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THE STRAIT GATE: 
A MISSING METAPHOR

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be which find it (Matt. 7:13-14).

The words of Jesus, forceful, descriptive, seem curiously uncongenial to the evangelical church. Ours is a generation of “broad way” Christianity. In its conception of grace as a matter of heavenly bookkeeping, remote from the harsh conflict against principalities and powers, it invites the masses to make a decision leading to the reconciliation of their spiritual accounts. That accomplished, the church begins to smooth their path to the heavenly city, amusing them with Christian concerts, comforting them with homogeneous companions, mesmerizing them with Muzak; mellowing them with gentle teaching of self-love, abundant living and—lest they become morbidly introspective—eternal security.

It was not always so. For other generations, the strait gate was a central metaphor of the Christian life. It testified to the church as an eternal minority, the Christian walk as an
arduous path of self-denial, the consequences of straying on to the broad way as severe. The message of the strait gate is unambiguous! The way to heaven is difficult, the way to hell easy.

The loose and leisurely, the casual and careless, do not pass easily, albeit without great rewards, into heaven; they go to hell. Speaking of the parallel admonition in Luke chapter thirteen, Calvin says:

The flesh is willing to flatter itself, and many who now give themselves every indulgence, promise to themselves an easy entrance into life . . . [Jesus] conveys the information that it is impossible to obtain eternal life without great and appalling difficulties.¹

But the strait gate also served other purposes. It testified, first, to the continuing importance of the divine law in the life of the believer. Without Jesus’ admonition on the narrow way, one might misunderstand the meaning of dying to the law. The great commentator, Matthew Henry, saw what makes Jesus’ way narrow:

We are not in heaven as soon as we have got through the strait gate; no, we must go through a wilderness, must travel a narrow way, hedged in by the divine law, which is exceedingly broad, and makes the way narrow; self must

be denied; daily temptations must be resisted; duties must be done against our inclination.²

Second, the strait gate guards against a misunderstanding about grace. Broad way Christianity knows nothing of the narrow way, indeed avoids it, or condemns it as encroaching legalism. To connect grace with difficulty seems contradictory; to speak of narrowness threatens their assurance. But Calvin, no stranger to the doctrine of free grace, saw Jesus’ words as a warning to the indulgent professor who “[falls] asleep in wicked indifference.”³ To him, the issue is not growth or stagnation, the growing Christian or the carnal Christian, but heaven or hell:

To shake off from his own people . . . flattering hopes, Christ declares that those who make themselves believe that they are already perfectly assured of eternal life, and walk on at their pleasure without concern, will be excluded from it.⁴

Third, the strait gate was intended to give us instruction on proper methods of evangelism and church growth. William Guthrie, the great Scottish preacher who one contemporary credited with converting and confirming many thousand souls, began his famous evangelistic tract, The Christian’s Great Interest, with Jesus’ warning to “strive to enter at the

². Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, Matt. 7:12-14
⁴. Ibid.
The Strait Gate

That paradoxical form of gospel recruiting—attracting by discouraging—has been common among the great evangelists of the church and goes back to the call of Jesus. Saying “yes” to the difficult reflects a sincere conversion from the world to Christ. Jesus was attempting to lift up the hearts of his disciples to aspire above the things of the world.

Cleopatra supposedly told Mark Antony that he should not be fishing for gudgeons but for towers, forts and castles, and when Alexander heard of the rubies of India he gave away his gold. When asked what he kept for himself he said, “Spem majorum et meliorum”—the hope of better and greater things. The test of one’s confidence in future expectations is one’s willingness to risk present resources.

As Bishop Davenant put it, “[H]e who does not advance in faith, love, and holiness, he does not, by the whole course of his life, seek heaven, but hastens to hell. . . . [H]eaven is not given to the indolent, but to those who seek it by great labor.”

The strait gate metaphor was used, fourth, as a guide to appropriate Christian values and behavior. Bunyan took it for more than the central theme of his classic, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*; to him, the strait gate was a method of discerning right and wrong and choosing among questionable activities. When Christian asks Goodwill whether there are not “turn-

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ings or windings” by which a stranger may lose his way once he has begun the Christian walk, Goodwill answers:

Yes, there are many ways but down upon this, and they are crooked and wide; but thus thou mayest distinguish the right from the wrong, the right only being strait and narrow.7

The very rigors of the way are part of the Christians’ training in holy living. As Thomas Brooks said, “Afflictions are the Lord’s drawing-plasters by which he draws out the core of pride, earthliness, self-love, covetousness.”8 The passage speaks most directly to a church which fancies itself at ease in Zion.

Fifth, the strait gate has always been especially meaningful in times of great evils in society and great opposition to God’s work. In times of cultural approval, when the world smiles at the church, Jesus’ words seem like an anachronism. But for the martyr, the isolated Christian in a wicked society, the words bring great hope. The great Puritan, Master John Bradford, one of the four great English martyrs, claimed the strait gate as his final comfort. When led to the stake, he:

asked all the world forgiveness, and forgave all the world, and prayed the people to pray for him, and turned his head unto the young man that suffered with him, and said,

7. John Bunyan, The Pilgrim’s Progress, p. 20
8. Thomas Brooks, The Privy Key of Heaven, p. 11
“Be of good comfort, brother; for we shall have a merry supper with the Lord this night;” and so spake no more words that any man did hear, but embracing the reeds said thus: “Strait is the way, and narrow is the gate, that leadeth to eternal salvation, and few there be that find It.” 9

A sixth application was a warning against apostasy. The way of false prophets is not always self-evident. Success is frequently confused with spirituality, a majority voice mistaken for the voice of God. Chrysostom, the eloquent preacher of the fourth century, saw the connection between the strait gate and false prophets. Speaking of the strait gate, he says:

And not in this way only did He work upon men, to be vigilant, but also by adding that it contains likewise many to supplant them; and, which is yet more grievous, they do not ever attack openly, but hiding themselves; for such is the role of false prophets, “but look not to this,” saith He, “that it is rough and narrow, but where it ends, nor that the opposite is wide and spacious, but where it issues.” 10

The important question to consider of teachers is not their apparent success, but their ultimate destiny.

Finally, the strait gate and narrow way reflect the warfare of the Christian life. A combat which implies, as Edwards points out, “strength of desire and firmness of resolution.” 11

As Jonathan stalked the heights between Bozez and Seneh in his conflict with the Philistines, the narrow way of the Christian disciple is a way of unending struggle against sin, the flesh, and the devil.

Given its uses, its centrality to the call and convictions of Jesus, why has the teaching of the strait gate fallen into disuse? The answer is obvious but frightening. The modern church is being seduced increasingly onto the broad way of a world ever more hostile to effort or excellence, ever more addicted to temporal values and comforts.

In both church and world, the strait gate metaphor runs headlong into a three-fold cord of modern culture that is not easily broken: paternalism, which encourages passivity; democracy, which, misapplied to non-political pursuits, encourages alignment with the many; and security, which encourages timidity. Put another way, paternalism discourages effort, democracy excellence, and security the taking of great risks.

The strait gate, like so much of the rest of Jesus’ teaching, seems curiously out of date. The paternalism and democratic spirit of the age, the late Richard Weaver said, inevitably leads to a “spoiled child psychology.” The spoiled child wants instant gratification and equality with the adult world. That spirit which focuses on selfish needs has affected the church. Weaver said: “The worship of comfort, then, is only another aspect of our decision to live wholly in this world.”

C.S. Lewis expressed the same sentiment in *Screwtape Proposes A Toast*, in which Screwtape, an “experienced devil” called to the podium at the Tempter’s Training College, gives a brief reply to Dr. Slubgob. Though expressing reservations about the quality of recent human beings ensnared by devils, finding them “so passively responsive to environment” and so “muddled in mind” that they are “hardly worth damning,” Screwtape sees a great opportunity.

Despite their “very smallness and flabbiness,” these unambitious human recruits are both numerous and less likely truly to repent and be transformed. Great sinners are, after all, generally made of the same material as great saints; but these dumb sheep who will follow a film star or crooner by “tens of thousands,” Screwtape says, represent a great affront to heaven. To keep the supply coming, he proposes a plan:

Democracy is the word with which you must lead them by the nose. . . . You are to use the word purely as an incantation, if you like, purely for its selling power . . . The claim to equality, outside the strictly political field, is made only by those who feel themselves to be in some way inferior. What it expresses is precisely the itching, smarting, writhing awareness of an inferiority which the patient refuses to accept and therefore resents, yes, and therefore resents every kind of superiority in others; denigrates it; wishes its annihilation. Presently he suspects every mere difference of being a claim to superiority. No one must
be different from himself in voice, clothes, manner, recreations, choice of food.\textsuperscript{13}

J. Gresham Machen, in his classic, \textit{Christianity and Liberalism}, saw a similar trend:

The truth is that the materialistic paternalism of the present day, if allowed to go unchecked, will rapidly make of America one huge “Main Street” where spiritual adventure will be discouraged and democracy will be regarded as consisting in the reduction of all mankind to the proportion of the narrowest and least gifted of the citizens.\textsuperscript{14}

The devil’s tactic is not unlike that of the ancient Greek tyrant who, when asked about the principle of government by another tyrant, took his envoy into a field of standing grain and nicked off with his cane every stalk that stood an inch or two above the rest. In a way, he was saying, allow no distinction, no excellence.

But Jesus speaks not of the many, but of the few; not of security, but of adventure; not of the comfort and three square meals sought by the “spoiled child,” but of the narrow way; not of a guaranteed freedom from want or fear or a guaranteed wage, but of a prize held out to those who “strive,” who risk all for a great reward. It is a theme he will hit again and again. The fearful steward who buries his talent has it taken

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} C.S. Lewis, \textit{The Screwtape Letters}, pp. 197-199
\item \textsuperscript{14} J. Gresham Machen, \textit{Christianity and Liberalism}, p. 12
\end{itemize}
away; the man who started out with a greater allocation to begin with finds himself receiving even more. For great sacrifices, Jesus promises great rewards. In an age suspicious of excellence, this call to a strait gate rings severe.

The modern church is at a crossroads. The superhighway looks promising, well-paved, broad and safe. Next to it, the narrow road looks as outmoded as the winding, high-hedged ways that crisscross Wales. Quaint, but uncomfortable, and altogether too risky. But God’s ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts our thoughts. And unless believers rediscover the unsparing lesson of the strait gate, they will discover that the comforts of fellowship with the “many” have been bought at the price of the fires of hell.

Let there be no mistake. The division between sheep and goats is beginning today in the house of God. The word which divides will increasingly separate these professing Christians who style themselves as evangelical or fundamental into two camps, constituents which reflect either the “strait gate” or the “broad way.” Because a famous professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago used to say that the essence of clear thinking is the ability to provide a “for instance,” a few comparisons may illustrate how such strait gate and broad way constituencies differ on important aspects of Christian life and practice.

THE LAW

**STRAIT GATE:** The divine law continues to be an expression of God’s will for man. The Christian is not free “from it,” but is
made free by grace to comply with it and to love its guidance. It is the “hedge” around the narrow way.

**Broad Way:** When Christ set us free from the law, he freed us also from the need to comply with the moral law. Legalism, a form of preaching emphasizing do’s and don’ts, is a threat to the modern church.

**Grace**

** Strait Gate:** Grace is a dynamic, not a static, concept. The new birth, implanting “God’s seed” in the believer, empowers the Christian to get victory over sin, the flesh and the devil. Unless the professor takes on the family characteristics of God, he has no assurance that God is his father.

**Broad Way:** Grace is a description of what occurs when a profession of faith is made. By grace, God declares the unrighteous, righteous; and by grace, man reckons himself righteous, whether or not he sees any progress in personal sanctification.

**Evangelism**

** Strait Gate:** The goal of evangelism is to bring men to repentance; the theme of evangelism is the cross, as it reveals the holiness and love of God; the method of evangelism is the Word, an unsparing use of the logic and terror of the law to lead men to the mercy of Christ.

**Broad Way:** Evangelism should emphasize the positive; it is, after all, “good news.” The evangelist should avoid words with bad connotations (“saved,” “sinner,” “hell,” “judgment”) and
avoid confrontations, to make it as easy as possible for a man to accept the gift of eternal life.

**CHRISTIAN BEHAVIOR**

**Strait Gate:** The righteousness of the believer must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. If a person is bold enough to claim possession of the Holy Spirit, the world and the church have a right to expect godly character, separation from the world, and convictions that cut across current trends. **Broad Way:** The essence of Christian ethics is love which sometimes goes beyond the narrow demands of the letter of the law. That love is inconsistent with judging others, or insisting that believers live by any legalistic standards of behavior.

**THE CHRISTIAN AND SOCIETY**

**Strait Gate:** A permissive society reflects a permissive church; the prevalence of abortion, homosexuality, and entertainments mirrors a church which has lost its saltiness. The church must use its spiritual weaponry to confront society; it must tend its garden and mind its spiritual hedge, lest it become a wilderness and lose its special beauty. **Broad Way:** The church was meant to infiltrate society, not to isolate itself from it and preach at it. The most effective way to transform society is by deemphasizing meaningless points of conflict in lifestyle between church and culture and by building instead bridges of common interest, using the songs and heroes and themes of the day to carry a Christian message.
WORSHIP AND ENTERTAINMENT

**STRAIT GATE:** Christian worship is effective insofar as it empowers believers for their central mission, to be witnesses. Fellowship is not an end in itself, but a recognition of a common struggle and a common vision. Entertainment is inconsistent with fellowship and worship, because its essence is to divert, amuse, relax.

**BROAD WAY:** Worship and entertainment cannot be clearly separated, nor should they be. In every good sermon or song, there is some showmanship. The growth of the Christian entertainment field has been of benefit in evangelism as good “bait” for non-Christians, and has served as a source of godly blessing and relaxed fellowship in the church.

PRINCIPLES OF CHURCH GROWTH AND FINANCE

**STRAIT GATE:** The primary goal of the church is not apparent success, but real success. For that reason, the church must be obedient to Christ, even if it means fewer numbers on the rolls or fewer dollars in the offering plate. Churches whose growth is based on worldly standards—homogeneity of class, race or culture, fund-raising by direct mail and importuning appeals, worldly management models—disprove in practice what they preach in theory: that the church is a supernatural institution with a source of supernatural power.

**BROAD WAY:** The church learned early that it must take into account man’s natural inclinations, and hence began to divide along ethnic and cultural lines. While the church must adhere to biblical truth, God also expects us to use our heads and go with what works. Churches grow faster if aware of homoge-
neous factors in attractive numbers. They can’t find growth without adequate numbers of giving units. If modern times reveal successful fund-raising techniques—the direct mailing approach, for example—it is poor stewardship not to use them.

THE CHURCH AND ITS ENEMIES: APOSTASY

**STRAIT GATE:** A primary duty of church leaders, in their role as shepherds of the flock, is to warn of false teachers, the “wolves in sheep’s clothing” who insinuate themselves into every godly church. While Christians should not “strive” in their dealings with believers or unbelievers, they must be alert to detect and denounce false teachers; such teachers can be spotted by a discerning application of scriptural principles.

**BROAD WAY:** The modern church should assume an “irenic” stance toward Christians with different convictions or whose lifestyles may betray—like those of all of us from time to time—certain inconsistencies. Heresy-hunting and denunciation of other traditions in the Christian community is divisive and has no place in the modern Christian pulpit. Neither is it in the spirit of Jesus. Let him who is without sin in doctrine or life cast the first stone.

THE METAPHOR OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE: 

**WAR/PLAY OR PLAY/WAR**

**STRAIT GATE:** The repeated references in the Bible to the Christian life as warfare reveals much about Christian duties. As a form of serious play, with life and death stakes, the war metaphor shows what attitudes, agonies, disciplines, and
rewards characterize the life of the Christian warrior, and reminds us what is really important in life.

**BROAD WAY:** We don’t attract people to Christ with gloomy predictions of struggle and warfare. We welcome them to a loving family, free, playful, assured of eternal life, that in a sense can have the best of two worlds: abundant life here; eternal life hereafter. And it’s all free.

The distinctions are, of course, matters of emphasis. Many believers could accept, with appropriate footnotes and qualifications, some descriptions from both columns. But they should not be said to be *merely* matters of emphasis, in the same benign way a federal judge described abortion and live birth as *merely* two alternative ways of terminating a pregnancy. If ideas have consequences, so do different emphases. Careless similes lead to careless living; heresies are generally the product of truth misemphasized or misapplied.

The burden of this book is that the modern church has been diverted through a wide gate onto a broad way, whose comforts belie a catastrophic destination. If its message is severe, its way seems strait, the reader is asked to consider whether its message is more severe, or its way more strait, than the words of Jesus.