

FIVE DIMENSIONS OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

III. REBIRTH

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

September 28, 1975

Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

Back in the days of the Friday night fights an aging former light heavyweight champion named Archie Moore entered the ring with a bruising young heavyweight from Canada. Archie Moore was clever and canny. He was a master at slipping punches, and he could hit. But Archie was old for a fighter and he was too thick around the middle. The Canadian was one of those clumsy, plodding, heavy-handed maulers. But he was young and strong, and if you got in his way, he could knock you down. Very early in the match, I think it was in the first round, Archie Moore got in the Canadian's way. Archie went down and almost out.

For the next few rounds it was all Archie could do to survive. He used all his seasoned savvy just to stay on his feet. Then gradually, as the effects of that early blow wore off, he moved warily onto the offensive. Once again he got in the way. Again he went down for eight or nine. It seemed impossible that old Archie would recover sufficiently to finish the fight. But he stood up, held off the other man's crude attempt to finish him off, and painstakingly fought his way back. In the closing rounds Archie Moore took command, until in the final seconds he put the hulking Canadian away.

As I watched that fight on television, it seemed to me an inspiring parable on the resiliency of human nature. It spoke of the reserve powers that lie deep within people, not only physical reserves, but spiritual ones. Archie Moore, the aging pugilist, was a symbol of humanity's capacity to get up off the floor.

It is always a surprise, this factor in human nature. I do not recommend boxing as a source of inspiration, though I find it a more honest form of violence than sports where getting a puck or a ball across a line becomes a pretext for beating people up. Whatever brutal instincts it may arouse, a prize fight can become a revelation of human resiliency. It is a crude expression of something we meet in people all the time, but which we tend to take for granted. We find the same get-up-off-the-floor capacity in the person struck down by a debilitating illness who like a silent screen actor builds something imaginative within these limitations. We find this capacity in the person whose marriage comes apart with the result that he is completely demoralized, yet who comes back to build a new life. We find it in the person who gets up off the floor morally and turns from a lifestyle that is degrading to one that uplifts the lives of others. It is a common, familiar experience, this power of resiliency in the human spirit. Yet is always comes as a surprise. There is a mystery in it that outstrips comprehension. When we confront this quality in human beings it makes us prickle a little with wonder. It may make us laugh too. The circus clown who bounces back from incredible calamities testifies to this quality. And it may make us cry as we cry at Hemingway's old fisherman who after weeks of bad luck comes back with the biggest fish he ever caught only to have it stripped to the bone by sharks. In a book full of symbolic allusions to Christ the author tells us that man may be destroyed, but not defeated. And that is the last word and the best word that can be said about us short of the word that is spoken by God.

We have this capacity for rebirth. Regeneration is the fancy name for it. Just as a starfish can grow back an arm that has been lost, so the human spirit grows back the courage, the confidence, the creative power and moral insight that sometimes gets lost.

Still, the starfish image does not do justice to this human capacity. The starfish has the power of replacement. It grows a new arm with roughly the same dimensions as the old. But human beings do more than replace. Human beings have the capacity of becoming something different. We do not become completely different, of course, But we may become enough different to change the course of history. Starfish have been leading exactly the same sort of life for millions of years. But we have brought a little variety to the world since we climbed down out of the treetops.

But my concern is not with cultural evolution; it is with the new birth that happens within the personal histories of individuals. For such new births do take place. Sometimes it may be an intellectual rebirth. A person gets into the middle years without much mental stimulus. Then he or she takes a few courses in the UMD extension program and suddenly the mind begins to open, the world enlarges, the whole person is enriched. Or the rebirth may appear through a different sort of activity. A man decides he is in a rut, finds a new job, and reveals talents that no one believed that he possessed. An old woman whose hands are troubled by arthritis tries a little recreational therapy and turns into a Grandma Moses.

Or the new birth may arise through a new relationship. A girl gets engaged and suddenly she looks different. She looks so good in fact that we may wish a little wistfully that we had seen her first. But it is the new relationship of falling in love that brings this radiance to light.

In human nature there is this power of regeneration - both in the sense of the ability to get up off the floor and in the sense of becoming something different. I have spoken about this feature of the human spirit at some length because it is only in connection with that feature, I think, that we can appreciate the New Testament message about new birth. I don't mean to suggest that when Jesus speaks of being born anew he is only referring to some latent human capacity. Nor do I mean that when Paul speaks of becoming a new creation he is talking about something that lies entirely within our own power. No, a new creation still requires a creator. The new birth in the spirit is as much a gift beyond our own doing as that birth that took place in our mother's womb. The New Testament is talking about something that happens to people when they are touched by the grace of God. But it does happen to people. It happens to people in terms of the way people are made. We distort the whole idea of Christian rebirth if we think of this as a kind of bolt out of the blue that has no connection with ordinary events. God works through our humanity. Not even in the life of the saintliest saint can you say where a person's innate power for renewal leaves off and the saving grace of God begins. One reason you can't say that is that our own powers of renewal are themselves marks of the creator's image.

Of all the illustrations I used a few minutes ago to point to the human capacity to become something different the one that came closest to depicting the nature of Christian rebirth is the one about the girl falling in love. For Christian rebirth is the fruit of a new relationship. It is the change that begins deep within the person when repentance clears the way and faith opens the door to the presence and power of the divine spirit. John and Paul saw Jesus Christ as the door to this new birth because he brought the

presence and power of God home to people. In his life God came alive. To love and to trust Christ was to discover the love and the faithfulness of God reaching out through him to all the dead places in the souls of men and women. So it was for Paul and John, and so it is today.

The new birth arises from a new relationship. The kind of religion we inherit from the American frontier stresses this new birth as a once-and-for-all-in-an-instant kind of happening. But even Billy Graham admits that not everyone gets saved at a point of time he can mark on the calendar. Creation is an on-going process. None of us carries around exactly the same set of cells we had when we weighed seven pounds and fourteen ounces. So it is with the new creation of which Paul speaks. There are many new creations in a Christian life, for the life of God is always life-giving to the spirit of man.

The goal of Christian faith is to stay in such a relationship with God that the process of renewal remains unbroken. It is living out of the divine center, as Thomas Kelly said. Or as an old man put it to me last week, it is putting God first. This can be a trite and empty saying of the sort that people come up with when they meet a minister. But said sincerely, as I believe it was in this case, it says it all.

The surprise and mystery of humanity's capacity for renewal revealed even in a prize fight is infinitely enlarged when we lay ourselves open to the life of God.

The Five "R's" (Five Dimensions of Personal Christianity)

III. REBIRTH

"Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" John 3:3.

"Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away; behold the new has come."
II Corinthians 5:17.

GOD TAKES HOLD OF US AND BEGINS IN US A NEW CREATION

Tasks

- Continuing that process of turning which is repentance, we come to God in a venture of trust saying, "I believe, help my unbelief."
- God grasps hold of us, giving us the assurance of his forgiveness and his affirmation of us as persons. He offers communion with his Spirit and power to lead a new life.
- With joyful faith we grasp hold of God. We receive his forgiveness, his presence, his re-creating power.
- Again and again we seek God's help in nurturing the new life that grows out of relationship with him.

Supporting Attitudes

- Faith: Faith is both a venture and a certainty. It is "betting our lives" that there is a God who will answer to our seeking and it is the firm assurance that "nothing can separate us from the love of Christ." We usually begin with the venture; the assurance is a gift from beyond.
- Gratitude: Any genuine encounter with God issues in joyous thanksgiving.
- Adventure: Rebirth means that we take the risk of new possibilities, of becoming different and living differently, of beginning a pilgrimage whose end is not in sight. To stay the same is to die. Only the bold are reborn.

Previous Steps:

- I. Reckoning: We take stock of ourselves in the sight of God and conscience.
- II. Repentance: We turn our lives toward God.