

FIVE DIMENSIONS OF CHRISTIAN LIVING.

I. RECKONING

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II Corinthians 13:5

We think of the day of reckoning as a last day. That's the way it is pictured in the Bible and in our religious traditions. When the sands of our time have run out, when "this brief candle" is burnt clean down to the base, when for better or for worse we have done our last deed, spoken our last word, thought our last thought, we stand before the judgment throne to settle our accounts.

The day of reckoning is a last day. But there is a paradox here. The day of reckoning is also a first day. In the symbolism of the Bible the end of the world is also the beginning of the kingdom.

It's the same way in the life of the individual person. The experience of reckoning always brings him to an ending. It draws a dividing line right down the middle of his existence. But the experience of reckoning is also the start of something new. Through a searching reckoning one's orientation to a future can be changed. No matter how late it comes the reckoning is always the indispensable first step in Christian living.

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Suppose we consider three situations in which the dimension of reckoning enters into Christian living.

The first situation is that which comes before a decisive spiritual commitment. I could use the word "conversion," but that is a problem word for many people today. So I speak of a decisive, spiritual commitment. By that I mean a turning point in a person's life in which some important discovery is made in his own religious experience, in which there is a significant deepening of faith and a strengthening of personal allegiance to God.

Before this happens, indeed, before this can happen to most people, I think, there has to be a reckoning. A hard, soul-searching assessment of oneself and one's way of life is bound to occur. This assessment may not always be a fully conscious undertaking, it may not always command the center of our attention. But before those other dimensions of personal religion open up - the dimensions of repentance, rebirth, and so on - this day of reckoning must occur.

Sometimes this personal day of reckoning may come about through a probing encounter with another person. Philip Neri, a sixteenth century Catholic leader, once asked a young university student how he was getting on. The student told him that he was trying to become proficient in all the subjects of the university.

"What then?" Philip Neri asked.

"Then," replied the student, "I shall study for the doctorate of both civil and cannon law."

"What then?" Philip Neri asked again.

"Why then I shall inherit my substantial family fortune, shall marry, raise a family, and get on with my legal career."

"What then?"

"Why then I shall achieve a brilliant legal career and receive high honors, perhaps even be elected an orator of the rota."

"And what then?" asked Philip Neri.

"Why then I shall grow old and die like everyone else, I suppose."

"And what then?"

Sometimes persons or events force us to ask, "what then?". When that happens we begin our day of reckoning.

It may be that the reckoning arises from a profound dissatisfaction with ourselves and our way of life. Do you remember that turning point in the story of the prodigal son? He leaves home and totally immerses himself in a life of self-indulgence. When his money runs out his life becomes one of corresponding misery. But in pleasure and in pain he is always moving in the same direction - away from his father. Then comes the turning point - or more precisely the stationary point. It is a point that comes just before the turning around and the trip toward home.

Said Jesus, telling the story:

"But when he came to himself...."

"But when he came to himself" a reckoning began. He began to take account of how much he had lost.

The reckoning that comes before a decisive, spiritual commitment always involves this coming to oneself. It is the "moment of truth" that arises from profound dissatisfaction and the realization that something essential is lacking in one's life.

I do not believe, however, that we should think of such reckonings only as a summing of liabilities. The trouble with revival meeting testimonials is that they give us the impression that life is always lived on one side of a chasm or another. One day you're a derelict; the next day you're a saint. One day you're in hell; the next day you're in heaven. I believe that there are decisive spiritual turning points in people's lives, genuine conversions, but even then people tend to straddle both sides of the chasm.

The reckoning that leads to the turning point need not consist only in an adding up of liabilities. It may also consist in the review of some unappreciated assets. How many moments of love and beauty there have been when God was telling us that he was with us, but we did not notice! Indeed, something is missing from our lives! What is missing is precisely our failure to capitalize on what has been present all along.

The reckoning may come through some probing encounter that makes us ask questions about where we are going. It may come through profound dissatisfaction with ourselves or through a sharper awareness of a spiritual dimension in ourselves. But one way or another it must come before we start that long journey home.

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A second kind of reckoning is the sort that occurs at certain stages in life's way. It may not lead to any decisive turning point in our religious faith, but it brings a major reassessment in the way one intends to live out that faith.

One of the congregation gave me a magazine interview with William Sloane Coffin, the controversial chaplain who is about to leave his post at Yale.

"Why are you leaving Yale?" asks the interviewer. Replies the chaplain:

"First, I'm too secure. I had the terrible fantasy that without Yale I'd be nothing. I've been the best known of the campus-spokesman-minister types and there's too much security in that symbol; it began to trap me. Also, I turned 50; in the Bible that's a time to stop everything and look at yourself and the world as they might appear in God's eyes."

Well, life used to begin at forty. Now with our longer life expectancy it begins to begin at fifty. That is to say, that particular age may become a time of reckoning when a person says to himself, "Either I get out of the rut now or I stay there for the rest of my life." It is a time when a person realizes that if there is unfinished business, if there are opportunities unfulfilled, talents undeveloped, projects uncompleted, now is the time when he had better get to them. And that discovery may lead to a major change in direction.

Of course, there is nothing magical about the figure 50. I don't know where in the Bible Coffin finds that figure singled out for the purpose he mentions. That special stage in life's way when a major change in direction is in order may come to a person at any age. But when it comes you know it is "a time to stop everything and look at yourself and the world as they might appear in God's eyes."

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The third situation where the dimension of reckoning enters into Christian living is appropriate to every person all the time. This is the day by day appraisal that ought to go into every extended meditation and prayer.

The great Puritan pastor, Richard Baxter, suggested that we all keep a daily account book in this way:

"Keep an account of your expenses; at least of all your most considerable talents; and bring yourselves daily or frequently to a reckoning, what good you have done, or endeavoured to do. Every day is given you for some good work. Keep therefore accounts of every day (I mean in your conscience, not in papers). Every mercy must be used to some good: call yourselves therefore to account for every mercy, what you have done with it for your Master's use."

And lest we think this advice applies only to people with very large talents and unusual opportunities, Baxter continues:

"And think not hours and minutes, and little mercies, may be past without coming into account. The servant that thinks he may do what he list with shillings and pence, and that he is only to lay out greater sums for his Master's use, and lesser for his own, will prove unfaithful, and come short in his accounts. Less sums than pounds must be in our reckonings."

The little opportunities matter.

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We see, then, that while in one sense reckoning comes at the very beginning of a Christian life, it also comes with us all along the way. It is there as that radical self-appraisal that goes before a decisive spiritual commitment. It is there at those stages in life's way when circumstances prompt us to add up the past and to project a new future. It is there in that daily effort to reckon our stewardship of the resources God has given us.

There are many people in the world who yearn for a religious faith that is deeply felt and which truly makes a difference. They wonder why that kind of profound religious experience does not happen to them. Well, it will not happen unless there is a reckoning. Somewhere along the way - indeed, many times along the way - we need to stop on the road, to plumb the depths of our situation and to try to look at ourselves and our world as they really are.

I.

II.

III.

IV.

V.

Task

Method

THE FIVE "R'S"

SOME BASIC STEPS IN EFFECTIVE RELIGION

- I. Reckoning
We take stock of ourselves in the sight of God and conscience.
- II. Repentance
We turn our lives toward God.
- III. Rebirth
God takes hold of our lives and makes of us a new creation.
- IV. Reinforcement
We strengthen our new life by using the tools of practical religion.
- V. Responsibility
We fulfill our new life as servants of God.

I. RECKONING

"Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts! (Psalm 139:23)

"Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to
your faith. Test yourselves..." (2 Corinthians 13:5)

WE TAKE STOCK OF OURSELVES IN THE SIGHT OF GOD AND CONSCIENCE.

Tasks and Queries

- A searching moral inventory of our behavior. How well are we living up to our own best ideals?
- A probing examination of the inward person. Do destructive feelings and attitudes, such as resentment, worry, guilt, self-deception, pride, prejudice etc., sabotage our spiritual efficiency and peace?
- An accounting of our personal assets. What special talents, skills and acquisitions are ours? Are we using these resources effectively in the service of our ideals?
- A plumbing of our spiritual depths. How deep is our spiritual experience, how profound our religious commitment? Is our relationship to God a potent influence in our lives? Do we feel the need to strengthen that relationship?

Methods

- We ask God to shed his truth upon our reckoning that in his light we may see the light.
- We devote ourselves to the truth and seek to avoid self-deception.
- We face courageously those liabilities our reckoning turns up.