

OCT., '64

"Christ and the Confidence Man"

Lloyd J. Averill
Kalamazoo College

I.

One afternoon this past spring, the telephone rang in my study at home. An unfamiliar voice asked whether I were free to discuss what the caller described as an urgent personal matter. I offered to meet him at my office in twenty minutes.

When I arrived, I found waiting in the hall a man of about thirty-five years of age. He had a kind of rough good looks and carried himself easily with the manner of one who was at least apparently in possession of himself. That voice, which had made a disembodied impression on me when he phoned, added impressiveness to the person. It was a rich voice, employed with at least a trace of selfconscious concern for its effect; the voice of an actor, I immediately thought, with diction fit for Shakespearean roles.

We entered my office together and settled ourselves comfortably, all the while carrying on the kind of inconsequential talk strangers use to dissipate their strangeness. When I let my end of the conversation lag, he knew it was an invitation to get to the point. He did. A man was dying, he said, and he had been asked to pray for the man's recovery. The request had been made of him by one to whom the dying man was very dear, and he wanted to honor the request. He was not at all sure, however, that he could pray with any honesty or integrity. "Perhaps," he said, "I could pray, 'Lord, thy will be done,' but I don't know what the will of God is. So I have come to ask whether you believe in intercessory prayer, and if you do, whether you will pray in my stead."

I told him I thought these were rather sudden questions, and that I wanted to know more about him before I undertook to answer them. He seemed to have no reluctance to talk about himself. His home was in Texas, he said, though he had not seen his parents for eleven years. He had become estranged from his father, and he described the events which contributed to the estrangement in some detail. As a brash youth, he had called his father a drudge and a non-entity. He had deliberately defied his father's standards of behavior and had openly encouraged his younger sister in a similar defiance. He was now prepared to admit how immature and brash it all had been, and he expressed regret that he had seemed not to care for his father. He did care, he insisted, but he was never able to express his affection in the expected ways.

At this point my visitor admitted what I had come to suspect-- that the one who was dying, and for whom he had been asked to pray, was his father. His mother had called to give him word of his father's illness, and as their conversation ended, she had spoken words which expressed her own mixed anger and anguish: "Philip," she said to her son, "If you have an ounce of Christian charity left in you, you will pray for your father's recovery."

And then he told me something I had no way of suspecting. When his mother's telephone call had reached him a few days before our visit, he was just being released from serving a three-year term in the Federal Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, where he had been sent for transporting stolen property across state lines. After leaving Texas, he said, he had enrolled in Amherst College; and he told of chance meetings with the poet Robert Frost on that campus. He graduated from Amherst with a degree in economics and subsequently found his way into business in New York. When sent to prison he had been operating his own import company. It was not clear from his account just what circumstances had led to his arrest and conviction, and I did not press him further for the details. That he was a graduate of an eminent Eastern college did not at all surprise me. His voice, his manner, the articulate and urbane way in which he told his story, clearly marked him off as a man of education and culture. He was a reflective man too. He talked with some feeling and insight about the depersonalization of prison life. He made occasional use of biblical allusions, talked of some gossip about one of the leading theologians of the East, and recounted an amusing story or two with theological significance.

For my own part, I was disposed to take seriously the questions about prayer with which he had begun, and the questions about the Christian understanding of death and of man's destiny after death which he had asked in the course of his personal narrative. I spoke to them as best I could, and he seemed genuinely appreciative of my response.

I realized with a start that we had talked for an hour and twenty minutes, and that I was already quite late for a meeting at which I had been expected. I told him I must be on my way, and he expressed regret at having detained me. As we walked out of the office, he asked whether he might have any chance for a job on our maintenance staff until fall. It had only been a few days since his release from prison, and he was hitch-hiking back to New York; but he needed some time to get used to being beyond the walls, he said, and besides he needed to earn a little money. I replied that such a maintenance job might be possible, and it was arranged for him to call back the next morning at ten o'clock to get the

answer. He had one final question. Did the Chapel have a fund from which he might get the price of supper and a room for the night? The Chapel had no such fund, but I gave him ten dollars and wished him well.

There was something appealing about this young man who had come to the campus, by his own account, because he thought a college chaplain might be able to help him with his questioning. But there was also something odd about him. Any uneasiness I had found support only in small things. He had mistaken the first name of Amherst's president; he had described his parents as "hard core" Baptists, when the term he probably meant was "hard shell;" and when he first called me at home, I was almost sure he had identified himself as John Osborn, but when I met him at the office he introduced himself as Philip Osborn. If these were nagging discrepancies, they were surely small enough, and I was disposed to accept his story at face value.

Nevertheless, the next morning before his expected call at ten o'clock, I got in touch with Amherst and was told that no Philip Osborn had ever attended that college. Then I called the Federal Prison at Leavenworth and was told that no Philip Osborn had recently been released from that institution. My next calls were local. From the First Baptist Church I learned that my visitor had also visited there earlier on the day of his visit to me, identifying himself by the name of Lord. His story was the same, but he asked for no money. From the First Congregational Church, I learned that he had presented himself there and had been given two dollars. Calls to other downtown churches failed to turn up information of other visits.

So now it was clear. My visitor was a con man. His day's work had apparently yielded him twelve dollars. When ten o'clock came, my telephone was silent.

II.

It is humiliating to be "taken" by a con artist, especially if you have previously thought of yourself as a reasonably shrewd judge of character. In my own case, when it finally became clear that "Philip Osborn" was at least partly a myth, I felt emotionally betrayed. I had allowed my emotions to become involved in his story; I had allowed myself to have some feeling for his situation. By his own account, he had gone through an early rebellion against his father and had never found a graceful way to restore their relationship even after he had come to recognize that his rebellion had gone too far. Now his father was dying and their estrangement

was about to become permanent. There was real pathos in that. He felt helpless, and a part of his helplessness lay in the fact that not even the resource of prayer was available to him. Surely that added poignancy to pathos. He had known the devastation of imprisonment, and now though legally free he was nevertheless a marked man. I saw possible tragedy foreshadowed in that. Such feelings had made me vulnerable, and in that vulnerability I had been betrayed.

To make matters worse, he had my ten dollars! If it were not for that, perhaps I could have persuaded myself that I had not really been taken in by him, that I had only pretended to find his story credible, whereas in fact I had cleverly penetrated his deceit. I might even have succeeded in reversing things by convincing myself that it was really he who had been taken in, since he believed that I believed him, whereas in fact I knew what he was up to all along. But my ten dollars, deposited snugly in his pocket, robbed me of my own comforting and self-justifying deceit.

Perhaps worst of all, he had deprived me of the satisfaction which comes with charity. What a warm feeling it gave me to know that, whatever unreasoning prejudice other men might have toward the ex-convict, I was willing to help one find rehabilitating work. What a generous fellow I was, when there were no Chapel funds which covered the case, to reach into my own wallet for a self-sanctifying ten-spot. But the sweet taste of satisfaction turned sour in my mouth when charity was exposed as a cheap racket.

If only I had known what he was up to from the beginning! If only I had first detected in that beguiling voice the accent of deceit! All right, suppose I had known. Just suppose that one of my clerical colleagues, who had been visited by "Philip Osborn" earlier in the day, had warned me of his game, so that when he called I was ready for him. What should I have done differently under those circumstances? What would it mean to be ready for such a confidence man?

Well, for one thing, I might have been ready with a few choice and vivid words which would have made it clear that I regarded him as a thorough scoundrel. I might have been ready to tell him that I had no time for the likes of him and that he had better be off before I put the authorities on his trail. Surely these are the things which, in retrospect, I would have liked to do. They would have given me a good bit of righteous satisfaction and saved me from the humiliation of being taken in. And I think I could have justified such a course by all the ordinary expectations of justice.

The difficulty is that in my case, at least, the "ordinary expectations of justice" do not provide sufficient guidance. I am a man under a peculiar rule of obedience which does not permit me to settle for ordinary expectations; or when I do settle for them, that rule of obedience makes it clear to me that I have settled for too little. It finds many forms of expression, this rule, but one of them is this: "If you only love those who love you, it is not particularly virtuous; even the vulgar do that. And if you honor only those to whom you are bound by affection and common ideals, what are you doing more than anyone else? Even the godless do that." (Paraphrase of Matthew 5:46-47). Of course, that is one of its negative forms. In positive terms the rule is sometimes stated this way: "Have the same mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). A Christian is one who believes that in the extraordinary life and teaching of Jesus Christ we learn what it is to live; but we should be warned that if we are willing to learn from him, we may find ourselves thrust into a kind of learning we never bargained for. As one recent book on the words of Jesus puts it, "To the unavoidable human question: what must we do in order to live? there is no human answer--and the words of Jesus never attempt to supply one. 'Leave all you have and all you are and follow me!' they say and thereby insinuate that we are not so much in need of an answer but of an answerer. It is part of the untidiness of life that it does not want to be solved but to have someone to live with. Our lives could become the expressions of our hope that men are worth living with." (Hannah and Werner Pelz, God Is No More, p. 16)

Including the confidence man? Yes, if Jesus is to be believed, even including the confidence man. There is an account in the New Testament of a meeting between Jesus and a man who was a notorious extortioner; and the fact that he practiced a form of legalized extortion did not make the offense less offensive from a human point of view. Zacchæus was a tax collector, which, under first century Roman practice, often simply meant licensed exploitation. This is the way the Third Evangelist tells the story:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zacchæus; he was a chief tax collector, and rich. And he sought to see ~~who~~ Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchæus, make haste

and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it they all murmured, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house...." (Luke 19:1-9a, RSV)

Zacchaeus and the man I knew as "Philip Osborn" are not identical types, to be sure; but in this story of Jesus' encounter with the exploiter, I think I find enough clues to suggest what might have happened if indeed there had been an encounter between Christ and the confidence man. Even more to the point, I think I find there clues which help me to answer the question I raised a few moments ago. Suppose, when "Philip Osborn" came to my office, I had known then what he was. How should I have received him?

For one thing, not by arming myself against any human feeling for him; not by caring more for the possibility that my emotions might be betrayed than for the fact that he was a human being in need. There is not the slightest doubt that Jesus knew precisely what Zacchaeus was, and that he might find himself exploited as Zacchaeus had cynically exploited others. By all ordinary considerations, then, it would have been safer for him simply to ignore the ludicrous little man perched in the branch of the sycamore tree; or Jesus might have turned the tables by making a public object lesson of him before the crowd which cordially hated the little man. He did neither. "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today." Those are not the words of one man seeking to impose upon the hospitality of another. They are, rather, the sound of the openness one man has to another. And it was an incredible sound in Zacchaeus' ears.

Behind those words of Jesus lies the conviction that to identify Zacchaeus as an exploiter, or to identify "Philip Osborn" as a confidence man, is to tell only a part of the truth about them. Even when I know that "Philip Osborn" was, in fact, such a man, I am not at all sure which part of the truth I know. Elements of his story were clearly fabricated, but which parts? Had he experienced a long and painful estrangement from his father? Was that father now near death, and did he feel powerless to reverse a long-regretted series of events? Had he been in prison, if not Leavenworth then another? Any one of them might have been true.

But suppose, at the extreme, that none of them was true. Should not the very fact of his compulsive deceit have awakened in me some feeling for the awful circumstances he had fashioned out of his own life?

Would I have given him the money if I had known what he was? He alone knew whether it was for him a vital need rather than a ruse. Perhaps it was not important whether or not I knew which it was. If I had not sought to help him in the presence of real need, that would have been my problem. If I had helped him where no real need existed, that was his problem. It is just this, I think, which lies behind one of the hardest of Jesus' sayings in the Sermon on the Mount: "Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you" (Matthew 5:42, RSV). It is better to be betrayed in a generous and even ingenuous response to apparent human need, than to be careful and callous.

IV.

If, knowing the identity of my confidence man, I could not arm myself against any feeling for him, neither could I receive him with pretended ignorance of what he was. I said there is not the slightest doubt that Jesus knew precisely what Zacchaeus was, nor is there any doubt that he found it morally unacceptable. Neither is there any doubt Zacchaeus knew that Jesus knew. But it was not so much the knowing in itself which was important as the purpose that knowing was to serve. My natural inclination is to use my knowledge of another man for the purpose of exposure. By exposing him, I intend to shame him, to condemn him, to render him morally defenseless in my presence. But to do this is to fail to see that exposure on these terms is nothing less than my own kind of exploitation. I simply exchange roles with him, as it were: the victim becomes the victimizer.

But when Jesus met Zacchaeus, his knowledge of what Zacchaeus was served the purpose not of pitiless exposure but of forgiveness. Forgiveness, in its New Testament sense, does not mean to forget, nor even to overlook. To do either of these things is to do something basically dishonest: it is to pretend that evil is not really evil. If I cannot help a man by exploiting his moral fault, neither will I help him by pretending that he has not done what he has, in fact, done, or by pretending that it is less serious than even he himself knows it to be. Somehow if the confidence man is to be helped at all, he must be freed both from the necessity of perpetuating his unhappy fiction, and from the illusion that his fiction doesn't really matter.

Listen:

Forgiveness cannot condone evil, since it is intrinsically that which reveals evil as evil. It is the energy that saves us from decay, the courage that bids us laugh at fear, the passion that breaks our apathy, the hope that overcomes despair, the love that saves us from indifference. It is the action which lets the other find sympathy where he expected hatred, generosity where he expected retribution, which gives much because it expects much, which recreates new opportunities for the other, because it apprehends the world as a vast bundle of opportunities. (God Is No More, p. 117, italics mine)

"Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today." That is the sound of forgiveness, an act of the moral imagination by means of which one man gives another man his life back to him. Forgiveness is not the experience of having something to live down; it is the experience of finding someone to live with.

Suppose, then, I had known that "Philip Osborn" was a confidence man. What would it have meant to be a responsible Christian under that circumstance? It would not have meant to be against him, in the sense of pitiless condemnation; it would not even have meant to be for him, in some kind of mistaken idealism. It would have meant simply to be with him, as a man with another man.

V.

If, knowing who this man was, I could not arm myself against any feeling for him, nor receive him with any pretended ignorance of what he was, neither could I refuse to take seriously the questions about life and death which he put to me. To be with a man is not to manipulate him for my own ends, to be sure, but neither is it to be passive in his presence. So I could not ignore his question as if, by virtue of his attempt to deceive me in other things, he had disqualified himself for asking them.

Not that I had the answers to which he must conform himself. Not that at all. "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today." Those words prescribed no answer, but in them was a welcome sound Zacchaeus had not heard before--the sound of an answerer. The Italian dramatist Ugo Betti has described

what it is to be an answerer with a force which, for me, is more compelling than anything outside the New Testament itself. In his play The Burnt Flower-Bed, Betti makes one of his characters say,

That's what's needed, don't you see? That!
Nothing else matters half so much. To reassure one another. To answer each other. Perhaps only you can listen to me and not laugh. Everyone has, inside himself...what shall I call it? A piece of good news! Everyone is...a very great, very important character!...Every man must be persuaded--even if he's in rags--that he's immensely, immensely important! Everyone must respect him; and make him respect himself too. They must listen to him attentively. Don't stand on top of him, don't stand in his light. But look at him with deference. Give him great, great hopes, he needs them...especially if he's young. Spoil him! Yes, make him grow proud. (Three Plays by Ugo Betti, p. 151)

VI.

When ten o'clock came on that morning last spring, my telephone was silent. Probably I shall never see my confidence man again. Perhaps, then, all this has been an empty exercise, a futile rehearsal of what might have been.

I think not. What I have been talking about in this sermon is not simply one man's story; it is the human condition. Each of us is, in his own way, a confidence man. The face we turn to the world is in all of us at least one part pretense. There is in each of us a shadow-life which is hidden from the view of others. Each guards secrets he desires to keep untold. There is in us all some intent to defraud, even if it is only the good opinion of another man that we covet.

And if this is not just "Philip Osborn's" story but mine and yours as well, then what I have been describing as the need of the confidence man is precisely what each of us must find the grace to accept for himself. But even more importantly, it is precisely what we must find the moral imagination to give to each other. In the most casual or the most sustained of relationships--in the lunch line or between roommates, on the Quad or in class, on the train or in courtship, on the street or in marriage--we must find the courage to risk the involvement of our feelings in another's

condition when it would be safer to be distant. We must find the wit to be forgiving when it would be easier to be vindictive. We must find the good news each of us has for another--to reassure one another, to answer each other, to listen and not to laugh. These are the things we must do for each other.

And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully....And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house...."