

FIVE DIMENSIONS OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

V. RESPONSIBILITY

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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Romans 14:12 "So each of us shall give account of himself to God."

Each week I have been putting in the Sunday service folders little outlines relating to certain elements or dimensions of our personal relationship to God. They are something that I originally used many years ago, but as I told you several Sundays back, I lost the one on responsibility. I don't know what my original presentation contained, but I have made up a new one for the bulletin today.

Reckoning, repentance, rebirth, reinforcement, responsibility. Originally I called these five steps. But that figure of speech may give the impression that as we move from the first step to the second we are to leave the first step behind, and so on. But I don't think we can afford ever to leave any one of these steps behind. That is why I prefer to think of these as five dimensions of Christian living.

Nevertheless, there is a certain sequence. This sequence may be illustrated by the case of the prodigal son. The son comes to himself, reviews his situation and decides that it's time for a change. That's reckoning. He turns his back to the far country and heads for home. That's repentance. He is welcomed into his father's household. That's rebirth. He is given a ring and robe as the symbol of sonship and goes to the party with the rest of the household. That's reinforcement. Now the story stops there. But my guess is that had the story continued, after the party was over, the young son would have been put to work. That's responsibility.

The idea of responsibility is a complex idea. On the one hand, it points to our freedom and independence. On the other hand, it points to the ties that bind us to others.

To be responsible is to stand on one's own feet and exercise the power of decision. It is a sign of maturity. When children are little we do almost everything for them. We would not trust a three year old to drive a car or to open a bank account. But as children grow older we gradually confer greater responsibility upon them. It is a real test of our own judgment as to how much responsibility we should measure out to them. If we give them too little, they will remain too dependent. If we give them too much responsibility, they may make a mess of things.

When I was in college I had an allowance. It came to me so much a month. There might be more if I needed it, but my father held the purse strings and he paid all the major bills. Even handling my monthly check was a responsibility. But in my own son's case, I decided to extend the risk a little. I figured out with him what he would be likely to need for the first semester. Then I deposited that amount in a new bank account in his name. It was up to him to pay all the college bills, and take care of books, laundry, transportation and all incidentals for the next four months out of the sum provided. This is a far weightier financial responsibility than my son had ever borne before. It is possible that any day now I shall receive a telephone call from Ft. Lauderdale, Florida saying that he has blown the whole amount on a trip there, and needs plane fare back before

he is expelled from school. I don't think that will happen, but it could. Giving people the independence that goes along with responsibility always involves some risk.

The Bible teaches that God takes that risk with humankind. It is up to Adam and Eve to look after the garden. Sometimes the risk leads to disastrous results. Adam and Eve end up in the badlands. But God continues to take the risk. For only when we have the freedom to bear responsibility can we become mature human beings.

When we enter into a close relationship with God the outcome is not that we become weaker and more dependent. Rather the result is that we grow stronger and more responsible. If repentance has led to renewal and faith to rebirth we should experience some liberation from the selfishness, the guilt and the anxiety that tied us down before. No longer will we be so completely the victims of impulses that go against our best intentions. Out of our relationship with God we receive power to take responsibility for our own lives. No longer do we hold fate, or evil demons to blame for what happens to us. We are strong enough to bear the burden of our own selfhood and also to assume some responsibility for what happens in the world around us.

In one way responsibility means independence. But in another way it means recognition of the ties that bind. To be responsible means literally to be answerable. The Christian message reminds us that we are always answerable. There is no conceivable situation in life in which we would not be answerable for what we are and what we do.

We are answerable to ourselves. You probably agree with me that somebody ought to tell Madison Avenue that the expression "You owe it to yourself" isn't making it any more. If that particular appeal ever did have any life in it that life has long since dried up and died. But there is a sense in which that expression may be applied to our answerableness. I doubt very much that we owe it to ourselves to try still another detergent. But we do owe it to ourselves to make the most of the resources God has given us and to be true to our own best insights and values.

A higher level of self-respect emerges from a life-transforming relationship with God. Out in the far country the prodigal son lost all respect for himself. He came to the point where the only thing he asked of himself was survival. Some people get to the point where they do not even ask that. But when the prodigal was welcomed home as a son he had something to live up to. And so it is with anyone who has tasted just a little of the love of God.

We are also answerable to other people. This answerability to others is not limited to those who have authority over us. It extends to everyone who in some way is bound up with our own experience. Jesus gave strong emphasis to this extension of our responsibility. His story of the Good Samaritan illustrates that extension. Do not think, he says in effect, that you are accountable only to your boss, or the people you borrow money from, or to your fellow Jews. Even the Gentiles recognize such relationships of responsibility. But you, said Jesus, are answerable to the unknown voice that cries out to you along the highway.

His story of the last judgment illustrates this extension of responsibility. No one is surprised at the thought that people are answerable

to their king. People take it for granted that we are all accountable to constituted authority. But Jesus turns the notion of answerability upside down and says that we only fulfill our responsibility to the king when we answer to the nobody and the powerless. We confront our responsibility in the hungry, the stranger, the person in jail.

We are answerable to ourselves and others. The Bible stresses a third and more ultimate source of our answerability, the one who in ancient times evidently was known as Yahweh, the Lord. To many modern people this more ultimate responsibility seems superfluous. Why drag Yahweh in? Isn't it enough to answer to self and neighbor? Did not Jesus imply as much when he said that in so far as we serve the least of the brethren we serve the king?

Part of the answer to that question is that without the higher critique which a sense of responsibility to Yahweh brings to the world, our answerability to self and neighbor is likely to get confused.

The distinction between Yahweh and the gods of the nations did not lie in the fact that Yahweh was invisible and the other gods were made of wood and bronze. The essential distinction lay in this matter of answerability. The gods of the nations had a way of rubber-stamping the values of the culture that paid them tribute. They also had a way of agreeing unanimously with the policies of the power structure. But Yahweh was a transcendent God who never allowed anyone to confuse him with themselves or their society.

The gods of the nations say that you fulfill your responsibility to them by doing what the king wants. But Yahweh, speaking through Samuel, tells Israel that kings make for a bad scene. They lead to tyranny and war.

The gods of the nations tell their people that the way things are run in Memphis or in Babylon is the way things ought to be run now and forever. But Yahweh, speaking through Amos and Jeremiah, says that something is rotten in Samaria and in Jerusalem and that one way or another things are going to change.

The gods of the nations declare that they are on our side and against the other guys.

Yahweh, speaking through the author of Jonah, announces that he is concerned about the other guys too.

Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts, is captive to no people, no culture, no social system. Therefore, he will not allow his servants to be captive to their culture or social system. Hitler said that the teachings of the new order should be the teachings of the church. Most of the preachers then agreed that that was so. But the members of what became known in Germany as "The Confessing Church" knew they were answerable to Yahweh. In the Barmen Declaration they said that what Hitler said was not so.

Tradition held that racial segregation was the keystone of gracious southern living. Most of the preachers said that that was so. But because some people knew they were answerable to Yahweh the time came when voices, both white and black, declared that that was not so.

Yankee tradition holds that if you just let everyone run no holds barred toward the finish line, the profit motive alone guiding the way, the good guys will come out on top and only the lazy loafers will be the losers. Most of the preachers still say that is so. But so long as someone knows he is answerable to Yahweh, there is still a chance that another point of view will prevail.

"The gods of the nations are idols" says the psalmist, "but the Lord made the heavens." Yahweh is not captive to our scene. He has a way of lifting us out of the scene to a higher perspective. Knowing that we are answerable to him makes us take all the cultural gods with a grain of salt.

Of course, there is risk in admitting that we may be answerable to Yahweh. We may find ourselves very much alone. Like Elijah. He was the only person left who objected to the gods Queen Jezebel imported into Israel. Elijah might have joined the court religion and become fashionable. Instead he found himself alone in the wilderness.

But not quite alone. There was the still small voice. And as the saying goes, that makes a majority.

There is this fifth dimension to Christianity: responsibility. Part of what that means is that Christians live as those who know that they are always answerable to one who transcends their own interests and their own wisdom. Even after we think we've done our duty by ourselves and our society there's that smoky character up on the mountain who won't be melted down into a golden calf, that voice in the wilderness who keeps insisting that we be answerable to him as well.

FIVE DIMENSIONS OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

Earlier Dimensions

- 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

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.'" Genesis 1:27

"So each of us shall give account of himself to God."
Romans 14:12

"His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.'" Matthew 25:21

WE FULFILL OUR NEW LIFE AS SERVANTS OF GOD

Tasks

- We affirm anew our faith that we are of value in God's sight and that we can make a contribution to his world.
- We review the talents and opportunities for service that God has given us and consider how we may make the best use of them.
- We put our talents and opportunities to work as guided by our prayers.
- We make an effort periodically to see beyond conventional insights into where our responsibility lies to God's own perspective on ourselves and our society.

Supporting Attitude

The recognition that "we are not our own," that we are responsible in some measure both for and to other people and that in all relationships we are ultimately answerable to God.