

The Soap Box

or The Modest Newsletter Almost Entirely Usurped (again) by Joel,
for Reasons Which We Shall Have No Need to Set Forth

The Main Business of Life

by Joel Zartman

Gregory the Great believed that the main business of life was to prepare the soul for judgment. Shall we agree with, or dissent from, or modify his statement? It is to be commended that he had an answer, and a very definite answer, to an important question which not many even ask. It is like the question, what is the business of a church, which is seldom asked and so is seldom answered exactly even though it is an important question. The church suffers from ambiguous answers because the church seldom remembers to ask the question first. The first lesson from this remarkable statement of Gregory the Great is that we have to know the questions before we can have good answers. The question is philosophical, whether we chose to admit that or not. The business of the lover of wisdom is to ask these questions and to seek their answers. Ravaged as we are by anti-intellectualism, of course, we seldom do. How do you know? What can you know? What is real? and all those basic questions seldom get asked. Thanks to Nominalism and its handmaiden, Common Sense Realism, we consider ourselves beyond those questions.¹ We fail to ask them and so we limp about with our bad answers.

Perhaps we do ask them but we give up without trying very hard. We decide that since there is controversy and divergence of opinion, then there is no solution. This is greatly due to the fact that we think of knowledge as a means to power rather than seeing humility as a means to knowledge.² It is very much like the despair of some who prefer the majority text to an eclectic text. The human science and art of textual criticism is not sufficiently modern, not sufficiently objective because it is a humanity, sharing with literature and history very greatly. They wish to make it completely a science and reduce it to another of the pseudo sciences by measuring quantity, by rendering the process objective in the nominalist fashion. They make quality correspond to quantity and drink of the spirit of the age which in *The Pilgrim's Regress* is

¹How so? I think it is because both Nominalism and Common Sense Realism encourage a surface explanation. Both deny what is beyond the surface.

²How so? Knowledge as a means to power is quick and easy, trial and error. It is the great Baconian project of accumulating enough facts so that all things are possible. The reason I say this leads to giving up quickly is because it involves a mind set of changing the answers to fit the questions. They end up with mostly superficial questions, quality is forced into the space of quantity because quantity is easier to deal with. The contrary, the way of humility, will wait patiently to come up with answers rather than grasping at the most immediate even though it may not be the most satisfying.

challenged by Lady Reason when she asks the question, “how do you know the counterfeit from the original?” The spirit of the age has no answer to this; and his ilk prefer the majority text. The failure of Denethor, the steward of Gondor is their failure. It is a failure of resolve because they have ceased to hope. Another version of this despair is called existentialism.

But even those who ask the question well may get it wrong. Even though Gregory answered the question definitely, he need not have answered the question accurately. Is the main business of life to prepare the soul for judgment? Thanks to Gregory, you have the great edifice of the Roman Catholic religion, a very definite outworking of a very definite answer to a very fundamental question. Perhaps I am wrong in this surmise, but I do think it will bear the weight I am giving to it. Does it not seem to you that preparing for judgment is antithetical to the protestant spirit?³ Does it not seem that the accumulation of a system dedicated to this particular answer is exactly what drove humanists like Calvin and Luther away from the Catholic church? What is the protestant answer to the question, what is the business of life? Is this question not the same as the first question of the Westminster Catechism? Roman Catholicism had to live with a split between what was sacred and the rest of life. And the sacredness of the sacred is well kept separate. It must be. This they do well and this we do badly.⁴ But because of this you have the stifling of the rest of life. You see, Gregory the Great is not the only one who gives this answer, although he is the most definite in his answer. The implication of such an answer is that any of the occupations of our life that are not immediately and obviously connected with preparation for judgment are dispensable. Does this not sound to you like the preaching we often have on greater and greater dedication? on being yielded? on giving up everything but the most important thing?

It is not my purpose to disparage those who advocate greater commitment when it comes to the Christian life. I think the only worthwhile Christianity involves a wholehearted commitment. True religion is not half-hearted or casual. That is why I am a Fundamentalist, because the idea of Fundamentalism is that Christianity is taken on its own terms and not on our own terms. It is, however, my purpose to point out the similarity that exists between the answer that Gregory the Great provided and the practice of some Fundamentalists. The result of making part of life dispensable creates a tension. The most easy place in which I can see this sort of thing coming up is when it comes to employment. What has employment to do with judgment? If you have employment in the secular realm this can be used to prepare yourself for judgment, but how much better will it be if your employment is in the realm of the sacred! It seems to me that the doctrine of vocation, that calls you to your employment in whatever realm it is, and that

³The protestant believes in forensic justification. He is declared righteous. He no longer fears condemnation. The Catholic is never so bold as to approach the eternal throne and claim the prize, through Christ, his own. The attitude of the last stanza of Wesley’s poem is the attitude that I speak of.

⁴Now here is an interesting thing to think about. Do they indeed? Perhaps it is my bias toward Anglican liturgy that provokes such statements.

it is therefore a sacred duty, is disparaged in this arrangement. We seek to make our life count by giving ourselves over to the work of “full time ministry”.

But what about the rest of life? The tension that such an answer created for the Roman Catholic church can be seen in the indulgence of Carnival and the abstinence of Lent. The two compartments of life, one more important, eventually led the slighted compartment to break away. And this, it seems to me, describes the Renaissance. In the Renaissance, life, the humanities, the part relegated to lesser importance takes over. Something vital was being slighted. The Renaissance erred in the same way by pushing away the sacred entirely. But they did realize that life is glorious and good. The reason for this is because it is part of what God gives us. But better than the Renaissance, is the Reformation. The result of a dissatisfaction with the answer of Gregory was a change in life. What does Luther say? He who does not love wife, wine and song is a fool. The Reformation brought with it a flowering of interest in the art of living: in the rest of life. Perhaps this is because bound up in the idea of the Protestant Reformation there is another very definite answer to the question of the main business of life. It is to know God and to enjoy him forever.⁵ This answer is different, you see, from that of Gregory. This answer doesn't disparage the rest of life, focusing all of it impossibly on judgment. Rather, it turns away from the person, and thus the person gains much more. The answer of Gregory, ultimately, results in a truncated or inconsistent practice because it is not an accurate answer, for all that it is definite. The answer the Reformers give is that the business of life is to live. Personal knowledge and the enjoyment of fellowship is at the heart of what life's business is.

This gives a greater scope to the application of the answer than does Gregory's does it not? I think that in Fundamentalism our answer is very frequently very similar to the answer of Gregory. While the result may not be penance or pilgrimage - Although we do sing that awful song “I Gave My Life for Thee, and Now What's In It for Me” - the result is a truncated view that excludes life. It is a rationalistic view, ironically, applied to spiritual matters. Rationalism is another sort of truncation. It is a system of calculation based on quantity.⁶ However, this is too involved a matter for me to go into now.⁷ The point is that we often take the answer that cuts us

⁵What departure is this? Glory and knowledge have to go close together. I think I can make this argument thus. What do the Seraphim cry about the glory of God? That is fills the earth. But what does the prophet say will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea? The knowledge of the glory of God. Glory has to do with recognition, and I don't need to demonstrate that recognition has to do with knowing.

⁶What new sophistry is this? It is none. Calculation of the worst sort is here involved. It is calculation that refuses to include everything. This is avoided by people like Augustine when he goes for the heart of the matter, in that case, all things follow. But when superficial calculation is involved, things are bound to be left out.

⁷In other words: I have not worked this one out (even in the scanty detail which I have worked out the other things flung insouciantly above) and might have a hard time making it

off from involving ourselves in the full scope of human affairs as if they were not essential to what God has made us to be. God cares about the humanities, because God made humans and he made what makes them distinctly human. The answer to the question of the business of life, has to take these into account.

Some Quotations

Contributed (as a means of relief) by Todd Mitchell

From <http://www.monarchy.net/quotations.htm>

If a nation does not want a monarchy, change the nation's mind. If a nation does not need a monarchy, change the nation's needs.

–Jan Christian Smuts, Prime Minister of South Africa 1939-1948

Monarchy can easily be debunked, but watch the faces, mark well the debunkers. These are the men whose taproot in Eden has been cut: whom no rumour of the polyphony, the dance, can reach - men to whom pebbles laid in a row are more beautiful than an arch. Yet even if they desire mere equality they cannot reach it. Where men are forbidden to honour a king they honour millionaires, athletes or film stars instead: even famous prostitutes or gangsters. For spiritual nature, like bodily nature, will be served; deny it food and it will gobble poison.

–C. S. Lewis

Keen Observations about the Retreat

by Joel Zartman

Well, I thought it was pretty cool. I mean, I had a good time, you know. So, like, we want to do it again next year and party on, dude. It was like a taco, you know. There were, like, layers. And I thought that was pretty cool. We had like, people eating their sandwiches and stuff. Anyway, everybody was talking about stuff and mostly didn't stay up except for a few of us who did. And the food was, like, extremely bodacious. Only, they didn't have tacos . . . could have used some tacos. Otherwise it was cool. Everything was pretty cool. Yeah, looking back on the whole experience, I'd have to say that all of it was extremely bodacious, except for the tacos . . . but I already mentioned that.

I think that everybody else thought it was pretty cool. And, like, they would do it again. I would say that they would have to agree that they would do it again if somebody asked them to do it again. It was excellent. Party on dude. Maybe next year they'll bring some tacos . . .

work were I pressed to elaborate.