

Of course, it takes a strong man to be a gentleman or a strong woman to be a lady. So Paul ends by saying: "Be strong." But Paul knew better than most people where strength could be found. Bernard Shaw echoed the great apostle Paul when he wrote: "This I know, a person without religion is a moral coward." And all history confirms the truth of that observation. Without a firm faith to stand on, man is a moral coward.

As Claude Montifiore noted: Christianity is an ethic for heroes only". It requires strength, not weakness. It was so in the 1st century, and it is so now. Remember John, the unknown, writing to the Christians of his day in the book of Revelation. He lived in a day when the very existence of the Church was threatened. There could be no hope for it unless its members were prepared to hold their confession and their faith without yielding. ~~Site~~ Either the Christians would live gallantly and courageously, preaching with life itself and at the risk of life, or the Church and the faith would perish.

I believe that such a time has come again. Either we will "be strong" standing fast in the faith like men, or the future of our civilization is grim indeed. God needs our strength to meet the issues of the hour with the grandeur of independent decision and courage. Ellen Glasgow has a phrase to describe our need—"a vein of iron." And where shall we find that vein of iron? Samuel McChord Crothers found the answer in an old army who visited a theological seminary and was puzzled by the way the men talked of "larger fields of service." Finally he realized by that they were thinking of their world in terms of a farm that needed to be cultivated. "But," he observed, "the true picture is that of a battlefield that must be won. On such a field frequently the key to the whole campaign is the top of a lonely hill."

So, the key to the whole campaign for our world is "the top of a lonely hill," where you stand in the presence of Jesus Christ, make up your mind, and set the course of your life. Paul had the matter right when he addressed himself to the Christians at Corinth, saying to them one by one: "Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong."

The little church Paul founded in Corinth was a problem. Paul made three visits to Corinth and wrote at least four letters to the Christians there. Two of Paul's letters have survived, so we know something about the problems that concerned the great apostle. Fundamentally, the Corinthian church members were having trouble being Christians. Their behavior was abominable. They quarreled among themselves. They seem to have had a fondness for pagan courts of law. Some of them were just plain immoral and dishonest.

Paul was disturbed, and yet he understood the difficulties of the Corinthians. They were living in a city that justly owned the name "Vanity Fair". Corinth was a lusty city, a strategic commercial center on the ancient trade route between the East and the West. It was a city of a half-million inhabitants, representing mingled races, colors, and creeds. People worshipped a multitude of gods, from the Egyptian Isis to the Greek Aphrodite. In more ways than one, the city was wide open, and the phrase "to live like a Corinthian" meant to abandon all pretense of moral decency. Paul knew it was not easy to be a Christian in Corinth.

The great apostle did not mince matters when he wrote to the Corinthian Christians, but gave them a piece of his mind; a present day preacher saying the same things to his congregation would do well to start moving out of the manse. Paul denounced their immorality, their business ethics, their personal habits, their quarrels. To be sure, being Christian was a problem in a pagan environment, but who ever said it was easy? Paul concluded his lecture to the members of the Corinthian church by saying: "Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong." It was a large order, but it had meaning for the Corinthian Christians, and it has a real point for us as well.

"Watch ye", Paul wrote. Watch your step, and don't blunder into blind alleys with inviting entrance lights, which may very well lead to nowhere. Check the highways you intend to travel. Highways are not always happy ways, even though the traffic on them runs bumper to bumper. "Strait is the gate and narrow the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." "Watch ye."

Watch your step, or you will find yourself bungling along through the days, behaving like "little Sir Echo," a mental and spiritual facsimile of your crowd, just going along. It takes courage to make independent judgments and decisions.

The crowd may not approve, may even jeer. Charles Frances Berry, an American League umpire, observed that making decisions on a baseball diamond is a hazardous business. He says he is puzzled sometimes by the crowd. "It seems," he says, "that you get your biggest yelp from the crowd on some of your best decisions."

That is life in a nutshell. The prophets knew that, and Jesus and Paul knew it. You get your biggest yelp from the crowd on some of your best decisions. The crowd howled its derision when Amos took his stand against irresponsible wealth in Israel. The crowd yelped vociferously when Jesus would not go along with the idea of winning the kingdom by violence. The crowd wanted Paul's scalp when he joined the Christians. The crowd howled "No" when Lincoln faced the end of the Civil War, "with malice toward none and charity for all." Ask ~~Herbert Hoover~~ ^{any public} ~~Herbert Hoover~~, and he will tell you that nine times out of ten your best decisions get the worst press notices.

So, of course it is easy to go along with the crowd than it is to challenge the crowd. It was easier in ancient Corinth, and that is why Paul had so much trouble with the Corinthian Christians. It is easier in our time, and that is why Christians seem to carry so little weight. You do not manage moral and spiritual progress until somebody comes along who will say, as Albert Einstein did, "I challenged an axiom." He questioned what everybody thought, and at first he got a yelp from the scientific crowd. Nevertheless, when he challenged an axiom, he laid foundations for the future in science.

With that word of warning to the Christians at Corinth, Paul went on to say: "Stand fast in your faith." Certainly, if you expect to make sound decisions in the face of crowd pressure, you need some solid dependable standard for judgment. You will blunder into a number of different standards on the road of life. You will find one standard at home and another some where else; one in Church and another in your job. Some or later you will have to take a stand for one standard or the other, or you will suffer the fate of Carl Sandburg's chameleon. He was a remarkably well behaved chameleon, and nothing much could be urged against his record. But, on one occasion, when he was ~~but~~ walking, he blundered into a Scotch plaid and tried to cross it. In order to navigate the plaid, he had to imitate six different yarn colors, first one and then the other. Sandburg remarks that "he was a very brave chameleon and he died at the crossroads, true to his chameleon instincts."

So men and women have achieved moral and spiritual miracles when they have heard the Master say: "You follow me though it may seem to you the height of folly." And sometimes it seems folly to follow. It seems crazy to be honest in a world of corruption. It seems absurd to be pure in a world of lust and licentiousness. It seems silly to love in a world of violence and hate. It seems nonsense to trust in the truth in a world in which men live by lies. Nevertheless, "at your right there is nothing; at your left there is nothing; behind you there is nothing. But in front of you is Jesus Christ." "Stand fast in your faith" that he will lead you to the only triumph life offers.

Take Paul, for example. It did not make any sense to any of Paul's friends when he took a stand for Christ. He never knew exactly what happened on the Damascus road except what he told King Agrippa years later. He had been on his way to Damascus to stamp out the Christians by force. Anyone should know it was silly to believe in a king called Jessus, ruler of a world order built on mutual love and trust. But suddenly the heavenly city, which Paul thought was fanatastic, had become terribly real. He heard a voice: "Rise, and stand on your feet. I have appeared unto you for this purpose, to make you a servant and a witness of what you have seen. To the nations I send you, to open their eyes." All this Paul told Agrippa; but that is not all he had to say. Lifting his aging head and looking piercingly into the eyes of the king, Paul concluded: "Whereupon, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly Vision."

Standing fast, as Paul saw the matter, was a token of manhood. "Quit you like men," he wrote to the Corinthians- act like men- and he meant is altogether clear. Act like men, Paul was telling the hard-pressed Christians at Corinth. Be gentlemen, no matter how your pagan neighbors behave. Fundamentally, the great Apostle was saying: "Be what God meant you to be. Just be yourself at your best." A wise father caught the idea when he said good-by to his son, just entering college: "Just remember, son, be a gentleman." That is all a man needs to be, a gentleman or a woman, a woman with a faith to live by and the gentleman of Nazareth to follow.

As Paul understood the matter, A Christian gentleman or woman set the pattern of his or her behavior, they don't allow it to be set for them. A small boy put the matter rather adroitly when he stood one day in front of a store counter insisting he wanted a red pocketbook. "But", said his mother, "the boys are not carrying pocketbooks like that." "Well," the boy answered, "I am." The question is: Are you setting the pattern of your own behavior, or is the crowd setting it for you?