

## 4 FORMS

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*Norms*, as we discussed them in the previous chapter, refer to something *outside* ourselves—the models or patterns for behavior which God has constructed and placed before us. Norms are expressions of God's will which create a vision of the kind of person that God wants us to be and to become.

*Forms*, as we consider them in this chapter, refer to changes which take place *inside* ourselves—the characteristics, the qualities of attitude and action, which can be expected in the person who is reconciled to God and being refashioned into His image. Forms are the profile of the new person whom the Holy Spirit is nurturing and cultivating within each Christian. Forms are related to norms; in fact they conform to norms. As God transforms those whom He pardons, He follows the pattern which He has revealed in the Bible.

In this chapter we will develop in some detail the shape of the new person God is forming within each believer. We will investigate the character of this new person in relation to God, to others, and to self. This is not just an ideal or an abstraction, but a concrete reality, an actual identity—someone who is emerging within and striving to become dominant. We need to be ac-

quainted with the features of the new person so that we know which impulses and tendencies within us are God's will and work and, therefore, to be welcomed. We need to be able to recognize and to support the new person who is being formed within us.

It is important to distinguish between the new person and the Christian of whom the new person is a part. As was indicated in chapter 2, alongside the new person who is attuned to God and responsive to Him there remains in every Christian the old person, the old self, who is attuned to Satan and responsive to him. From this corrupt element within come many of the evil impulses which lead us astray and which contaminate even the best that we attempt. Very often in ethical discourse when we refer to "the Christian" we really mean the new person in the Christian. For example, we say that the Christian delights in God, loves His Word, and is constant in prayer. We mean that the new person is this way, and to the extent that the new person is dominant, the Christian is this way.

It must be remembered, however, that in every Christian there is also the old self who is in revolt against God, despises His Word, and tries to avoid prayer. These two elements within the Christian are in constant tension and conflict. It is incorrect to assume that the true Christian is immune to the influence of the old person and experiences only the influence of the new person. The tyranny of Satan and the old self is broken, but their influence is still present, powerful, and dangerous.

## I. GOD-CENTERED

The most significant feature of the new person is his God-centeredness. The life of the new person is lived in awareness of God, and rests in the promises of God. Another way to put it is to say that the new person lives by faith, and this also involves living for God. The highest purpose of the God-centered life is to fulfill His expectations, to accomplish His goals. This is a life that expresses and evokes praise to God, that calls favorable attention to Him. The first three (or four, depending on the system of enumeration) commandments and related New Testament materials are descriptive of the God-centered life of the new person. The exposition in the section which follows analyzes and applies these materials.

## A. Obedience

A natural and inevitable form of God-centeredness is obedience. In our cultural context, however, the term *obedience* often has negative connotations. It means galling conformity to resented demands, or demeaning surrender to the will of another. But to the new person, obeying God is a positive experience. It is glad surrender to a will which is recognized as higher and better than one's own.

The obedience of the new person is given, not in response to God's demands and threats (His law), but rather in response to His love and promises (His gospel). It reflects grateful sonship and creatureliness. The new person, moved and overwhelmed by God's generosity, looks for ways to show his high regard for God. One obvious way to do this is to comply with His will. In most cases we need not wonder what this is. God has stated it in the Bible clearly and emphatically.

## B. Worship

Worship is joyful communication with God and with His people. The new person, whose life is centered in God, and to whom the relationship with God is of supreme importance, senses the need for such communication and actively seeks it. When there is an opportunity to hear from God and to receive His love in word and sacrament, the new person will be drawn to it with magnetic force. He will cherish the opportunity to speak to God in prayer, to open up to Him, to share burdens, needs, desires, and joys. He will also treasure the fellowship of other worshipping Christians, will welcome the opportunity to encourage them in their faith and obedience and to be encouraged by them.

A variety of things may add to the attractiveness of worship—appropriate music, art, architecture, and drama, for example. To the new person, however, the great attraction is God Himself. To encounter God and interact with Him is the supreme delight. The worshipful response of the new person is surprisingly broad in scope. It is by no means confined to the sanctuary and to personal devotions. Ultimately, all of life and work becomes an occasion for recognizing God and for reacting with faith and with praise.



### C. Witness

The person whose heart and mind are fixed on God, who values God above all else, will share God with other people. Not out of a grim sense of duty, but in a natural and enthusiastic way, he will offer others the love and hope which God provides. The impulse to witness, to communicate the good news of Christ, is planted in the new person right along with saving faith. It flourishes and bears fruit in the form of Christ-like actions and Christ-centered conversation.

The content of Christian witness is not mere information about God, but specifically the message of pardon and eternal salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus. As it comes from the new person, witness to Jesus Christ is more than simply the transmission of facts and truths. It is also a report of personal experience and a testimony of personal conviction.

The desire to witness grows directly out of regard for God. It is the urge to call attention to His greatness and His grace, to help others notice and appreciate Him. Concern for people, for their well-being and happiness, is the other impelling source of witness. The realization that people desperately need to know and trust God moves the new person to speak the gospel and act it out at every opportunity. Ultimately, the ability to witness, as well as the stimulus to do so, comes from God. The Holy Spirit provides the new person with both insights and words to effectively convey the saving message to others.

### D. Sacrifice

Faith in Christ and devotion to Him attain their highest expression in acts of sacrifice. To sacrifice is to put God above everything and everyone else, even above self. The new person is able and willing to do this because he is aware of God's sacrifice for him, and is profoundly affected by the enormity and generosity of that sacrifice. By a life of sacrificial service to God, or, if necessary, by a martyr's death, the new person responds to the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. What distinguishes this from other forms of sacrifice is the fact that the new person does this joyfully, confidently, and without self-pity. He does it for God, who is the center of his life and who has saved him by sacrifice.

## II. PEOPLE-ORIENTED

The person whose life is centered in God is automatically turned also toward other people. The vertical relationship has a profound effect upon the horizontal one. God wants our highest love and our constant attention, but He does not need or want all of our love and attention. When by faith we surrender to Him and in gratitude want to do something for Him, He directs much of our interest and energy outward to our fellow human beings. We owe Him love and service, and the new person wants to give these to Him, but He accepts very little for Himself. Instead, He channels the bulk of our response toward the needs of the people around us. To live for God includes living for people, being aware of them and sensitive to their needs, reaching out to them in the way that He reaches out to us. Faith, when it is alive and authentic, becomes active in love. The love of the new person for others is a reaction to and, in fact, an extension of, God's love for him.

Several striking qualities characterize the love of the new person toward other people. It is not simply a variation or intensification of ordinary human loves. Rather, it has divine and transcendent elements. It is a gift and work of God, a replica of God's own love as well as a response to that love. To emphasize the uniqueness of the love which God generates in the new person, the New Testament in the Greek original employs a special term for it: *agape*. Other terms (*philia*, *eros*) refer to other kinds of human love. However, when the New Testament writers wish to specify that love which is God's primary characteristic and which He activates in the new person, they almost always use some form of *agape*. The numerous references to love in this section are to the *agape*-love of the new person.

One of love's striking qualities is its unselfishness. Love is triggered, not by the attractiveness or the usefulness of the other, but by his need. Even those who are unlovable and undeserving become its objects. Not, "What's in it for me?" but, "What's in it for *them*?" is love's major concern.

Love is also unsentimental. Although it may include emotional dimensions, it is primarily an act of the will. The *agape*-love of the new person may not always feel affection, admiration, or desire for those who need help. It may, in fact, fear them or find them repulsive. However, if they need help, love reaches out to



them. It wants to help and is determined to help, even those who are unworthy and unappealing from a human perspective.

The third striking feature of love is that it is sacrificial, willing to put the interests and needs of the other ahead of one's own. The new person cares enough about the well-being of others to sacrifice his own resources, convenience, comfort, or, if necessary, even life itself. "He laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16, RSV).

Details about the loving, people-oriented behavior of the new person are given in commandments four through ten of the Decalogue and other materials throughout the Bible which expand on them.

### A. Respect

Love manifests itself in respect for others. The basis of this respect is, first of all, the conviction that the other is God's unique creature. Even the lowliest, weakest, least interesting human being on earth is one to whom God has given life and an eternal future. This realization evokes respect. Furthermore, every human being is the object of Christ's saving love, and this adds immeasurably to his worth.

Christ died for all people. Out of respect for Him and His work of redemption, love honors all of those for whom He has given Himself. In addition, other people are regarded as those in whom God's Spirit dwells, or in whom He could and would dwell. All this means that they are beings of value and potential, important to God and therefore deserving of esteem.

Also of great importance is the fact that people need respect. Their personal comfort and confidence, as well as their ability to function effectively, depends to a significant degree upon the amount of loving respect which they receive from others. A healthy and positive self-image is essential to happiness, and the self-image is created largely by the attitudes and actions of others toward that self. Consequently, by treating others with respect, love tries to meet one of their fundamental human needs.

As the well-known folk hymn says, "love guards each man's dignity and saves each man's pride." It is eager to support the self-esteem of the other person. A vital part of this is to build and protect his reputation. People's attitudes and actions toward that individual affect his self-esteem. This moves the new person to

try to counteract gossip and slander, to cultivate appreciation for and respectful treatment of that other person on the part of all who know him.

Although love owes and shows respect to all people, it exercises a special kind of respect for those in positions of leadership. Parents, teachers, government officials, and spiritual leaders deserve respect, not only because they are human beings but also because they are God's representatives and servants. He has created us in such a way that we require leadership of various kinds. As a result of our corruption by sin, this need has been aggravated and complicated. Consequently, God has commanded that we make suitable arrangements for leadership in our midst, although He has not specified in every case the form that this should take.

Leaders render vital services. Some—temporal leaders—help to maintain peace, order, and justice in a world of sinful human beings, without which control community life would be impossible. Others—spiritual leaders—facilitate spiritual and moral growth by the communication of the gospel. Because they operate with God's own authority and carry out His purposes, we are to react to them with the respect that we owe Him.

Because they are fallible and sinful themselves, leaders do not always evoke respect by their personal character or performance. Even in such cases, for God's sake, we are to show them loving respect. We are to obey them, except when they issue commands which conflict with God's revealed will. For love's sake as well as for God's sake we are to respect them at all times, even when we must disagree with them or disobey them.

### B. Compassion

No aspect of *agape*-love, no mark of the new person, is more conspicuous than compassion. To have compassion means literally to *feel with* the other person, to identify with the other so completely that you hurt when he hurts and you celebrate when he is happy. Compassion grows out of involvement in the lives of other people and leads to further involvement. It is the result of noticing other people, of drawing close to them, of perceiving what is going on in their lives and what they are going through. Love looks beneath the surface, behind the masks with which others so often try to cover their personal anguish and joys.



Much interaction with other people in modern life is brief and rushed. However, the new person, constrained by love, is willing to pause and be touched by the plight of those in distress, and to enter into the happiness of those who are tasting success or victory. Compassion makes a difference. The realization that another person notices my sorrows and joys, and shares them, makes me feel better. Christian compassion is not content, however, simply to feel with others. It also insists on acting in behalf of others—to relieve the hurt, right the wrong, speak the good word, or do whatever else will help.

### C. Chastity

The approach of the new person to sexuality is also motivated primarily by love. Concern for others, the desire to act sexually in the way that is best for others, is what leads to Christian ideals of chastity.

Some misinterpret chastity as the very opposite of love. They say that love is open to and accepting of others in sexual matters, and is willing to respond generously to the sexual needs and desires of others. Chastity, in the view of such people, is rejecting others sexually, or unnecessarily restricting the expression of this very basic and vital form of love.

Others denounce chastity as a manifestation of fear, as timid withdrawal from the risk of conception, detection, and infection. Such fears are unwarranted according to these critics because of the supposed ease with which conception can be prevented or terminated, and the effectiveness with which venereal infection can be treated medically. In fairness to such critics it must be admitted that too many Christian advocates of chastity have relied heavily on motivations of fear and self-interest, as if keeping oneself clean and staying out of trouble were the main reasons for living chastely.

The perspective of the new person on sexuality is informed by the Word of God. In Scripture, God makes it clear that human beings are created to sexually celebrate only one relationship—the relationship of marriage. Conversely, God states that sexual relations outside of marriage damage and deprive others, whether they realize it or not. Trusting God's interpretation of sexuality, respecting His revealed will, and eager to live sexually

in the way that is best for others, the new person opts for chastity. Love for others as well as regard for God moves and guides him to reserve the full expression of sexual love for marriage.

Chastity is not sexlessness, or anti-sex. In fact, it represents an affirmative and appreciative view of sexuality. It recognizes sexuality as a good gift of God, with great potential for contributing to human joy and fulfillment. However, it also realizes that, like every other aspect of our humanity, sexuality is corrupted by sin, which inclines us toward its misuse. Limitations placed on sexual expressions reflect respect, not contempt, for sex.

### D. Honesty

The new person, because he is concerned about others and wants to live for them, is also honest with them, both in word and deed. Stated most simply, to love is to help, and one does not help others by depriving them of their possessions or by deceiving them. Rather, love respects and protects what belongs to others. Love is unwilling to cheat in business transactions or to profit by the mistakes of others. It renders the full measure of service for which an employer or customer pays.

In addition, by its very nature, love cherishes relationships with other people. Because relationships thrive on good communication and because communication depends on trust, love protects and strengthens lines of communication by speaking and acting truthfully. Here, too, the overriding motivation is love. Not self-interest (as in "Honesty is the best policy"; i.e., honesty is advantageous), but consideration for others is the basis of Christian integrity and truthfulness.

### E. Forgiveness

To love others, and to live for them, inevitably involves forgiveness. One is constantly being wronged by others, neglected, cheated, slandered, and abused in various ways. Instead of retaliating, love wants to help the wrongdoer. Love views the wrongdoer not as an enemy to be reviled, punished, or destroyed, but as a casualty, one who has been captured or disabled by sin and is in need of rescue. To help, one must first forgive, and extend to the offender the same kind of forgiveness that



God offers. Forgiveness drains the bitterness out of the victim and frees him to act constructively toward the one who has hurt him.

The new person can be forgiving because he is forgiven. God's complete and continuous pardon for the sake of Jesus' atoning sacrifice impels and enables him to respond similarly to those who have turned against him. This forgiveness does not wait for an apology. It forgives immediately and entirely. However, as in the case of God's forgiveness, it is not fully beneficial to the offender until he recognizes his wrong, repents of it, and accepts the offered forgiveness.

#### F. Generosity

Love does not carefully measure out its kindness and help, for it would rather make too much allowance than too little. In thought, word, and deed love wants to give the other person a break, the benefit of the doubt. Confronted by human need of any kind, love is willing to extend itself, and even to overextend itself. It views time and material possessions not primarily as sources of personal enjoyment, but as resources with which to help others. Confronted by questionable behavior in other people, instead of imagining and suggesting the worst, love offers the kindest interpretation that honesty will permit. Generosity which issues from and mirrors God's own is a beautiful quality of the new person.

#### G. Justice

Every human society is riddled with injustices. In ways both subtle and overt, the strong exploit and threaten the weak. The demands of the many conflict with the rights and needs of the few. Like God, the new person has a special concern for the victims of injustice. He is aware of their vulnerability, sensitive to their indignities, angry at their oppressors. Although he also loves and serves those who are advantaged, the new person feels committed especially to the cause of the disadvantaged.

Scriptural support for this is found particularly in the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament and the words and example of Jesus in the New. The biblical concept of justice is not simply to treat everyone impartially, nor is it to do the greatest good for

the greatest number of people. Biblical justice, rather, redresses the grievances of those who are downtrodden. The balance is actually tipped in favor of the disadvantaged.

### III. SELF-ACCEPTING

Much popular psychology and philosophy encourage excessive preoccupation with self, leading to what has been called "the new narcissism." Some evangelical theology and piety, on the other hand, have promoted a posture toward self which is excessively negative, even destructive.

There is a proper place for self in the perspective of the new person. It is not first place, for God comes first. God is and should be loved above all else. Neither is it second place, for the fellow human being, the neighbor, is and should be next on the priority list of the new person. The proper place for self is third, as far as the new person is concerned; and that is still a very important place. The well-known acrostic expresses it correctly: *Joy*—Jesus first, *Others* second, and *Yourself* third.

Two observations are in order. One is that self does indeed belong on the list. The other is that the result of establishing and following this priority is joy, not frustration or debasement.

God has given the Christian the best possible reasons for maintaining positive attitudes toward self. These reasons are summarized in the three articles of the Apostles' Creed. They are essentially the same reasons why we can and should respect other people, referred to earlier in this chapter.

Because God has made the Christian a unique individual and endowed him with an endless future; because He has rescued him from sin at so great a cost; because He dwells in him through the Holy Spirit and can work through him to do great things for Him and for others—because of all this, the Christian can and should accept himself, respect himself, forgive himself, even love himself. Until and unless he accepts himself, he is seriously handicapped in his attempts to accept and serve others. A shriveled, dejected, and love-starved self is too distracted by its own needs, and desperate to try to meet them, to be able to concentrate on others and to do much for them. There is a sense in which it is true that before a Christian can love others, he must be able to love himself.



Unfortunately, a false conclusion and strategy can be drawn from this: in order to become more loving toward others, he will first of all have to work much harder at loving himself. He will do more for self, say nice things to himself and about himself. He will cater to his interests and desires. After he has loved himself a great deal more than usual, he will automatically become more loving toward other people.

Although superficially plausible, this approach operates with a fundamental fallacy, the fallacy that we can produce self-love in ourselves. The truth is that sound and healthy self-esteem is a gift from others, based on their attitudes and actions. Only the person who has been loved can love self and others. We cannot build our own self-image, except in a limited way. Others must do this for us. In this matter the Christian has some tremendous advantages. In addition to the love and acceptance which most can count on from family and friends, the Christian has the support and fellowship of the Christian community. And above all, he has the love and acceptance of God.

This is the ultimate basis of the Christian's self-acceptance and self-image. The attitudes and actions of other human beings toward us are important and do affect us. However, their value and validity are limited. Sometimes others react to us in cruel and inappropriate ways. They may deprive us of the support that we need and even punish us for doing what is right. God, on the other hand, is completely reliable and loving. Although others may ignore or despise us, He always notices and cares. When He judges and disciplines us, it is always because we need it, and because He wants to pardon and reform us. For the nourishment and development of self-esteem, the new person turns above all to the love of God and His great work.

Christian self-esteem is a large subject with many facets and dimensions, only a few of which have been selected for discussion here. Furthermore, it should be noticed that self-acceptance and self-care are not ends in themselves. Rather, they are valid and important because they are done primarily for the sake of God and for others, and not just for self.

#### A. Appreciation

A Christian can and should appreciate himself. He can honestly and comfortably admit that he has assets, abilities, and

achievements. Arrogance is wrong, however, for whatever he has acquired or accomplished is God's good gift and work in him. Not the Christian, but God deserves the credit. However, he need not disparage or despise himself, nor pretend that he is a zero. That, in fact, would be ungrateful, a failure to acknowledge what God has given him and done for him. Perhaps more clearly than any other biblical writer, the apostle Paul expresses this appreciation of self in the light of God's grace:

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me (1 Cor. 15:10, RSV).

#### B. Confidence

Because of God's generous gifts and sure promises, the Christian can expect to accomplish significant things for Him and for other people. No matter how ominous or discouraging a situation may be, the Christian has grounds for boundless optimism. He cannot surrender to a sense of futility, at least as far as his personal potential is concerned. "I can do all things in him [Christ] who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13, RSV). The Christian does not have to be pessimistic, or run scared through life. He does not have to shrink back from large or risky challenges. He does not have to play it safe all the time. He does not have to be paralyzed by fear of the unknown. Rather, he can live and explore and work with confidence, which is really a form of confidence in God.

#### C. Provision

Because he is God's redeemed creature, inhabited, empowered, and employed by the Holy Spirit, the Christian needs to take care of himself physically, emotionally, and spiritually. God's property, God's person, deserves proper care and maintenance. The Christian does not need to be pampered or indulged, for that would be materialism and worldliness. However, he does need food, rest, fun, and comfort in suitable amounts. Because material things are also God's good gifts, the Christian has a right, even a duty, to enjoy them and to show his thanks to God for them by so doing.

Provision for self is by no means the Christian's highest priority. As has been noted earlier in this chapter, service to God and people sometimes requires great sacrifice and always involves some elements of sacrifice. However, it is also true that God at times provides for His people very generously, enables them to prosper, and explicitly commands them to enjoy the abundance which He has supplied. Both testaments of the Bible are replete with such references. While some Christians give way to extravagant self-indulgence, others, and this is just as wrong, feel guilty about using any of their resources for feasting, vacations, luxuries, and the like.

#### D. Fulfillment

As a human being, and especially as a new person in Christ, the Christian has potential. The aspiration and obligation to realize that potential is also part of his new personhood. God has given him natural abilities of various kinds and strengths. Through the Holy Spirit He also endows the Christian with spiritual gifts. The new person is to recognize and accept them joyfully. He is to develop them and utilize them very diligently.

God also places various opportunities before the Christian—occasions for growth, prosperity, and service. He is to take full advantage of them. His goal in all of this is to be, not primarily personal gratification and enrichment, but rather usefulness to God and to others. There is a very natural and appropriate experience of satisfaction in realizing one's potential, but to the new person that is not the most important thing. What matters most to the new person is being a good steward of God's gifts, glorifying Him, and carrying out His purposes with the abilities and opportunities which He provides.

#### E. Freedom

Jesus Christ has set the Christian free in some very significant ways. He is free from the guilt and punishment of sin, free from the curse and condemnation of God's law, free from the fear of death, free from the devil's tyranny, free from futility. This means that the Christian is not to be a driven person, running away from guilt and from a bad conscience. It means that he does not have to get caught up in the exhausting business of

trying to justify himself to himself or to anyone else. Christ has taken care of all that. Consequently, the new person is in a position to respond freely, willingly, and joyfully when confronted with opportunities to serve God and people. He can serve not because he has to in order to be saved, but because he wants to in gratitude for the salvation which is already his.

As God brings forth and shapes the new person in Christians, as He reshapes our attitudes and behaviors toward Himself, other people, and ourselves, these are some of the forms which will result from the process. Those traits described above are not merely ideals toward which we should strive or demands with which we must comply. They are profound changes which God is bringing about within us.