

## FIVE DIMENSIONS OF CHRISTIAN LIVING.

### IV. REINFORCEMENT

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

October 5, 1975

Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

James 1:22

A few days ago I had a brainstorm. I was reminded of one night in the summer of 1973. It was about 3 A.M. Suddenly an air raid siren went off, very loud and very long. I leaped out of bed saying to myself, the Martians have arrived. I turned on all the radios and television sets in the house. But there was nothing except that man who plays all-American music.

A few nights later the siren went off again. But this time I paid no attention. "Who would want to bomb Duluth anyway?" I said to myself. "If the Russians invaded they would need some place to send the political prisoners." I went back to sleep. The next morning I discovered that half the city had spent the night in their basements. "Didn't you hear about the tornado?" people asked me. "No," I said, "I just thought they were blowing the dust out of the sirens again."

But then the other evening as I was jogging past East High School pondering this sermon - it gets the blood moving through the head, you know - I had this brainstorm. I said to myself, "We have all these old air-raid sirens around that need exercising, and we have all these Christians around that need scaring. Suppose we hire somebody to set those sirens off at five scheduled times every day. And then all over town people will stop what they are doing, pull out a little rug, kneel down and, facing Pilgrim Congregational Church, say a prayer."

You think that is a crazy idea. There are half a billion Moslems in the world who might find this idea rather familiar. Most of them live within earshot of a tower where five times a day, a man screams out the call to prayer, and everybody stops whatever he is doing and kneels down and recites the prayer. When you live under those conditions, it is very hard to forget that you are a Moslem. Which is one reason why Christian evangelists never got very far in Moslem countries, nor Communist evangelists either.

But in so-called Christian countries these days, it is easy to forget you're a Christian, which is why, running up the hill toward Holy Rosary, I thought up this idea about the air raid sirens.

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Last fall we had some people in the community who represent other world religions speak about their faith here. I was struck by the fact that in every case there were certain practical devices by which the religious heritage was built into daily life. There were symbols, there were ceremonies, there were easily remembered formulas like the five pillars of Islam or the eight-fold path of Buddhism. But for the liberal Protestant everything is so vague and loose. I wondered, suppose you took such a Protestant and set him down in Timbuktu or Kabul. What would he do to keep his faith alive?

It takes more than moments of inspiration to keep a religion going. History shows us that. Enduring religions are those that surround people



with conspicuous symbols of their allegiances, reminders of who they are and of the community of faith to which they belong. Enduring religions also provide structured devotional practices both for individuals and for groups.

Take the Jewish law: Jesus engaged in debate with the Pharisees about the law. But he never repudiated the law. I doubt that without the strict and even picayune observances of the religious law, the Jewish religion would have survived through exile, persecution and controversy until Jesus' day. I doubt even more that it could have survived to our own day.

Until recently Catholics shared widely in little practices that tended to serve as reminders of their faith and to tie them into the church. To us Protestants many of these observances were strange, even silly. All those fast days, saints days, all those candles burning in a corner, all those mumblings over beads. What difference does it make to anybody but the commercial fishing industry whether or not anybody eats meat on Friday?

When I was a small boy I ran up a country road one day to the sight of smoke. A bucket brigade was trying to save the Catholic rectory. The church building was already gone. Everyone for twenty miles around was there. Nothing like a good church fire to take the boredom out of living. Old Father McEnaney, I was told, performed a strikingly heroic act. It was also a crazy Catholic act. He ran into the flaming nave and carried out the statues one by one. After they built a new brick church, the new young priest showed me the old statues lined up against the wall. Even at that age I could tell that artistically they were well below the level of department store manikins.

We Protestants are suspicious of statues, pictures, images of any kind. We say we're against idolatry. But it may be that we are afraid to let our senses and our imagination get involved with our faith. Perhaps we try too hard to live on the level of pure ideas. I have noticed that even among contemporary Puritans things like mustard seeds, pocket crosses and lapel pins have a way of creeping in the back door.

We Protestants don't like ceremony either. We won't have much of it in church. But perhaps we have failed to appreciate the way in which ceremonial acts give shape to devotion and thus reinforce people's faith. People need symbolic gestures. I once took part in the funeral of a state trooper in which three hundred highway patrolmen filed past the grave, each man throwing down a white glove. I thought to myself, "That's a heck of a lot of gloves, I wonder if anyone will ever get to wear them again?" That was a practical, Protestant question. I don't think that ceremony should be wasteful. But people need it, and the church overlooks that need at its peril.

We Protestants don't want to be regimented. We shy away from schemes of spiritual discipline. But freedom can take strange turns. The youth rebellion of a few years back took many forms, the chief of which was restructured techniques of spiritual and mental discipline. That's partly why the Eastern meditation gimmicks caught on. Some of the more serious youth even went in for monastic forms of life.

I don't think we should give up our Protestant suspicions of magic, ritualism and legalism. But sometimes we take these suspicions too far in

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the wrong direction. We ought to recognize that both as individuals and as churches we need to use certain practical tools - symbols, ceremonies, spiritual disciplines to reinforce our faith.

Let me just speak of two ways in which I think this kind of reinforcement ought to take place.

First it ought to happen in the form of regular patterns of private devotion. Of course, many individuals make use of such patterns and always have. But I think that on the whole we in the United Church of Christ have been neglecting this whole business of spiritual nurture. We haven't been practicing the art of refocusing our minds and activities day by day on our values and beliefs. We haven't been opening up enough spaces in the midst of our daily living for the divine Spirit to get in there with us. We say we haven't the time to set aside fifteen minutes a day for meditation and prayer. But that's nonsense. We have the time; what we haven't got is the will.

So we are going to have to work on that will. And we are going to have to work on developing patterns of spiritual discipline appropriate to the age in which we live.

The other way in which reinforcement ought to happen is through worship as part of a Christian community. Rather by chance I came across something in my files this week that fits in with these thoughts. It is an advertisement by the Schulmerich Carillon Company which I cut out because it seemed to mark a new high in something or other, I wasn't quite sure what:

"There is a powerfully stirring way to water the seed of guilt in one who should be regularly attending services. The beautiful Schulmerich carillon ringing out on a Sunday morning has a way of nudging a latent spiritual need. Many pastors have found that with Schulmerich carillons as the voice of their church, pews are fuller and strange faces are becoming familiar. You too can enjoy that rewarding experience."

Well, we've had Schulmerich carillons here for twenty years. We've been watering the seeds of guilt so long the whole neighborhood is waterlogged. Guilt won't do it today, but terror might. If we had one of those air-raid sirens we might wake them up even during the week of the duck massacre.

Roy Pearson wrote some time ago:

"We must worship together or the time soon comes when we do not even worship alone. This is one of the inexorable rules of the spiritual life."

Not only does corporate worship bring us together with a few other Christians who happen to be walking around at this particular moment of time. It also ties us into those images by which the Christian message is channeled from other times into this time and beyond. For Christians the Lord's Supper is the chief of those clusters of tangible and even tastable images through which we receive the gracious news of God's liberating activity in Jesus Christ. In the words of our forebears, it is "a means of grace." It is a practical tool God has given us for reinforcing our faith.

The Christian life requires constant reinforcement. It calls for a structured practice of spiritual nurture, both in the solitary watches of private devotion and in the joint effort of corporate worship.

## The Five "R's"

(Five Dimensions of Personal Christianity)

### IV. REINFORCEMENT

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality." Romans 12:9-13

"Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ for you. Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil." I Thessalonians 5:16-22

"...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Philippians 2:12b-13

## WE STRENGTHEN OUR NEW LIFE BY USING THE TOOLS OF PRACTICAL RELIGION

### Tasks

- We establish a regular and working prayer life
- We enrich our understanding of the Christian message by reading, conversation, and attendance at church educational enterprises.
- We attend public worship regularly, seeking especially to use the "means of grace," the Word and the sacraments.
- We participate actively in the fellowship and work of the church.
- We abstain from all habits, amusements, associations etc. that tend to degrade us morally and spiritually.
- We strengthen our faith by "the therapeutic power of doing good."

### The Practical Christian's Tool Box

The Bible, private prayer (including confession and thanksgiving), public worship, Christian art and music, inspirational literature, study in Christian teachings, history, current issues and activities, Christian fellowship, specific tasks of service in and out of the church.