mean an end to their faith. Many half-baked arguments are floating around and are used by nonbelievers to confuse believers. Although apologetics cannot provide absolute certainty, it can make our commitment a leap into the direction revealed by the light rather than a leap into the dark.

While there is plenty of evidence to make a commitment beyond a reasonable doubt, only God's Holy Spirit can give us absolute certainty. Anything worth believing wholeheartedly can also be doubted. Even if you establish a strong intellectual framework for your faith, it will not immunize you against doubt. What matters is how you deal with doubts, whether your own or those of others. It is said that at age sixteen, atheist Bertrand Russell asked

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some hard questions and was told, "Don't doubt, just believe." That was the end of his professed faith. Intellectual doubts and questions need to be faced and given clear answers. If you do not know the answer, that's OK—but find someone who does.[17]

Relativism can be an obstacle to commitment. If whatever is true for you is true for you, and whatever is true for me is true for me, then everybody is right. But then in fact nobody is right. There is still what Francis Schaeffer called "true truth," truth that is true, independent of anyone's attitude toward it. Relativism leads to halfhearted commitment. Why should I be passionately committed to what is only my private view? Why should I give my whole life in the way Christ asks if this is only my community's perspective? Unless we are unequivocal on the issue of truth, it will not be clear who or what we are calling people to be committed to.

COMMITMENT DISTORTED

It is true that the commitment Christ calls us to make can be distorted into fanaticism. The Bible commends some kinds of zeal, but not all. There is zeal that is "not based on knowledge" (Romans 10:2). Cults issue a call to zeal and commitment and use it to strip their recruits of time, money, previous relationships, family and identity. Some may even use the same language of commitment to Christ, but it is twisted to mean total submission to cult leaders' authority and utter willingness to give up themselves for the goals of the group. The Bible does not encourage this kind of authoritarianism.

An argument against abuse is not an argument against right use. Faith in Christ does not require isolation from family and friends, stonewalling questions, hostility toward groups with a different

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viewpoint or the crushing of individual personality. Commitment to Christ encourages relationships with family, demonstrates the willingness to acknowledge truth wherever it is found and cultivates honesty about what commitment means. It is important to note that fanatical zeal without knowledge should not prevent zeal in accordance with knowledge.[18]

What Can We Do?

We can commit ourselves to the Lord. Even after becoming believers, we need to regularly restore our commitment. The glorified Christ called the Ephesian church to repent and recapture their first love (Revelation 2:4-5). We Christians need to go back to where we once were, confess our sin and refocus on Jesus.

In a marriage ceremony, a great commitment is made. An Anglican prayer book uses these words:

> With my body I thee worship
> With all my worldly goods I thee endow
> For richer or for poorer
> For better or worse
> In sickness or in health
> Till death do us part.

The marriage partners give their bodies and their worldly goods to each other. There is nothing else left for them to give. The terms of the commitment are for better or for worse, although neither knows what the other will be like in five, ten, twenty or fifty years. They pledge themselves to each other for richer or for poorer, not knowing what their financial position will be. They commit themselves to each other in both sickness and health, not knowing what physical illnesses they may have to face together. Many men and women are ea-

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ger to make such a total commitment to another human being. But how many have made that kind of commitment to our Lord?

What if we said these words to him?

> Lord, with my body I thee worship
> With all my worldly goods I thee endow
> For better or worse
> For richer or poorer
> In sickness or in health
> I offer my body as a living sacrifice to you
> You alone are worthy to receive my worship
> You are the One before whom the angels bow and say, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." (Isaiah 6:3)
>
> You are the one before whom the elders fall down and say, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (Revelation 5:12)

GODLY LEADERSHIP

Because believers too often lack such total commitment to Christ, they also lack strong, godly leadership in the church. You can't accomplish a great goal unless you are totally committed to it.

I once heard a story about Bill Pannell, who now teaches at Fuller Theological Seminary. In the 1970s he was talking to fellow African American students who were contemplating a violent revolution. One of them asked Bill, "When's the revolution going to be?"

Bill said, "There's not going to be any revolution."

They asked, "Why not?"

Bill replied, "Because of the weekend."[19]

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I had to think about that story for a while before I understood the point. For five days a week, the students were into their cause. But when Friday and Saturday night came, they went out and partied. They got so wiped out on the weekend that it took until Wednesday to get the "revolution" going again. When we take "weekends" from our faith, we lose our momentum and it's difficult to get up to speed again.

We Need a Push

I recently watched the Tour de France and noticed that at the beginning of the individual time trials, the competitors began on a downward ramp to get up to speed quickly. When riders fell during the race, often someone would help them up and give them a push to get going again. Similarly, when our spiritual momentum has stopped, we need a boost. Ultimately the Holy Spirit's help is what we need most, but it doesn't hurt to have brothers and sisters praying for us and pushing us to get going again.

We need to judge what is most worthy—our Lord—and passionately commit ourselves to him again and again. We need to say no to selfishness and say yes to our own best interests and the One who alone is worthy of worship. We need to ask not what our Lord can do for us, but what we can do for our Lord. There are many issues that we have to face in this nation and in our world, and we need passionately committed believers who have the courage to follow the divine call and use God-given gifts to build up the kingdom and love people in the name of Christ. Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life* and pastor of Saddleback Church, was asked if he was afraid of failure in his new quest to solve the problem of AIDS in Africa. He said no. He wants his tombstone to read "At Least He Tried."

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SUMMARY

We have a deep yearning to be committed to something worthy.

Unless we are committed, love will not be sustained, either in personal or public life.

Atheism and pantheism have no adequate basis to judge meaning, purpose or moral values that would show us where we ought to commit our lives or what we ought to love. Believers need to "switch the price tags" on their commitments so that first things are really first.

Jesus calls us to radical commitment.

Without the commitment to love in personal and public life, believers are not being faithful to our Lord.

COMMITTING OURSELVES

The study group members shift in their chairs and stretch a bit. John waits for their reactions.

Julia speaks first. "I do want to be committed to something bigger than myself. But too much commitment—isn't that kind of dangerous? I mean, like suicide bombers and cults and such."

Annette says, "My boyfriend and I have started going to church, but I don't want to become one of those people that stand on a street corner with a sign or give everything away and go off to some part of the world nobody's ever heard of. I hope he doesn't decide to do something like that." She goes blank for an instant, apparently imagining the worst.

"What about your commitment to each other?" Mike inquires.

"Oh, that's as strong as ever. Stronger. John, I really like what you said the Bible says about marriage. Most of it, anyway."

Julia seems impatient. "This thing Jesus taught about losing your

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life to save it—I can't buy that. I want to be myself. I don't want to disappear. I'd be afraid of losing myself completely in anything."

John assures her, "Christ doesn't mean for you to disappear. He made you. Why would he want you to disappear? It is *a paradox, though. We do lose ourselves in a sense when we give ourselves to Christ and to other people. But we* find *ourselves too—our true selves. We find eternal life* and *joy in this present life. Jesus said he came to give abundant life, the fullest kind of life."*

Simon says thoughtfully, "This idea of committing yourself to something, I mean, to someone*—" he stumbles a little over the word—"*someone *who is of infinite value—I have to admit, I do find it strangely attractive."*

Julia says, "I know what you mean. So do I."

"I think my boyfriend might like this group," says Annette.

"Bring him along," suggests Mike.

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