

## AGE OF THE OTHERLY

By

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You won't find it in the dictionary, but the otherly is everywhere. An otherly is one who determines nothing upon personal conviction, but who thinks as others think, acts as others expect him to act and says what others are saying. He does not ask, "Is this true?", but "Is this what others think is true?"

When Jesus once asked about his identity he received a number of answers. "Some say you are John the Baptist; some, Elijah; and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." Then Jesus said, "But who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). It is as if our Lord had said, "Don't quote. I care not what others think. Tell me exactly what YOU believe. Forget what the world is thinking; what each other may think. This is between you, individually, and me. Your life will depend upon it. Who do YOU say that I am?"

It is this kind of confession that counts. It is this kind of confession that one seldom hears. The "confession" may often be no more than the required ritual to be a member of church. It is like saying, "Yes, I believe, like all the rest (Who doesn't believe in Jesus (for heaven's sakes!) I'm here to join the gang – and say what you want me to say." Of course there are exceptions – there are some still capable of their own thinking, or else there would be no object in writing this.

Because Peter's confession was his own personal conviction Jesus commended him. "Blessed art thou Simon Bar Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father who is in heaven." Blessed Peter; He was not echoing something which was in vogue at the time. He was not parroting what other men thought. His answer was his own.

Contrast the attitude of Jesus here with his remarks on another occasion, the feast of the Jews at which they questioned his authority, persecuted him and even sought to kill him. Jesus went to the core of their unbelief when he said, "How can you believe, who receive glory one of another?" (John 5:1, 16, 18, 44). How can you have any thought of your own when you are concerned with the thoughts of others? To believe is to seek only to be a sole individual taking up a stand with God. But this is impossible for you if your first thought is to be sure that such a position will be honored by others.

Such is the way of belief in our day. One must retain the honor of others. One must have the esteem of others. He must make a good mark; he must be recommended; he must receive glory of another – or all is failure! Thus the church becomes, not a bulwark of faith and a light on a hill giving its own light of truth, but a hollow echo chamber, in which the consent of the whole is merely bounced from one to another, and in which the light is merely a reflection of the shades and shadows of the multitude.

How can YOU believe? YOU believe! How long since you actually weighed and defined your belief. Can YOU “give answer to every man that asks YOU a reason concerning the hope that is in YOU?” (1 Pet. 3:15). Not a reason for the other fellow’s thinking, but your own. No one can answer for YOU.

Otherliness is the password in modern church-anity. It is the key to position and the route to the chief seats. Conventions become the platforms for the giving and receiving of “glory” of those who act as reverberation units for the whole. The most honored is the one who quotes others. Nothing is so otherly as a convention. Here the others amen each thought that reflects otherly thinking, not even noticing that these thoughts might often contradict each other. One must smile and applaud whatever truth may be violated. What a brute is a man who does not applaud when others applaud.

I once sat in a Sunday school class which discussed a significant text. As each one gave his “interpretation” it was obvious that the actual fact stated in the text was being denied. When it came my turn to speak I pointed out that in spite of many fine expressions given, the text itself stated a particular fact which could not mean all these different things, and in fact, could only mean one thing. Quickly the teacher, who was also the minister, informed me that the class enjoyed freedom of discussion, but never argued the point! Later it occurred to me that there evidently was not supposed to be any point, only the blending of ideas and differences as each sought some common denominator which all the others could accept without conflict.

This does not mean that one should not respect another’s conviction. But the true otherly has no conviction. He will not dare oppose you out-rightly. One could respect his conviction – if he had any – but by practicing otherliness he has lost all possibility, all capability, of ever attaining a conviction of his own.

Jesus respected the personal thought and action of the individual. Mary broke the expensive vase of ointment – in spite of what the others might think – simply because Mary wanted to act as Mary thought. Jesus commended her for it and rebuked Judas, who was blabbering about “others” like a bureaucrat campaigning for urban renewal.

Zacchaeus reacted in contrast to the otherlies of Jericho, and climbed a tree in order to face Jesus. He heard Jesus say, “Today is salvation come to this house.” Think of the millions of church members who may never see salvation, because they would never be caught by others in such a position: up a tree. Their thinking, acting, believing is all by, for and of others.

Paul was not impressed by the otherlies. Not a word does he send marveling at Apollo or Peter because of their large following. “Each one shall receive his own reward according to his own labor,” he said. (I Cor. 3:8)

In the United Nations stands a statue of the “UNESCO Brown Man” – faceless, race-less, nameless, sexless, wholly lacking in muscles or features. He is the image of otherliness, the model of the modern man who has no thought of his own, and no concern except

what others demand of him, no creed, no conviction, and no distinguishing mark as a self-determining man at all. He might very well exemplify the idol of today's religion – an ecumenical man – one who believes “what the church believes,” who opposes no doctrine, accepts no doctrine, whose mind is open on all sides, who stands on both sides of every issue, whose example is a reflection of the average man, and whose goal is to be accepted by everyone in everything.

He is the insipid; not a fanatic; neither right nor left. The Bible has a word for him - lukewarm. And while he is most acceptable to the masses, to the others, to his group; he is unacceptable to God. “I will spew thee out,” He says. There is a rapidly accelerating pressure in the world to force Christians to give up a personal private conviction.

Jesus said, “You shall be hated of all men for my name's sake” (Matt. 10:22). It has never been popular to discount the traditions of the majority. Today even within so-called Christendom there is pressure to conform to all the others not on the basis of Scriptural truth, but for the sake of unity – for the cause of otherliness. With respect to others and their pressure against personal conviction, Jesus said to fear them not, that he came not to send peace – not that kind of peace, anyway – but a sword (Matt. 10:26-37).

Jesus did not warn his disciples against sickness, wars, financial risks, poverty, nor violence, but against succumbing to the pressure of others. Peter rebuked Jesus for his intention to go to Jerusalem and die on the cross, saying, “This shall never be unto thee.” Jesus said to Peter, “Get thee behind me Satan. Thou art a stumbling block unto me, for thou mind not the things of God but the things of men” (Matt 16:23). So quickly had Peter turned from his personal confession to thinking like others!

Organizations may grow while minding the things of men, but not so with faith. Faith that saves must be of the most personal sort, produced by one's own mental process and innermost desire. It is often purchased at the cost of friends, loved ones, and even life itself. This the otherly can never do. He cannot think, feel, judge or act entirely upon his own. He cannot truly believe, for he receives glory of others, and it is others that think, feel and act through him.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus faced the crucial test of his life, he went “apart” from the others to pray. He was not thinking of others nor letting them influence him. His one concern was to “do the Father's will.” The apostles would never have let him go to the cross. But Jesus faced the issue alone, and after a period of intense personal agony, which no one ever shared and never will share, Jesus said, “thy will be done.” No one can say “Thy will be done,” if he has surrendered his will to others.

The relation to God is essentially personal. God deals with no one by proxy. Jesus said, “This is the bread which came down out of heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down out of heaven: if any man eats of this bread he shall live forever: yea and the bread which I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world” (John 6:50-51). He gave his life for all, but the receiving process is personal. No

one can eat for another. Every man has to do his own digesting. This is how personal salvation really is.

Of course, this does not eliminate the fellowship and concern for one another. When persons come to the same conclusion in private, they desire to share their findings and thinking with each other. Thus the church is a fellowship of those who individually are related to God through personal faith. Moreover, because of the mutual love for God there is love for each other. "Whosoever loves him that begat, loves also him that is begotten of him" (1 John 5:1).

But this love and fellowship must not negate the original individual thought, intention and conviction of either party. As soon as conviction is surrendered, the very basis of the fellowship is undermined. Without personal belief any fellowship is merely social and superficial, conformity without honesty, for the conflict is merely hidden.

If freedom and Christian faith vanishes, and it seems to be vanishing in most quarters at an alarming rate, it will be partially because there can be no freedom nor faith for people who have no capacity to be individuals. There can be no self-denial unless there is a self. There can be no surrender to God for otherlies. There can be no saving of one's life, if his life is possessed by others.

**"But what do YOU think?"**

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