

Charles Burnette tells about visiting a parisher in the hills of SW Virginia who had a fine looking dog. Burnette couldn't tell what kind it was so he finally asked the man: "What kind of hound is that?" Answered the man, "Well, he is one half blue tick, one half black and tan and one half ..." "Now wait a minute" said Burnette, "that dog can't have three halves". But the parisher replied "You asked me what kind of dog he was, you didn't ask me if he was balanced".

Jesus' teaching on the narrow gate gives us a chance to think about the issue of balance in religious faith. Whenever the faith gets itself into a mess it is usually when someone or a group goes off "on a tangent" as we say. Whether it is Jim Jones in Guyana or the Inquisitors of medieval Spain or the snake handlers of Appalachia or the self-righteous groups found in nearly every community, Christianity is damaged by those who take one or two aspects of the faith and fanatically emphasize it to the exclusion of the totality of the gospel. Jesus' teachings about the narrow gate provide some groups with a proof text for all kinds of bigotry and pride. "Only a select few are going to heaven," they sneer. "That means us, and that means everyone else is going to hell. Yippee and Hooray for our side".

Such blatant self-righteousness is so far from the mind of Christ that it is blasphemous. When Jesus spoke of the narrow

2 he was not encouraging narrow mindedness, Indeed, Jesus was put to death by the self righteous religious people of his time...mostly because he rejected their narrowmindedness. He ate with the wrong kind of people, he brake the accepted r rules concerning the Sabbath. He tæated women - even Samaritan women - as persons of worth. He reinterpreted the law and the prophets. No wonder the narrow minded religious people of the day could not rest until they nailed him to a cross. He was a rebel, a radical, a threat to the status quo.

It seems ironic that this man whose entire life was a stark rejection of rigid, inflexible, and unloving religion should be used by so many as an excuse for forcing narrow sectarian views on others. If you are looking for proof that Satan is alive and well on Planet Earth, this evidence ought to suffice. . that the precious name of Jesus wouldbe used as an excuse for all manner of intolerance and self-righteousness, and judgement of others.

Condider the treatment of the Jewish community over the past 2000 years, Our Lord was a Jew. Heloved his people. To persecute Jews in name of Jesus has to be one of the most demonic occurances in human history.

Betty Beckwith writes taking her brain damaged child to a Jewish DR. He said: "you eople think of us as the people who killed your Christ". Spontaneously she replied: "Oh, no. We think of you as the people who gave him to us".

When Jesus spoke of the narrow gate he did not encourage narrow minded religion.

What did he mean? How is it possible to have a faith that is balanced and yet alive? Jesus was saying something important to us when he spoke of the narrow gate. His life was not a summons to the tepid watered down faith that characterizes so much of the Christian community in our country today. As William Lloyd Garrison once said, if you know that your house is on fire "you do not sit down by tolerantly and give a moderate alarm". There is a narrow gate. The call to enter the kingdom of God is a call to leave the mighty herd of men. It is indeed a call that only a few will answer.

1. It is a call to PERSONAL DISCIPLINE. "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees" Jesus said, "you cannot enter the kingdom of God". Now the term righteousness is easily perverted.

Hear these interesting words: "I do not drink, I don not smoke, and I am not interested in cards or games . . as for love of the table, I do not appreciate it...In every hour of my life it is the spiritual element which leads me on"

Those are very commendable words...they are from Benita Mussolini. So often we let righteousness be defined in such narrow terms that we have done a disservice to disciplined personal Christian living.

4 The righteousness to which Christ calls us is a wholeness ~~passed~~ embracing all of life. It is a consciousness that all of life is a gift from God and it is to be used responsibly. Our bodies are a gift from God, they should not be abused; our tongues are gifts from God, they should not speak gossip and hurtful words; our neighbors are gifts from God, we are to treat them as we want to be treated. Disciplined Christian living is a recognition that there is some force within the heart that drives us toward death and destruction - toward hatred and hostility - toward vice and viciousness.

If you have not discovered the power of that force in your life, you will. We are told that Edinburgh Castle was only captured once, and in a most unlike way. A shepherd lad led a storming party up a steep eastern sloop that had been left undefended, because everyone thought it was inaccessible.

No one in this room is "inaccessible". We share a common humanity - a humanity that can only be dealt with by the grace of God. "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" said Jesus. And yet without his help, none of us has much hope of attaining that kind of control over our lives. That is why none of us can look down on another. It is only by his grace that any can walk in his steps. It is only because of enabling spirit that any of us can make it through the narrow gate. The call of Christ is to disciplined Christian living.

2. It is also a call to EXTRAORDINARY COMMITMENT. Someone once said that "excellence means when a man or woman asks of himself more than of others" That is a good definition of Christian commitment. When we ask more of ourselves in terms of service to God and to others than others do, then we are headed in the direction of the narrow gate.

Perhaps you remember the book and the movie QUO VADIS. It is based on tradition accounts of Peter's last days. Peter, escaping from the burning of Rome by Nero, was confronted by his Lord. Falteringly he asked "Domine, quo Vadis (Lord, whither thou goest) And the Lord answered, "My people have need of me, I am going to Rome to be crucified again, Whither thou goest, Peter?" Then Peter remembered the times he had forsaken Christ. He repented, he recommitted himself to the work Christ has given him. He returned to Rome, where they crucified him with his head upside down because he said he was unworthy to die as his master had.

Perhaps it is melodramatic to ask of you: "Quo vadis? Whither thou goest" Are you satisfied with the token commitment that characterizes most of the family of God today? Or is there a voice within you that asks you to go beyond what others are doing?

The gate is narrow because only a few will step out of the crowd into disciplined living, in extraordinary commitment and

3. into LOVE AND COMPASSION Paul saw great danger in zealous piety. Zealous people are often intolerant of others, they tend toward arrogance and pride, they tend toward self-righteousness, and

~~are~~ contemptuous of those who do not see life as they do. Thus (6)
~~had~~ ^{are} ~~to~~ ^{Paul} write: If I speak with the tongues of men and angels
~~but~~ ^{but have} not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal...if
~~have~~ ^{I have} prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all
knowledge, and I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but
have not love, I am nothing, If I give away all that I have and
and deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain
nothing.

This is the dividing line between faith and fanaticism.
Do you have passion without compassion? Many have a passion
for souls but have no compassion for persons. There is a
story of a rabbi known for his piety. He was confronted one
day by one of his devoted youthful disciples. In a burst of
feeling the young man exclaimed "My Master, I love you" The
old teacher looked up and asked his fervent disciple, "Do
you know what hurts me, my son?" The young man was puzzled,
and stammered: "I don't understand your question, rabbi. I am
trying to tell you how much you mean to me, and you confuse
me with irrelevant questions". "My question is neither
confusing nor irrelevant" said the rabbi, "For if you do not
know what hurts me, how can you truly love me?"

On the cross of Calvary we see the figure of a man who
suffered for humanity. His passion for the kingdom was matched
by a compassion for persons. He could have led a revolt.
Instead, according to Scripture, he laid down his life.

The great Novelist Dostoevski was a political prisoner

for a long time. We are told that there was a small shutter in his cell door that was mysteriously opened every evening and thru it the voice of an unknown fellow prisoner whispered to him, "Courage brother, we also suffer".

Many of Jesus followers want to save people but they don't want to suffer with them. Paul presents a good example of these two approaches; When he was Saul before meeting Jesus he had a passion for religion. that is why he persecuted, that is why he could watch Stephen being stoned to death. He had a passion for religion, then he meets Christ and becomes Paul the Apostle and to his passion for religion is added compassion for people. So much so that many times on his own body the blows of self-righteousness fell.

You asked me what kind of dog he was, you did not ask me if he was balanced. We want a faith that is balanced and yet alive. We want to enter the narrow gate without being narrow minded. We can do that if we will do three things ...have personal discipline, have extraordinary commitment, and have a deep and real compassion for persons.