

Christian Eccentricity

Henry Drummond 1851-1897 (Adapted)

They said, he is beside himself. Mk. 3:21

The most pitiable life in the history of the world is the life of the Lord Jesus. Those who study it find out, every day, a fresh sorrow. Before He came it was already foretold that He would be acquainted with grief, but no imagination has ever conceived the darkness of the reality.

It began with one of the bitterest kinds of sorrow—the sorrow of an enforced silence. For thirty years He saw, but dared not act. The wrongs He came to redress were there. Hollow religion—a mere piece of acting—was being palmed off around Him on every side as the religion of the living God. He saw the poor trodden upon, the sick untended, the widow unavenged, His Father’s people scattered, His truth misrepresented, and the whole earth filled with hypocrisy and violence. He saw this, grew up amongst it, and knew how to cure it. Yet He was dumb, He opened not His mouth. How He held in His breaking spirit, till the slow years dragged themselves done, it is impossible to comprehend.

Then came the public life, the necessity to breathe its atmosphere: the temptation, the contradiction of sinners, the insults of the Pharisees, the attempts on His life, the dullness of His disciples, the Jews’ rejection of Him, the apparent failure of His cause, Gethsemane, Calvary. Yet these were but the more marked shades in the darkness which blackened the whole path of the Man of Sorrows.

But we are confronted here with an episode in His life which is not included in any of these—an episode which had a bitterness all its own, and such as has fallen to the lot of few to know. It was not the way the world treated Him; it was not the Pharisees; it was not something which came from His enemies; it was something His *friends* did. When He left the carpenter’s shop and went out into the

wider life, His friends were watching Him. For some time back they had noticed a certain strangeness in His manner. He had always been strange among His brothers, but now this strangeness was growing upon Him. He had said much stranger things of late, made many strange plans, gone away on curious errands to strange places. What did it mean? Where was it to end? Was the family to be responsible for all this eccentricity?

One sad day it culminated. It was quite clear to them now. He was not responsible for what He was doing. It was His mind, alas! that had become affected. He was beside Himself. In plain English, He was insane!

An awful thing to say when it is true, a more awful thing when it is not; a more awful thing still when the accusation comes from those we love, from those who know us best. It was the voice of no enemy; it came from His own home. It was His own mother, perhaps, and His brethren, who pointed this terrible finger at Him; apologizing for Him, entreating the people not to mind Him, He was beside Himself—He was insane!

There should have been one spot surely upon God’s earth for the Son of Man to lay His head—one roof, at least, in Nazareth, with mother’s ministering hand and sister’s love for the weary worker. But His very home is closed to Him. He has to endure the furtive glances of eyes which once loved Him, the household watching Him and whispering one to another, the cruel suspicion, the laying hands upon Him, hands which were once kind to Him, and finally, the overwhelming announcement of the verdict of His family, “He is beside Himself.” Truly He came to His own, and His own received Him not.

What makes it right to dig up this harrowing memory today, and emphasize a thought which we cannot but feel lies on the borderland of blasphemy? Because the significance of that scene is still intense. It has a peculiar lesson for us who are to profess ourselves followers of Christ—a lesson in the counting of the cost. Christ’s life, from first to last, was a dramatized parable—too short and too significant to allow even a scene which well might rest in solemn shadow to pass by unimproved.

It’s true!

Observe, *from the world’s standpoint*, that the charge is true. It is useless to denounce this as a libel, a bitter, blasphemous calumny. It is not so—it is true! There was no alternative. Either He was the Christ, the Son of the living God, or He was beside Himself. A holy life is always a phenomenon. The world doesn’t understand it. It is either supernatural or morbid.

For what is “being beside oneself”? What is insanity? It is eccentricity—ec-centr-icity—*having a different cen-*

ter from other people, being off-centered. Here is a man, for instance, who devotes his life to collecting objects of antiquarian interest, old coins perhaps, or old editions of books. His center is odd, his life revolves in an orbit of his own. Therefore, his friends say, "He is eccentric." Or here is an engine with many moving wheels, large and small, cogged and plain, but each revolving upon a central axis, and making a perfect circle. But at one side there is one small wheel which does not turn in a circle. Its motion is different from all the rest, and the changing curve it describes is unlike any ordinary line of the mathematician. The engineer tells you that this is the eccentric, because it is running off-center.

Now when Jesus Christ came among men He found them nearly all revolving in one circle. There was but one center to human life—self. Man's chief end was to glorify himself and enjoy himself for ever. Then, as now, by the all but unanimous consensus of the people, this present world was sanctioned as the legitimate object of all human interest and enterprise. By the whole gravitation of society, Jesus—as a man—must have been drawn to the very verge of this vast vortex of self-indulgence, personal ease, and pleasure, which had sucked in the populations of the world since time began.

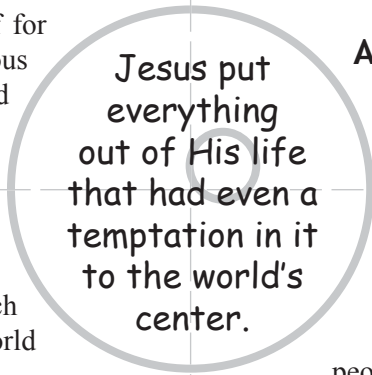
But He stepped back. He refused absolutely to be attracted. He put everything out of His life that had even a temptation in it to the world's center. He humbled Himself—there is no place in the world's vortex for humbleness. He became of no reputation—nor is there a place for namelessness. He emptied Himself—gravitation cannot act on emptiness. So the prince of this world came, but found nothing in Him. He found nothing, because the true center of that life was not to be seen. It was with God. The unseen and the eternal moved Him. He did not seek His own happiness, but that of others. He went about doing good. His object in going about was not personal gain, but to do good.

Now all this was *very eccentric*. It was living on new lines altogether. He did God's will. He pleased not Himself. His center was to one side of self. He was beside Himself! From the world's viewpoint it was simply insanity.

Think of this idea of His, for instance, of starting out into life with so quixotic¹ an idea as that of doing good;

¹ "Quixotic" references the character in classical literature of *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, who takes upon himself the task of straightening out the world.

the simplicity of the expectation that the world ever would become good; this irrational talk about meat to eat that they knew not of, about living water; these extraordinary beatitudes predicating sources of happiness which had never been heard of; these paradoxical utterances of which He was so fond, such as that the way to find life was to lose it, and to lose life in this world was to keep it to life eternal. What could these be but mere hallucination and dreaming! It was inevitable that men should laugh and sneer at Him. He was unusual. He would not go with the multitude. And men were expected to go with the multitude. What the multitude thought, said, and did were the right things to have thought, said, and done. And if anyone thought, said, or did differently than the culture around them, his folly be on his own head, he was "beside himself," he was insane.



As He was, so are we

Every man who lives like Christ produces the same reaction upon the world. This is an inevitable consequence. What men said of Him, if we are true to Him, they will say of you and me. The servant is not above his master. If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.

A Christian must be different from other people. Time has not changed the essential difference between the spirit of the world and the spirit of Christ. They are radically and eternally different. And from the world's standpoint, Christianity is still eccentricity. For what, again, is Christianity? It is the projection into the world of the ethics which Christ lived. It is a duplicating in modern life of the spirit, the method, and the aims of Jesus, a following through the world the very footprints He left behind. And if these footprints were at right angles to the broad beaten track the world went along in His day, they will be so still.

It is useless to say that the distinction has broken down in our day now. These two roads are still at right angles. Christ prepared His church beforehand for the reception it would get in the world. He gave no hope that it would be an agreeable one. Light must conflict with darkness, truth with error. There is no sanctioned place in the world as yet for a life with God as its goal, and self-denial as its principle. Meekness must be victimized; spirituality must be misunderstood; true religion must be mocked. Holiness must make a strong ferment and reaction in family or community, office or workshop, wherever it is introduced. "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter

against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household." Mt.10:34-36

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True religion is no milk-and-water experience. It is a fire. It is a sword. It is a burning, consuming heat, which must radiate upon everything around.

must radiate upon everything around. The change to the Christlike life is so remarkable that when one really undergoes it, he cannot find words in common use by which he can describe its revolutionary character. He has to recall the very striking phrases of the New Testament, which once seemed such exaggerations: "A new man, a new creature; a new heart; a new birth."

His very life has been taken down and recrystallized around the new center. He has been born again.²

The impression his friends receive from him now is the impression of eccentricity. The change is bound to strike them, for it is radical,³ central. They will call in unworthy motives to account for the difference. They will say it is a mere temporary fit, and will pass away. They will say he has shown a weakness which they did not expect from him, and try to banter him out of his novel views and stricter life. This, in its mildest form, is the modern equivalent of "He is beside himself." And it cannot be helped. It is the legitimate reproach of the cross. The words are hard, but not new. Has it not come down that long line of whom the world was not worthy? Its history, alas! is well known. It fell on the first Christians in a painful and even vulgar form.

The off-centered church

The little church had just begun to live. The disciples stood after the great day of Pentecost, contemplating that first triumph of Christ's cause with unbounded joy. At last an impression had been made upon the world. The enterprise was going to succeed, and the whole earth would fill with God's glory. They little calculated that the impression they made on the world was the impression of their own ridiculousness. "What meaneth this?" the people asked. "It means," the disciples would have said, "that the

² Ed. Note: Here the author brings out clearly that "born again" is not synonymous with "forgiven," but rather is synonymous with "changed in character."

³ "Radical" means "going to the *root*."

Holy Ghost, who was to come in His name, is here, that God's grace is stirring the hearts of men and moving them to repent." The people had a different answer. "These men," was the coarse reply, "are full of new wine." Not insane this time—they are intoxicated!

Paul's eccentricity

Time passed, and Paul tells us the charge was laid at his door. He had made that great speech in the hall of the Caesarean palace before Agrippa and Festus. He told them of the grace of God in his conversion, and closed with an eloquent confession of his Lord. What impression had he made upon his audience? The impression of a madman. "And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad." Ac. 26:24

Poor Paul! How you feel for him when the cruel blow was struck. But there was no answer to it. From their viewpoint it was perfectly true. And so it has been with all saints to the present hour. Such men are to the Jews a stumblingblock and to the Greeks foolishness.

The eccentricity of prayer

It is not simply practical Christianity that is an offence. The whole spiritual life, to the natural man, is an eccentric thing. Take such a manifestation, for instance, as prayer. The scientific men of the day have examined it and pronounced it hallucination. Or take public prayer. A congregation of people with bowed heads, shut eyes, hushed voices, invoking, confessing, pleading, entreating One who, though not seen, is said to see, who, speaking not, is said to answer. There is no other name for this incantation from the world's standpoint than eccentricity, delusion, madness.

We are not ashamed of the terms. They are the guarantee of quality. And all high quality in the world is subject to the same reproach. For we are discussing a universal principle. It applies to inventors, to discoverers, to philosophers, to poets, to all men who have been better or higher than their time. These men are never understood by their contemporaries. And if there are martyrs of science—the centers of science being in this world, seen, demonstrated, and known—how much more must there be martyrs for religion whose center is beyond the reach of earthly eye?

There is no sanctioned place in the world as yet for a life with God as its goal, and self-denial as its principle.

Don't be thorough (and you'll be "okay")

It follows from this that the more active religion is, the more unpopular it must be.

Christ's religion did not trouble His friends at first. For thirty years they were content to put up with it. But as it grew in intensity they lost patience. When He called the twelve disciples, they gave Him up. His work went on; the world said nothing for some time. But as His career became atypical more and more, the family feeling spread and gained universal ground. Even the most beautiful and tender words He uttered were quoted in evidence of His "condition." For John tells us that after that exquisite discourse in the tenth chapter about the Good Shepherd, there was a division among the Jews for these sayings: "And many of them said, He hath a devil and is mad. Why hear ye Him?" It seemed utter raving.

The tightening path

Have you ever noticed—and there is nothing more touching in history—how Christ's path narrowed?

The first great active period is called in books "The year of public favor." On the whole it was a year of triumph. The world received Him for a time. Vast crowds followed Him. The Baptist's audience left him and gathered round the new voice. Palestine rang with the name of Jesus. Noblemen, rulers, and rabbis vied with one another in entertaining Him. But the excitement died down suddenly and soon.

The next year is called "The year of opposition." The applause was over. The crowds thinned. On every hand He was obstructed. The Sadducees left Him. The Pharisees left Him. The political party was roused into opposition. The Jews, the great mass of the people, gave Him up. His path was narrowing.

With the third period came the end. The path was very narrow now. There were but twelve left to Him when the last act of the drama opens. They are gathered on the stage together for the last time. But it must narrow still. One of the disciples, after receiving the sop, goes out. Eleven

are left Him. Peter soon follows. There are but ten. One by one they leave the stage, till all forsook Him and fled, and He is left to die alone. Well might He cry, as He hung there in this awful solitude—as if even God had forgotten Him—"My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

And so goes the path of the saints ...

But this is not peculiar to Jesus. It is typical of the life of every Christian. His path, too, must narrow. As he grows in grace, he grows in isolation. He feels that God

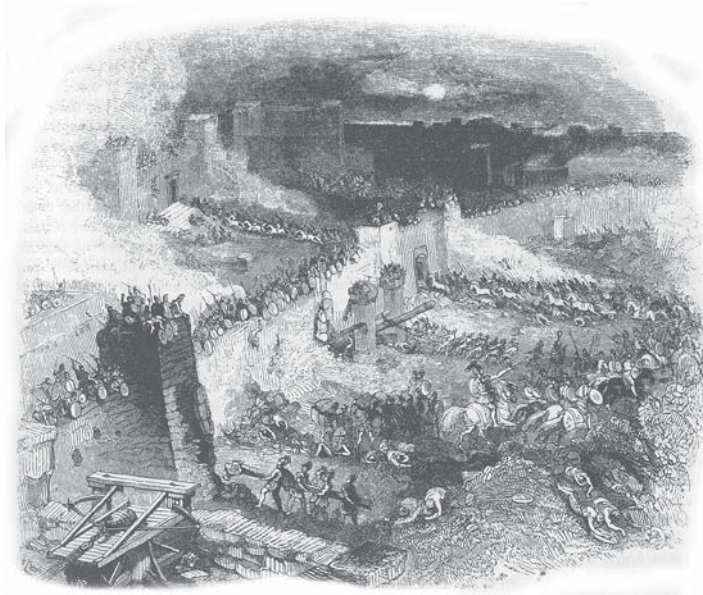
is detaching his life from all around it and drawing him to Himself for a more intimate fellowship. But as the communion is nearer, the chasm which separates him from his fellow man must widen. The degree of a man's religion, indeed, is to be gauged by the degree of his rejection by the world. With the early Christians was not this the commonest axiom, "We told you before," did not Paul warn them, "that we should suffer?" "Unto some it was given in the behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His

sake." It was the position of honor, as it were, in the family of God to be counted worthy of being persecuted for the sake of Christ.

It is a sad reflection that, as in the case of Christ, the keenest suffering may come sometimes from one's own family circle. Among our friends there may be one on whom we all look doubtfully—one who is growing up in the beauty of holiness, and we not knowing what it is that makes him strange. It often needs death to teach us the beauty of a life which has been lived beside our own; and we only know the worth of it when God proves it by taking it to Himself.

Eccentricity for eccentricity's sake?

Finally, it may be objected to all this that if eccentricity is a virtue, it is easily purchased. Anyone can set up for an eccentric character. And if being off-centered is what is necessary to be a Christian, we shall have candidates enough for the office. But it remains to define the terms



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on which a Christian should be eccentric—Christ's own terms. And let them be guides to us in our eccentricity, for without them we shall be not Christians, but fanatics.

The qualities which distinguish the eccentricity of godliness from all other eccentricities are three; and we gather them all from the life of Christ.

(1) Notice, His eccentricity was not destructive. He had no quarrel with existing institutions. He did not overthrow the church—He "went to church."⁴ He said nothing against civil government—He supported the government of the country. He did not denounce social institutions—His first public action was to go to a marriage. His great aim, in fact, outwardly, and all along, was to be as normal, as little eccentric as possible. The true fanatic always tries the opposite. Christ came not to destroy, but to fulfill. A fanatic comes not to fulfill, but to destroy. If we would follow the eccentricity of our Master, let it not be in asceticism, in denunciation, in punctiliousness, and scruples about trifles, but in largeness of heart, singleness of eye, true breadth of character, true love to men, and heroism for Christ.

(2) It was perfectly composed. We think of eccentricity as associated with frenzy, nervousness, excitableness, or ungovernable enthusiasm. But the life of Jesus was a calm. It was a life of marvelous composure. The storms were all about it, tumult and tempest, tempest and tumult, waves breaking over Him all the time till the worn body was laid in the grave. But the inner life was as a sea of glass. It was a life of perfect composure. To come near it even now is to be calmed and soothed. Go to it at any moment, the great calm is there. The request to "come" at any moment was a standing invitation all through His life. Come unto Me at My darkest hour, in My heaviest trial, on My busiest day, and I will give you rest. And when the very bloodhounds were gathering in the streets of Jerusalem to hunt Him down, did He not turn to the quaking group around Him and bequeath to them—a last legacy—"My peace"?

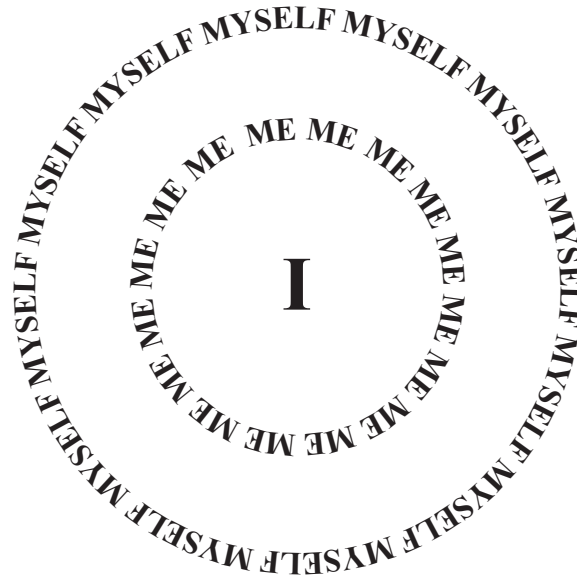
There was no frenzy about His life, no excitement. In quietness and confidence the most terrible days sped past. In patience and composure the most thrilling miracles were wrought. Men came unto Him, and they found not restlessness, but rest. Composure is to be had for faith. We shall be worse than fanatics if we attempt to go along the lonely path of Christ without this spirit. We shall do harm, not good. We shall leave half-done work. We shall wear out before our time. Do not say, "Life is short." Christ's life was short; yet He finished the work that was given Him to do. He was never in a hurry. And if God has given us anything to do for Him, He will give time enough to finish it with a restfulness like Christ's.

(3) This life was consistent. From the Christian standpoint a consistent life is the only sane life. It is not worthwhile being religious without being thorough. An inconsistent Christian is the true eccentric. He is the true phenomenon in the religious world; to his brother Christian the only madman. For madness, in a sense, is inconsistency; madness is incoherency, irrelevancy, disconnectedness; and surely there is nothing more disconnected than a belief in God and eternity and no corresponding life.

And that man is surely beside himself who assumes the name of Christ, pledges perhaps in sacramental wine to be faithful to His name and cause, and who from one year to another never lifts a finger to help it. The man who is really under a delusion is he who bears Christ's name, who has no uneasiness about the quality of his life, nor any fear for the future, and whose true creed is that:

He lives for himself, he thinks for himself,
For himself, and none beside;
Just as if Jesus had never lived,
As if He had never died.

Yes, a consistent eccentricity is the only sane life. "An enthusiastic religion is the perfection of common sense." And to be beside oneself for Christ's sake is to be beside Christ, which is man's chief end for time and eternity. ~



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4 That is, the gatherings in the synagogues.