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THE RESPONSIBLE CHRISTIAN

(ED. NOTE: This paper was prepared for and read at the annual convention of the Lutheran Education Association, held this year at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., July 8 and 9.)

Our church is long on Christian education. In many respects our history and our practice in this area are quite unique. We are one of the few Lutheran churches in the world, for instance, that have a developed parochial school system. Moreover, ours is one of the very few denominations whose program in Christian education has not surrendered to the humanistic and pragmatic heresies of our day. Finally, we still accept and encourage catechetical instruction. For all these advantages we are grateful to our heavenly Father, recognizing the full measure of His grace toward us.

Sometimes, however, we become so absorbed in our history, in our organization, and in our methods that we tend to lose sight of the end product of all we do by way of Christian education. We are confronted with the perennial temptation to think of education as an abstract process concerned merely with the imparting of knowledge and the development of attitudes and behavior skills corresponding to such understanding. We need constantly to remind ourselves, therefore, that a program in Christian education has people to train. The end product of all our efforts in Christian education must in fact be the responsible Christian.

Such a person must, first of all, of course, be a Christian. It is hardly necessary to remind a gathering of this kind that this is, in the last analysis and in a real sense, the work of the Holy Spirit. He has the primary function in any program of Christian education. In His grace the Spirit of God condescends to have a part in our efforts at developing the responsible Christian.

However, this same Spirit has chosen to come to us only by Word and Sacrament. In content, therefore, Christian education must always be anchored in the Scriptures. Just this is the strength of our church's program. The materials prepared and the persons trained to meet the needs of such education certainly speak in clear accents of our redemption in Christ Jesus as that whole plan of salvation is described in the Bible. There can be no mistaking our stress on justification by faith

in Christ Jesus. We teach that, and must do so, as the very heart of our religion.

Now, this might sound as if it were quite enough; and I sometimes get the feeling that this is actually what we believe and the principle on which we work. I should like to insist that the end product of our efforts must be not only Christians, but responsible Christians.

This statement is not intended to deny the central importance of the article of justification. Nor is our insistence aimed at diminishing the significance of our common citizenship in heaven. It is good for Lesslie Newbigin of South India to remind us of the fact that —

The Church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move — hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord who will gather all into one. Therefore the nature of the Church is never finally to be defined in static terms, but only in terms of that to which it is going.

(Household of God, page 18.)

We must, however, continue to be aware of the fact that we are in the world though not of it. The Apostle Peter, therefore, applies the word “resident aliens” to us as Christians. Strangers we are; and yet we live here. As the Epistle to Diognetus puts it:

Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by locality or speech or custom. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they take their share in everything as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them and every fatherland is foreign . . .

The Christian life has two foci. Yet the two cannot properly be separated. They are one responsibility, a single burden. No one discusses this dual aspect of our responsibility as Christians more forcefully than this same Apostle Peter, in his First Letter. On the one hand, our inheritance is on deposit for us in heaven (1:4); but, on the other, we are to practice submission to every order of creation established for man’s welfare (2:13).

The responsible Christian is aware of the tension between heaven and earth, between the place where he now resides and the one to which he is going. He cannot ignore or eliminate either aspect of his responsibility without becoming less than a whole Christian.

What is more, the responsible Christian will understand that the elements of his responsibility must receive different emphases in various periods of history. The early Christians, for example, were repeatedly admonished to practice hospitality. That was a rather important matter for the situation in which the church found itself. Today these injunctions to hospitality strike us as rather remote and less relevant to our needs.

Let us take another example. Luther had to emphasize the importance of the individual's relationship to God. He saw the need of stressing that being right with God was no corporate responsibility. We do not have to stress this point to the same degree. We live in a society that keeps on reminding us at every turn that responsibility is an individual affair.

In fact, to be fully relevant to our age, the emphasis in Christian education must be less on the individual and more on the "communion of saints." For we have seen the excesses of individualism in the French Revolution and thereafter; and we live at a time to which the words of Dostoevski apply:

An epoch of universal mutual separation has begun. Every one seeks isolation. . . Everyone seeks the common thought and feelings of the past. Every one by himself wants to start anew. Early associations are torn without mercy and each one acts for himself.

For that reason, in part, people like to move to the suburbs today. There they are away from the noise and pressures of city crowds. And yet they are not content. Life often seems most futile just to suburbia; and the people who live there often recognize the truth of T. S. Elliot's remark:

And the wind shall say: Here were decent godless people;
their only monument the asphalt road and a thousand lost
golf balls.

To be as effective as possible, a program in Christian education must take cognizance of the most pressing needs of men in their particular age. Now, I do not believe that it is easy to deny that men of today deep down inside yearn for a sense of community. They are weary and afraid of being alone. That is one of the appealing sides of Communism. It is not too much concerned with liberty and equality; but it does propose to create a fraternity, a *sobornost*, which, by the way,

is a word used much the same way as we speak of the "*communion of saints*." In an atomistic society that particular offer fills a primary need.

Now, it so happens that the Christian religion has a message to satisfy just this longing more completely than any version of Marxism and needs to be stressed to meet the present situation. In developing the responsible Christian, therefore, the third article of the Apostles' Creed also must receive full emphasis.

There is another urgent reason for the need of this stress. Our society is fluid. In moving around as much as we do, many a presumed Christian runs out on some of his primary responsibilities, especially to the church. If at this point I speak with some feeling, I can only explain that some of my saddest experiences as an Air Force chaplain during more than a decade of military service are associated with flagrant cases of irresponsibility on the part of men and women brought up and trained in our own churches and schools. On many occasions I have tried to analyze such cases; and almost without exception the trail leads back to a failure to answer adequately the question, "What is the church?"

We have been so busy stressing the importance of the individual congregation that we have often failed to provide guidance for those many hundreds who suddenly find themselves on Johnson Island, at Thule, or in Taegu, or Morocco, where there is no congregation in the sense that the word was used in our formal training materials and sessions. We have been very one-sided in our stress, with the result that we have frequently produced irresponsible Christians.

The same lopsided approach has created another kind of irresponsibility. We have at times stressed the duty to avoid all association with false doctrine to the extent that we have isolated ourselves. What is more, we have developed people who shirk the responsibilities which all of us have to that church of which the Apostle says, "It is one in Christ." We have occasionally failed to stress that fellowship is a concept held in balance by a concern for the truth of God's Word, on the one hand, and by a sense of responsibility for God's church, on the other. This equilibrium is destroyed, on the one hand, by indifference to doctrine, which is unionism; it is disturbed, on the other, by withdrawing from the responsibilities laid upon all Christians to reflect and maintain that unity of the church which exists in Christ.

If our program of Christian education is to develop responsible Christians, it will have to direct itself to these points. It must take up

the questions posed by the requirements of Christian living in the mid-twentieth century and provide adequate guidance in areas that still lie unexplored for the most part.

There is another basic issue that runs through modern life. It is a question that has become particularly acute because of the gigantic ideological conflict being waged at present between East and West; and that is the query "What is man?" This is where the most violent battle also between Communism and Christianity rages. Unhappily we are often betrayed by such as live within the shadow of the church or even mount her pulpits but deny or ignore her teachings.

Do you, perhaps, recall the scene in Eugene O'Neill's play, *The Great God Brown*, where the central figure, Brown himself, lies dead on the street? A policeman bends over his body and asks, "Well, what's his name?" Someone replies, "Man!" Then the policeman with notebook and pencil, demands, "How do you spell it?" There you have it!

There are those who proclaim that man is solely a creature of instinct, a refined model of Pavlov's dog, his life a series of reflexes. There are others who insist that man is the product of his environment. If men are to be better, we must see to it that they are better off. The individual is a number, "the quotient of one billion divided by one billion," in the words of Arthur Koestler. In this view civic rulers are social engineers who manipulate figures.

Both of these are heresies and must be so treated in Christian education in such a way as to underline the fact that if men are only creatures of instinct or products of circumstances, it is not possible to speak of responsibility; for then the individual has none. Everything he is and does results from his glands or his environment, or perhaps both.

At this point any program in Christian education must attack in force, with a full understanding of the diabolical nature of our modern heresies. It must develop a thorough and coherent Christian anthropology, with full emphasis on the Scripture truth that we are not only stray sheep or wandering prodigals, but "rebels taken with weapons in our hands" (Forsyth). We must underline the fact that man was created with a will and that this will is in a state of insurrection against God's will unless it is redeemed and sanctified.

If we grapple firmly with this issue and make it a focus of our attention in education, our program will be fully relevant to our present situation today. It will spell the difference between the sentiment expressed by some lines from Carl Sandburg and a quotation from an old church hymn:

Carl Sandburg has this:

If I had a million lives to live
And a million deaths to die
In a million humdrum worlds,
I'd like to change my name
And have a new house number to go by
Each and every time I died,
And started life all over again.

I wouldn't want the same name every time
And the same old number always . . .

Would you?
Or you?
Or you?

And now the hymn:

Had I a thousand lives to live,
Lord, they should all be Thine.

St. Louis, Mo.

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