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The Interior Warfare

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In a recent bulletin of the Academy of Religion and Mental Health a psychiatrist quotes a Harvard junior, "Many students turn into themselves and become preoccupied with their own thoughts and emotions to the point of obsession."¹ We should not be surprised. Your generation has been more sensitive to the nature of man and his interior struggle than most generations. The era of Freudian psychology and existential philosophy has exposed the depths of man's psyche to the point of nausea. It was not too long ago that we greeted the Freudian view of man as the clinical evidence of Pauline anthropology. This we believed was the corrective for the undue optimism about man that grew out of the sloppy applications of the evolutionary hypotheses to man's behavior.

A new era of understanding had dawned, we thought. Now we could follow that ancient Socratic advice, "Know thyself." Everywhere men would be using their professional tools and skills to unfold the mysteries of man. Sociologists, geneticists, and educators teamed up to offer insights for man to discover himself. Dramatists, novelists, and poets used their crafts to add dimension to the enterprise of uncovering the real man. We shattered man's defenses, we shot holes in his rationalizations, we destroyed his inhibitions, we condemned

his compulsions, we questioned his motives, and we doubted his loyalties. We assured him that we could help untangle the confusions and guilt conflicts that dog his life, if only he would be himself. We could go to that dark closet of the self and drag out all the skeletons. We could rummage around for skeletons as Rogerians or Skinnerites, but we were sure we could help man to know himself.

But for all our effort to help man know himself we came up with a new problem—the identity crisis. Modern man does not know who he is. And how can he? We have examined and dissected him until we have worried him out of identity. If he is a tardy man, we tell him he is hostile toward society. If he is a punctual man, we tell him he is anxiety ridden. What's a poor fellow to be? How can we really know ourselves? If I keep telling myself that my chief sin is lethargy, I may discover that my sin is not laziness at all but that I am punishing myself with compulsions for work. The compulsions probably arise out of hidden guilt. The hidden guilt undoubtedly is a basic motive in creating a self-styled piety that compelled me to be a minister in the first place. Knowing myself is not the total solution.

Ewald Bash was right. Contemporary songs carry messages worthy of our attention. Along with the new hymnody we talked about we also catch the wail of the

¹ "Academy Reporter" (Feb.-March 1970), p. 1.

blues in the identity crisis. "I Gotta' Be Me," the singer belts out at us with a flood of questions like, "Where Am I Going?" "What Am I Doing?" The songs expose the lack of something in our desire to be something. The psychologist Rollo May claims that whatever we lack in understanding man, in answering his questions, in solving his dilemma in the identity crisis has been the lack of a proper human model. Alvin Rogness, the president of Luther Seminary, says that he is tired of being compared to the old model, the rat. He would like to hear from the other side of the family, the angels and the whole company of heaven. That may sound facetious and overly simplified, but it is profound indeed. Rollo May does us a great service when he raises "Questions for a Science of Man" and challenges the one-sided and lopsided approaches to the complexity of man.² May suggests that much of behavioral science has been guilty of oversimplification. If we are to discover ourselves and quiet the interior struggle, we will have to go farther than the sciences have.

This is not to diminish the role for the behavioral sciences. The pastor must use them. Further, he must make regular referrals to caseworkers, psychologists, and psychiatrists. It is not the function of the faith to remove all neuroses and psychoses. A Martin Luther suffered from melancholia after the tower experience as well as before. An apostle Paul had as many compulsions after the Damascus road as before. However, we must also recognize the limitations of the behavioral sciences. The psychiatrist has not, as was suggested not

too long ago, replaced the priest. The sciences cannot unlock the secret of man's meaning nor get at the roots of man's interior struggle. Suddenly the younger generation is aware of these limitations of psychiatry and psychotherapy. A short time ago it was faddish for a university student to be in treatment. Today the students are swarming to horoscopes, Eastern religions, and primitive rituals to find some meaning and to gain help for the interior warfare.

What has been the problem? Why the disenchantment with the behavioral sciences? The answer is that they have not the resources for being radical or thorough enough. We get so close to the answer at times in analysis, but we come up short. We try reforming man, taking him apart and pasting him back together again. But that is our problem. We keep working with the old man. We try to salvage what we can and hope to build in some new stuff. We try to reeducate. We try to soften life for him. We used to tell him guilt feelings were bad. Now, we tell him there might be a positive use of guilt. We do not tell him he needs forgiveness, but that he needs acceptance. Who is worried about the seven deadly sins today? We have blessed pride and endorsed envy. We know that anger comes from gland secretions and can be handled with a simple headache remedy. Depression comes from a lack of vitamins. And we have long ago discouraged man from having inhibitions about his avarice and lust. And with all that, modern man still does not know who he is and is unhappy with his interior warfare.

If we are to discover ourselves in an interior struggle in which we overcome all that haunts us, we will have to take seri-

² See *Psychology and the Human Dilemma* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1967).

ously the radical approach the Scriptures apply in their anthropology. Take the story of Nicodemus. Here is this fellow who thinks he is risking his reputation to come to Jesus by night to pay Him the high compliment that Jesus' credentials are divine. Obviously he wants something of Jesus. Well, the answer is surprising. Jesus does not say, "Nick, you will never know how delighted we are that you have come. You are from the Council, and that is important. You are a part of the power structure, and if we are going to do anything for man, we will have to get to the power structures." Or He did not say, "Nick, you noticed that I am sent of God? That's wonderful. That is really sensitive. I think we can use you. We will start you out with a sensitivity group. You can work with Thomas and Phillip; they are really insensitive." Or He did not say, "Nick, what makes you think I am from God? Do you have some special problem you have not revealed to anyone?"

There were many approaches Jesus avoided. He took the most direct and radical of all. "In truth, in very truth I tell you, unless a man has been born over again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3 NEB). The Scriptures are wholly consistent in this radical demand which they spell out in a variety of ways. We have to lose our life in order to find it. We have to be buried with Christ. We have to put on Christ. We have to be crucified with Christ. We have to be renewed in righteousness. We have to put on the new man. All the tinkering and patchwork with the old man is of little value. And we must be careful that we understand how radical the business of being born over again is. This is no Billy Graham decision to be for

God. This is no Bultmannian move from the inauthentic man to the authentic man. This business is so radical that only God can accomplish it in us through the water and the Spirit.

Religionists, however, also live under the special temptation of developing a piety that underplays the radical nature of new life in God. The Gregorian enterprise of playing off the seven virtues against the seven deadly sins is attractive indeed, but fails to portray adequately how deadly the bondage to sin is and how glorious is the freedom of the Spirit. As you come to preach the Gospel of freedom, speak the holy absolution, administer the sacraments of God, you will be impressed with the difficulty people have in surrendering their sins. You will meet people in your office who are distressed and torn by their sin but who refuse to let go of their guilt, because it is still something of the old self to hang on to. You will minister to many who will engage you in the game of casuistry simply because they cannot admit to being wrong. You may begin your ministry thinking that people do not believe the Gospel because it is too good to be true. In time you may come to understand more and more that they do not believe because they refuse God's radical offer to put them to death in Christ and raise them to new life.

It is also easy for us to construct a piety that fails to make God's radical offer. Graham Greene chases that problem in a number of his novels. In *The Heart of the Matter*, Scobie, a law officer guilty of adultery, hesitates to go to the Sacrament, which he knows will pledge Him God's gift of forgiveness, because he must first go to confession. In confession he knows

Father Ranl will ask him not to see his paramour again. "The trouble is, he thought, we know the answers — we Catholics are damned by our foreknowledge."³ Scobie is right. Anyone who takes the bondage of sin seriously knows there can be no deliverance from it by resolution, determination, pledge, promise or oath, no matter how pious. We need the radical action of God's love in Christ to set us free. Our Lord is that Strong One, stronger than the strong, who is come to destroy the strong forces that would destroy and possess us. He stripped evil of its authority and power over us. He did so in a death struggle. The suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord are the signs of how grim the battle is. He had to deal with it on its terms — suffering and death.

To keep us pure in spirit, to cleanse and renew us, this Christ gives us His presence. By the Holy Spirit God gives Himself to us, becomes present in our minds and hearts to direct us. Jesus promised us the power of the Spirit to produce in our lives the fruits of the Spirit. This is not simply a rearrangement, a reordering of our lives, but God at work within us. We do not have to rummage around in the inside looking for some virtue. God is at work to put to death the old fires of the self and to furnish us with the power to lead a creative, positive life in Christ. The old neuroses and compulsions may still be there, but God makes even them captive to His Spirit. The old nature comes to haunt us daily, but daily our God puts him to death for us. Luther noted that faith as the gift of Christ is warfare. Faith is not static but active and lively warfare

³ *The Heart of the Matter* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), p. 235.

against that which would destroy us. Worship, whether it be through our works or in the assembly of worship, becomes the battleground where faith destroys the works of the devil.

If then we are in search of a piety that will make us durable in the interior struggle and warfare, we must construct a piety that takes seriously the radical view of man's captivity and the view of God's radical offer in Christ. For each of us the struggle may appear to be different, but the answer is the same. I can recall from my seminary days a sermon a student preached at evening chapel. I cannot recall his name. I cannot even recall his face. But I remember his message. His explanation of Paul's thorn in the flesh was that it was a particular sin or weakness of Paul. This sin kept Paul from being unduly elated about the revelations he had received and compelled him to rely on God's grace in Christ that its power might come to full strength in weakness (2 Cor. 12:7-8 NEB). I cannot squeeze the exegesis to allow that. But certainly Biblical anthropology allows us to say it about ourselves. We are sinners and saints at one and the same time. I recall also that the sainted Dr. F. E. Mayer told us that one overcomes one sin only to discover that another comes to replace it, but again, that we might run to our God to live in His strength and His grace.

Such piety is not popular in the world. The world would rather waste itself in its scrupulosity with man's problems in the hopes that it can find a better solution for a better life. The Gospel, however, gives us the freedom to abandon in radical honesty and confession that which plagues us and to run to our God for help. Those who find that Lutheran piety is boringly monot-

onous and pessimistic with its emphasis on confession and absolution have never tasted the freedom of its realism and hope.

Pope John's *Journal of a Soul* is a strange mixture of evangelical faith and medieval piety. One senses that a great soul was unfortunately encumbered with much spiritual exercise that was alien to it. In his seminary days during a retreat in preparation for his ordination to the priesthood he confessed his skepticism about his spiritual advancement and his efforts at Christian perfection. He decided, "God does not consider the number of my deeds, but the way in which I do them; it is the heart he

asks for, nothing more. An intimate sense of the presence of God, as the final end of all creation, and a total forgetfulness of myself: these two things alone, and with these whatever I do is complete."⁴

I offer to you that a Christian piety which will be effective in the interior warfare is one that is openly skeptical about the self and daily in faith surrenders the self to God for the rebirth of His Spirit.

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⁴ *Journal of a Soul*, trans. Dorothy White (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 145.