

## Values To Live By

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In the past twenty-five years or so, in various areas of American society, there has been a lot of talk about values. It has been alleged by some observers that there has been a national “decline in values,” resulting in moral chaos, a decline in positive work performance standards, and even an increase in criminality. Some people want nationwide enforcement of the “right” values, those standards of thought and behavior to which all members of society should be held. Others vehemently reject that notion, viewing it as an infringement of personal rights and freedom. For them, values must remain personal beliefs and opinions.

Regardless of such differing views, values are generally understood to be a good thing. Most people would agree that a truly healthy, whole, well person (or community) is one that consistently holds to sound principles of living. Such standards are like a compass, helping people steer a life-course that is responsible and meaningful.

In the 1970s Dr. Sidney Simon of Temple University, along with Louis Rath, published the most popular and widely read study on the subject of values—a book titled *Values and Teaching*, followed by *Values Clarification* and *The Search for Values*. The authors sought to differentiate between mere “personal choices” such as selecting chocolate ice cream over vanilla and those deeply held priorities that underlie and govern our most critically important personal life-shaping decisions as well as providing a basis for communal life. Their basic insight was that there are distinct qualities that separate the two and that persons who are seeking “wellness”—individuals who want to be intentional, consistent, and effective in life—need to take the time to recognize, understand, and act on the basis of their own deeply held set of core values.

Everyone recognizes that core values are very tricky things. We may *think* that we’re guided by a particular set of priorities when, in fact, it may be that we’re actually being led by pressures or desires that are antithetical to what we claim. So how can a person know? The criteria that Simon and Rath offer have proved to be a relatively simple and effective way for an individual to discern those principles (or values) upon which to base

personal decisions and, for that matter, decisions which operate corporately within societies, institutions, and organizations.

Let's consider one example. Suppose that I claim that I am committed to the principle that "all people are created equal." That statement suggests that I am always guided by that belief in determining my actions and decisions. To determine if this really *is* a value upon which my life is solidly based, here are seven criteria against which to test the depth of my views regarding human equality:

1. Was that view chosen freely without pressure, punishment, or threat?
2. Was that view selected from among other known alternatives?
3. Was that view chosen with full awareness of possible consequences?
4. Do I cherish and prize the choice that I have made in this regard?
5. Am I ready to affirm my view aloud in public?
6. Will I act on my choice when it costs something to do so?
7. Have I, over a long period of time, consistently held and acted on this view?

Clearly these are tough, demanding standards of the "stand up and be counted" sort. That's precisely their purpose—to separate the most important and highest principles from the arbitrary and inconsequential. Personal and societal values are developed only through a lifetime of experience and reflection, as we consider truthfully, carefully, and prayerfully what we actually *are*, not just what we would like to be or what we wish that we were.

The only way to avoid a life of confusion, being torn between arbitrary priorities and making decisions that are completely random, is to find a set of values that is both positive and dependable. A person who is living in a state of wellness—a life characterized by strong, healthy, consistent standards of what truly matters—is someone who has taken the time to understand and affirm his/her authentic priorities. Rather than, as The Book of Common Prayer states so graphically in a Sunday Collect, "being blown about by every changing wind of doctrine," the person who is truly well is guided by commitments that, when pursued consistently, have been demonstrated to bring a sense of purpose, fulfillment, and satisfaction.

So, what are the core values that lie at the heart of the Christian faith? What are the core values of our faith that promote authentic wellness? Certainly to the general criteria to determine core values offered above, the Christian standard would insist on an additional item that asks, “Is this consistent with what we know of the model given to us in the life of Jesus Christ?” Beginning with that one addition to the criteria for identifying a core value, I want to suggest that there is, indeed, a set of implicit Christian core values. While individual Christians certainly might, understandably, differ on those specifics, I want to offer here what seem to me to be the basic core values that, throughout the centuries, the Christian faith has found to profoundly underlie and sustain human wellness:

1. *Commitment to living as a Christ-centered person and seeking to build intentionally Christ-centered communities.*

This is the primary Christian commitment, upon which everything else depends; therefore it is critical that there should be absolute clarity about its meaning. Perhaps the best way to define the term, *Christ-centered*, would be to point out that genuine Christian faith is based on a personal relationship, rather than upon some set of narrowly defined religious doctrines requiring our intellectual assent. Christian faith proceeds from an experience of relationship—a sense of our being “people in a Presence.” The resurrection of Jesus means that Christ is alive and active right now in the heart and mind of every person on this planet. Being a Christian means being in touch with that presence every day—knowing and seeking to be constantly faithful to our “life in Christ.”

Clearly, God’s unique action initiates and precedes any human response. Each individual Christian comes out of a lifelong journey of faith that has led him/her to know Christ in a profound way, unique to himself/herself. Yet, there are some basic common experiences that shape the way in which all Christians have come to know God in and through Christ. Whatever else Jesus Christ showed to us in his life and ministry, there are his primary commitments of faithfulness, gratitude, and love. In Jesus we see absolute trust in the will and purposes of God, a pervasive, thankful stewardship of every gift of this life, and a total unselfishness manifested in compassion and practical action on behalf of anyone who is in need or at risk.

A Christian, pure and simple, is one who sees in that unique model of THANKS living exactly what it means to be effective in his/her witness to God's initiative. Although living up to that high standard is impossible for us to attain relying only on our own resources, Christians are convinced that Christ both empowers and forgives. God gives us strength to transcend our limitations and we are forgiven when our best efforts fall short of the mark. Christians rely on the absolute certainty of Jesus Christ's continuing presence whenever we, in caring community, work together to "seek and serve Christ in all persons."

Following the example of Jesus, the Christian church—at its best—challenges all people to build and strengthen their own personal faith in the ways that are most helpful and meaningful for themselves, never insisting on some narrowly theological interpretation. The strategy is to "respect the dignity of every human being" by affirming each person's own calling as a sacred trust to be nurtured and revered. Such openness to a range of understanding and interpretation is a scary prospect for some. They want to restrict such freedom by insisting on creedal uniformity. The result is the emergence, today, in every era of Church history, a precarious tension between individual and institutional needs. The institution constantly threatens to impose the dead hand of outdated dogma upon the life-giving freshness of God's ongoing revelation. It all seems to work best when the institution has a high tolerance for variety, insisting on only the most non-negotiable tenets of belief. The church, in this view, always seeks to create an atmosphere in which conditions are maximized for Christ's healing presence to flow. The assumption is that each participant is committed to the highest standard of personal stewardship—to seek a state of personal and professional wellness in which nothing hinders the most effective response to God's calling. The goal is to offer assistance and empowerment, reaching out to another without concern for personal gain.

Institutional titles, rank, and status have very little importance in the Christ-centered life. Church politics get left behind. Any notion of self-appointed "experts" telling others what to think or do has limited application. At best these are resources, springboards for personal reflection and growth. Leading and learning are roles handed back and forth because we understand that "the Spirit flows where it will" and Christ's presence will redeem and transform all of us into a community of shared service. That norm, in short,

represents a primary core value that we find reflected in the church when it is truly well transforming and enriching our individual and institutional ministry throughout the entire world.

2. *Commitment to the pursuit of unifying the heart, mind, body, and spirit.*

There are many programs of personal and vocational “training” available for the continuing growth and education of the church’s ordained and lay leaders and members. Most of those programs address some particular area of function or skill—new strategies for raising money, physical exercise activities for better health, or for more effective preaching tips for next Lent. While there certainly is a need for such education, this second core value of Christian faith holds that genuine wellness can only be found in an integration of every facet of the whole person, not just the intellect or the talents in isolation, but every aspect of one’s being working together in a unity of focus. Unity with God and with one another begins with a sense of personal integrity.

For years church wellness initiatives have unmistakably revealed that one’s own wellness is most threatened by any imbalance that favors work over leisure, job over family, intellect over exercise. Christian faith values equally all facets of human life and experience. Physical wellness and activity are not “inferior” to intellectual or aesthetic qualities. It is in the balance, unity, and harmony of the entire person (or community) that true wellness emerges. For Christians, the ultimate goal of life is, through Christ, to be restored to complete unity with God—a harmony in which all the fragmentation and division that cause self-alienation and separates people from one another is finally overcome. The authentic Christian community seeks to involve participants in a total renewal experience, one in which their faith, their work, their relationships, and their physical well-being find integration and refreshment. The very same root linguistic source word is shared by “wholeness,” “holiness,” “happiness,” and “health.” Christians are committed to the core value of challenging and breaking down the compartmentalization that often separates work from bliss, home and family from job, desires from duties, and the realm of the spiritual from ordinary reality. Instead, the church offers an opportunity and a variety of resources by which members can journey toward a more complete drawing-together of every gift that God has given them. For

Christians, one of the most strongly held values is a belief that God created us to find our true selves in a unity that defies fragmentation. Conversely, alienation, loneliness, and isolation result from a failure to see the interconnectedness of one's entire being. Lasting wellness and personal peace come only from the integration of all aspects of one's life. In the end, of course, such renewal is the work of God alone. Our privilege is to offer resources, support, and assistance and then to get out of the Spirit's way.

3. *Commitment to an understanding that we are all part of a living stream with a sustainable spirit.*

The revelation of the nature and purpose of God that flowed from the life and ministry of Jesus is not yet complete. God continues to open new visions and insights every day. A third Christian core value is the perception that our experience of God is still growing, changing, and being discovered. Like our experience of a parent, a friend, a child, or a spouse undergoes daily enrichment and deepening, so is our apprehension and appreciation of God. While we can trace patterns that provide assurance and trust, the process of discovery is not yet complete.

No one should presume to think that he has arrived at some eternal, immutable truth that we need to protect, preserve, and transmit to others. Rather, a Christian core value is to see ourselves as always engaged in a continuing quest that responds to God's constantly changing and challenging call. The church invites people to immerse themselves into that flowing stream. It is that spirit of adventure and discovery that enlivens healthy Christian community at every level of its programmatic and institutional life. Although there is certainly a legitimate level of history and tested structure within the life of the church, its liveliness and spontaneity depend on leaders, and participants' willingness to throw all our plans up in the air and reassemble them in light of God's new gifts of insight and creativity. That very process is the evidence that God's spirit is present within us and our community, creating, sustaining, and extending our work. For that reason, controversy and conflict are normal elements of wellness of Christian community.

God brings out of our differences and disagreements the new thing that is promised throughout Holy Scriptures. Far from seeking some homogenized and apathetic uniformity, the wellness that is valued is a restlessly creative energy requiring patience, understanding, and

tolerance. As it pursues personal and corporate wellness, our experience of Christian faith will be a vital part of a learning experience that continues to be shared and by which all are sustained in their practice of ministry.

4. *Commitment to a disciplined reflective lifecycle process of identity, discernment, practice, and transformation.*

Central to every Christian pursuit of wellness is the practice of a reflective process, the four steps of which can be identified as IDPT:

*Identity:* Who and what am I right at this minute in time—with all my faults and all my gifts? How do I understand myself, my relationships, and my responsibilities?

*Discernment:* Who and what is God calling me to be?

*Practice:* How am I responding to God's call? What am I doing to be more faithful and effective? What resources are there to help me?

*Transformation:* How am I changing and being changed by God's spirit within me as I seek to follow a new practice and pattern of faithful ministry?

Some individuals have a seemingly innate, unconscious gift by which this practice of wellness renewal appears simply to have “always been there.” For others, it is a learned, conscious discipline. Whichever the case, a core value of Christian wellness holds that the daily application of IDPT for personal and professional growth is central to a lifelong process of personal and vocational renewal. Just as importantly, it is a discipline that the entire Christian church is called to apply to its total corporate life.

Every institution—a business, a religious congregation, a government, or an entire society—is constantly at risk of becoming fossilized. Without constant reassessment and renewal, practices and policies become set in concrete and can actually prevent progress if we're not mindful. Wellness—personal or corporate—demands change and we must embrace the challenge of new ways of thinking about old truths if we are to remain vital. No doubt, this is a demanding and even risky perspective—one that is often rejected by the defenders of an unchanging, eternal view of the Word of God. While ultimate truth does not change, its expression and relevance always have to be rearticulated and made applicable to changed circumstances. The alternative is a nit-picking devotion to perpetuating the minutiae of religious lore. Such fearful resistance to anything new

cannot be consistent with our experience of the renewing energy of God. The entire Christian revelation—the new covenant—proceeds from the very notion that time after time peoples and religions have lost their vitality and turned into museums. It is God’s will throughout history to break through like “new wine in old wineskins” to refresh and renew.

Christian faith places a very high value on the IDPT model of reflection, learning, and change. All Christians are called, in their own way, to take the time to “do their IDPT.” It’s the only way we can be sure that we stay open to God’s spirit. It’s the only way we can continue to keep up with the God who moves ahead of us every day, boldly doing a new thing.

*It’s Who We Are.*

It is my firm belief that by seeking to be true to these four core values, the Christian faith points the way toward authentic human wellness. Over two thousand years of experiences, these four core values have been shown to build sound practical principles of teaching, learning, affirming, showing hospitality, worshiping, and serving for which we think God has raised us up. History shows us innumerable authentic Christians and authentic church communities that achieve greatness by seeking to pursue these same beliefs and commitments. That’s why I confidently identify these four essential commitments as our Christian “core values.”