

Editorial

Lost: A Sense of Responsibility

Of the transformations through which modern society has gone in the past five decades, few have been more significant than that which has become manifest in the area of personal responsibility. America's transition from pioneer conditions to modern mechanized and urbanized society has been effected at the price of inevitable changes. With some of these we will doubtless be obliged to make peace. Others contain within themselves factors lethal to the propagation of the Christian Faith, and must be met with intelligent resistance and vigorous counter measures. It is the thesis of this editorial that the contemporary trend away from a sense of personal accountability is in the latter class, and needs to be considered accordingly.

A number of factors, some of them inevitable, have converged to decrease the importance of individual initiative and its consequent responsibility. Pioneer conditions, with their accent upon individualism, could not prevail indefinitely. When frontiers disappeared, the aggressive genius of a young nation turned to the task of consolidating its gains. The patent office became the new frontier. Industrial combines and skyscrapers overshadowed individuals. Work became humdrum. The man who formerly saw the work of his hands through to completion now came to spend forty uninspired hours each week tightening Nut 47, or filing papers from F through L. It is only rarely that a sense of individual responsibility can survive a loss of personal incentive.

The development of the machine age held heavily over the laboring man's

head the threat of the loss of what employment he had. It was with difficulty that he failed to conclude that he was engaged in doing something for which a machine had not yet been invented, or for which the company was not yet ready to lay out the price of an automatic gadget.

To add to the sense of futility with which his daily work was fraught, his leisure time became increasingly meaningless. Canned music, comic strips, and movies promised to relieve his boredom with a minimum of effort. Commercialized sports permitted him to take his exercise vicariously; he grew soft and paunchy while watching professional athletes exert their muscles. Both his cultural and his spiritual birthright were exchanged for a mess of commercialized pottage.

A second factor which served to progressively evaporate the sense of personal accountability has been the increasing degree of extension of government into the personal lives of its citizens. It is not the purpose of this editorial to pronounce a value judgment upon the evident movement of the governments of the world—including our own—in the direction of the left. Doubtless there has been much legislation in our own country in the past fifteen years which is necessary and enlightened. Few will disagree that we were thirty years behind the times in such matters as social security legislation in 1933. Nevertheless, it is apparent to all who think soberly that increased social responsibility tends toward decreased individual initiative, and toward the loss of the consciousness of the self as the responsible center of moral and spir-

itual action.

It is evident, of course, that social responsibility is a matter of degree. Some nations, such as the Scandinavian Countries, have met certain inevitable conditions in their lands with moderate measures of a socialistic character. Others like National Socialist Germany have gone the whole way in the subordination of the individual to the state. It is to be devoutly hoped that those European nations, including Great Britain who at the moment appear to view state socialism as the only way to security may not find themselves driven by some demonic logic to the regimented state. But if the general movement toward the left be one to which forces beyond our control are inevitably leading us, (and this we are by no means prepared to admit) then the need for some more adequate means by which to reinstate the sense of personal accountability becomes more imperative by the hour.

The world of scholarship can scarcely evade its share of responsibility for the loss of which we are speaking. Happily some of the academic fads, particularly in psychology, of the 'twenties' appear to have run their course. Only occasionally does an academic Rip Van Winkle teach that human conduct is purely an organic response to certain stimuli. And, there is reason to hope that the major interest in scholarship today is away from the natural sciences, with their emphasis upon mechanism, toward the more speculative sciences, and toward some recognition of the status of moral values. Nonetheless, the sowing to the winds in the 'twenties and early 'thirties is now producing the whirlwind. In place of the frank disavowal of responsibility for human actions we must endure today a general indifference to the question of personal accountability.

Theology must likewise accept a share in the blame for the current decline with which we are concerned.

Personal responsibility at the several human levels is a reflection of something deeper, namely the sense of accountability to the Divine Source of moral law. Reacting against what were felt to be the excesses of Calvinism, vast sectors of American Protestantism progressively lost a sense of the majesty of God until a view of God as person became rather exceptional among theologians. So low became the fortunes of theology that it was considered a major triumph in some circles when a group of thinkers asserted that God was after all a Person, though finite and "this side of creation."

When "God" became no more than the projection of man's highest ideals, or the impersonal - but - suprahuman creative good, it is not surprising that the sense of individual responsibility should dwindle to near-zero. It would require superhuman imagination and sense of humor to feel accountable to "an impersonal and complex vector in the environment." It is likewise asking a great deal of the man in the street to feel anything approximating a Christian sense of moral obligation to a finite "Conservator of Values" whose dignity rises no higher than that of a cooperator with men in the achievement of 'value'.

Let us look briefly at the forms which the contemporary loss of personal responsibility have assumed. Our minds turn at once to the more obvious manifestations, such as the mob, in which individuals take retreat in the social group to engage in conduct which they would not dare attempt as individuals. More refined is the tendency pointed out by Buell Gallagher in a recent volume, of conferences (including church conferences!) to pass resolutions which are far beyond that level of idealism which those passing them are willing to espouse on their responsibility as individuals. It was just this which so profoundly disturbed S. K. in his day. And as

the smug denizens of Copenhagen took refuge in the Church to secure the anonymity so necessary to their chosen pattern of life, so our moderns seek to evade personal obligation at every level by losing themselves in the social group.

The import of this trend for Christianity depends largely upon our view of the essential character of the Christian religion. Let us not be stamped by the insistence of some that we must make a radical choice between historic Evangelicalism and a 'social gospel.' While Evangelicals have without doubt made regrettable failures in the matter of maintaining the balance between the doctrinal and the ethical factors in Christianity, there is no inner logic in their theology which renders this inevitable. While historic Christianity has been *primarily* individualistic in its approach, it has never been exclusively so, even in its most imperfect embodiment.

The need for a larger concern with the exertion of the impact of Christianity upon the world about us must not, however, deflect us from our understanding of the Christian Evangel as a message whose cutting edge is ever directed toward the establishment of right relationships between the individual and his Maker. The need for such a ministration only emerges, we think, out of a recognition of the individual and personal responsibility of man toward God. It is time for the Church to search and see whether her present impotence may not be attributable to her relative failure to emphasize the principles which belong to her classical theology.

A great deal has been said in some circles (and rightly so) concerning the matter of preaching for a verdict. What is not always so clear is, what techniques shall we employ? And more important still, upon what *or whom* shall we rely in accomplishing this task? The factor which seems too largely to have been overlooked is that

which our fathers called "conviction for sin." Emphasis upon this ebbs or flows in proportion to our belief in and reliance upon the Holy Spirit. Pause a moment and consider the center and core of His work among men. Is it not His genius to isolate men, and to confront them as individuals with the solemn fact of moral responsibility? Is He not the Hound of Heaven?

Let us put it more plainly still. Is it not the uniform tendency of the demonic forces in our lives and in our living to drive us to take refuge from our personal responsibility in some larger totality, usually social? Then let us liken the work of the Divine Spirit to that of the skilful cowhand, who deftly cuts us from out of the herd, and corrals us up by ourselves and confronts us with the claims of the Divine Lawgiver. In such a moment as that we are brought face to face with the deepest realities that can confront us, whether in this world or in the next. It is in this moment of providential isolation from the group that eternal issues are decided.

Consider, finally, that the Spirit of God utilizes means in the achievement of His ends. His work of singling men out from the herd and confronting them with the issues of life and death is seldom done without the skilful ministry of the Word, and particularly that aspect of the Word which deals with the reality of Divine justice, the universal sinfulness of mankind, and the negative relationship which sin has set up between the individual and God. Some will object that these are archaic assertions, and that the 'modern man' will have none of them. Well, possibly he will have to. Let the reader, before he lay aside as trivial these matters, ponder the possibility that the operation of the Divine Spirit which we term 'conviction for sin' be a deep reality, and that it may correspond to a profound realism in the God-man relationship. Consider, further, the possibility that this conviction may

be an *anticipation* of a day in which every individual will stand openly before the Judge of all, and there "know as he is known."

If this be true, then the trends of modern life which serve to blunt the sense of individual responsibility must

be received as unrealistic. A Christianity which seeks to fulfil its mission to the age will be well-advised to think twice before abandoning its emphasis upon the moral and spiritual recovery of the individual, as its primary task.

—H. B. K.

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