

and spiritual death are the result of such attempts to find a cure.

Solitude and Silence

Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. He will only do harm to himself and to the community. Alone you stood before God when he called you; alone you had to answer that call; alone you had to struggle and pray; and alone you will die and give an account to God. You cannot escape from yourself; for God has singled you out. If you refuse to be alone you are rejecting Christ's call to you, and you can have no part in the community of those who are called. "The challenge of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Everyone must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. . . . I will not be with you then, nor you with me" (Luther).

But the reverse is also true: *Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.* Into the community you were called, the call was not meant for you alone; in the community of the called you bear your cross, you struggle, you pray. You are not alone, even in death, and on the Last Day you will be only one member of the great congregation of Jesus Christ. If you scorn the fellowship of the brethren, you reject the call of Jesus Christ, and thus your solitude can only be hurtful to you. "If I die, then I am not alone in death; if I suffer they [the fellowship] suffer with me" (Luther).

We recognize, then, that only as we are within the fellowship can we be alone, and only he that is alone can live in the fellowship. Only in the fellowship do we learn to be rightly alone and only in aloneness do we learn to live

CHAPTER THREE

The Day Alone

Many people seek fellowship because they are afraid to be alone. Because they cannot stand loneliness, they are driven to seek the company of other people. There are Christians, too, who cannot endure being alone, who have had some bad experiences with themselves, who hope they will gain some help in association with others. They are generally disappointed. Then they blame the fellowship for what is really their own fault. The Christian community is not a spiritual sanatorium. The person who comes into a fellowship because he is running away from himself is misusing it for the sake of diversion, no matter how spiritual this diversion may appear. He is really not seeking community at all, but only distraction which will allow him to forget his loneliness for a brief time, the very alienation that creates the deadly isolation of man. The disintegration of communication and all genuine experience, and finally resignation

rightly in the fellowship. It is not as though the one preceded the other; both begin at the same time, namely, with the call of Jesus Christ.

Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair.

Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.

Along with the day of the Christian family fellowship together there goes the lonely day of the individual. This is as it should be. The day together will be unfruitful without the day alone, both for the fellowship and for the individual.

The mark of solitude is silence, as speech is the mark of community. Silence and speech have the same inner correspondence and difference as do solitude and community. One does not exist without the other. Right speech comes out of silence, and right silence comes out of speech.

Silence does not mean dumbness, as speech does not mean chatter. Dumbness does not create solitude and chatter does not create fellowship. "Silence is the excess, the inebriation, the victim of speech. But dumbness is unholy, like a thing only maimed, not cleanly sacrificed. . . . Zacharias was speechless, instead of being silent. Had he accepted the revelation, he may perhaps have come out of the temple not dumb but silent" (Ernest Hello). The speech, the Word which establishes and binds together the fellowship, is accompanied by silence. "There is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (Eccles. 3:7). As there are definite hours in

the Christian's day for the Word, particularly the time of common worship and prayer, so the day also needs definite times of silence, silence under the Word and silence that comes out of the Word. These will be especially the times before and after hearing the Word. The Word comes not to the chatterer but to him who holds his tongue. The stillness of the temple is the sign of the holy presence of God in His Word.

There is an indifferent, or even negative, attitude toward silence which sees in it a disparagement of God's revelation in the Word. This is the view which misinterprets silence as a ceremonial gesture, as a mystical desire to get beyond the Word. This is to miss the essential relationship of silence to the Word. Silence is the simple stillness of the individual under the Word of God. We are silent before hearing the Word because our thoughts are already directed to the Word, as a child is quiet when he enters his father's room. We are silent after hearing the Word because the Word is still speaking and dwelling within us. We are silent at the beginning of the day because God should have the first word, and we are silent before going to sleep because the last word also belongs to God. We keep silence solely for the sake of the Word, and therefore not in order to show disregard for the Word but rather to honor and receive it.

Silence is nothing else but waiting for God's Word and coming from God's Word with a blessing. But everybody knows that this is something that needs to be practiced and learned, in these days when talkativeness prevails. Real silence, real stillness, really holding one's tongue comes only as the sober consequence of spiritual stillness.

But this stillness before the Word will exert its influence

upon the whole day. If we have learned to be silent before the Word, we shall also learn to manage our silence and our speech during the day. There is such a thing as forbidden, self-indulgent silence, a proud, offensive silence. And this means that it can never be merely silence as such. The silence of the Christian is listening silence, humble stillness, that may be interrupted at any time for the sake of humility. It is silence in conjunction with the Word. This is what Thomas à Kempis meant when he said: "None speaketh surely but he that would gladly keep silence if he might." There is a wonderful power of clarification, purification, and concentration upon the essential thing in being quiet. This is true as a purely secular fact. But silence before the Word leads to right hearing and thus also to right speaking of the Word of God at the right time. Much that is unnecessary remains unsaid. But the essential and the helpful thing can be said in a few words.

Where a family lives close together in a constricted space and the individual does not have the quietness he needs, regular times of quiet are absolutely necessary. After a time of quiet we meet others in a different and a fresh way. Many a household fellowship will be able to provide for the individual's need to be alone, and thus preserve the fellowship itself from injury, only by adopting a regular order.

We shall not discuss here all the wonderful benefits that can accrue to the Christian in solitude and silence. It is all too easy to go astray at this point. We could probably cite many a bad experience that has come from silence. Silence can be a dreadful ordeal with all its desolation and terrors. It can also be a false paradise of self-deception; the latter is no better than the former. Be that as it may, let none expect

from silence anything but a direct encounter with the Word of God, for the sake of which he has entered into silence. But this encounter will be given to him. The Christian will not lay down any conditions as to what he expects or hopes to get from this encounter. If he will simply accept it, his silence will be richly rewarded.

There are three purposes for which the Christian needs a definite time when he can be alone during the day: Scripture meditation, prayer, and intercession. All three should have their place in the daily period of meditation. The word "meditation" should not frighten us. It is an ancient concept of the Church and of the Reformation that we are beginning again to rediscover.

Meditation

It might be asked, Why is a special time needed for this, since we meditate already during the common devotions?

This is the answer. The period of personal meditation is to be devoted to the Scriptures, private prayer, and intercession, and it has no other purpose. There is no occasion here for spiritual experiments. But for these three things there must be time, for God Himself requires them of us. Even if initially meditation means nothing but this one thing, that we are performing a service that we owe to God, it would still be sufficient.

The time of meditation does not let us down into the void and abyss of loneliness; it lets us be alone with the Word. And in so doing it gives us solid ground on which to stand and clear directions as to the steps we must take.

Whereas in our devotions together we read long consecutive passages, in our personal meditation we confine our-

selves to a brief selected text, which possibly may not be changed for a whole week. If in our reading of the Scriptures together we are led into the whole length and breadth of the Bible, here we go into the unfathomable depths of a particular sentence and word. Both are equally necessary, "that ye may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height" (Eph. 3:18).

In our meditation we ponder the chosen text on the strength of the promise that it has something utterly personal to say to us for this day and for our Christian life, that it is not only God's Word for the Church, but also God's Word for us individually. We expose ourselves to the specific word until it addresses us personally. And when we do this, we are doing no more than the simplest, untutored Christian does every day; we read God's Word as God's Word for us.

We do not ask what this text has to say to other people. For the preacher this means that he will not ask how he is going to preach or teach on this text, but what it is saying quite directly to him. It is true that to do this we must first have understood the content of the verse, but here we are not expounding it or preparing a sermon or conducting Bible study of any kind; we are rather waiting for God's Word to us. It is not a vacuous waiting, but a waiting on the basis of a clear promise. Often we are so burdened and overwhelmed with other thoughts, images, and concerns that it may take a long time before God's Word has swept all else aside and come through. But it will surely come, just as surely as God Himself has come to men and will come again. This is the very reason why we begin our meditation with the prayer that God may send His Holy

Spirit to us through His Word and reveal His Word to us and enlighten us.

It is not necessary that we should get through the entire passage in one meditation. Often we shall have to stop with one sentence or even one word, because we have been gripped and arrested and cannot evade it any longer. Is not the word "Father," or "love," "mercy," "cross," "sanctification," "resurrection," often enough to fill far more than the brief period we have at our disposal?

It is not necessary, therefore, that we should be concerned in our meditation to express our thought and prayer in words. Unphrased thought and prayer, which issues only from our hearing, may often be more beneficial.

It is not necessary that we should discover new ideas in our meditation. Often this only diverts us and feeds our vanity. It is sufficient if the Word, as we read and understand it, penetrates and dwells within us. As Mary "pondered in her heart" the things that were told by the shepherds, as what we have casually overheard follows us for a long time, sticks in our mind, occupies, disturbs, or delights us, without our ability to do anything about it, so in meditation God's Word seeks to enter in and remain with us. It strives to stir us, to work and operate in us, so that we shall not get away from it the whole day long. Then it will do its work in us, often without our being conscious of it.

Above all, it is not necessary that we should have any unexpected, extraordinary experiences in meditation. This can happen, but if it does not, it is not a sign that the meditation period has been useless. Not only at the beginning, but repeatedly, there will be times when we feel a great spiritual dryness and apathy, an aversion, even an inability to medi-

tate. We dare not be balked by such experiences. Above all, we must not allow them to keep us from adhering to our meditation period with great patience and fidelity.

It is, therefore, not good for us to take too seriously the many untoward experiences we have with ourselves in meditation. It is here that our old vanity and our illicit claims upon God may creep in by a pious detour, as if it were our right to have nothing but elevating and fruitful experiences, and as if the discovery of our own inner poverty were quite below our dignity. With that attitude we shall make no progress. Impatience and self-reproach will only foster our complacency and entangle us ever more deeply in the net of self-centered introspection. But there is no more time for such morbidity in meditation than there is in the Christian life as a whole. We must center our attention on the Word alone and leave consequences to its action. For may it not be that God Himself sends us these hours of reproof and dryness that we may be brought again to expect everything from His Word? "Seek God, not happiness"—this is the fundamental rule of all meditation. If you seek God alone, you will gain happiness: that is its promise.

Prayer

The Scripture meditation leads to prayer. We have already said that the most promising method of prayer is to allow oneself to be guided by the word of the Scriptures, to pray on the basis of a word of Scripture. In this way we shall not become the victims of our own emptiness. Prayer means nothing else but the readiness and willingness to receive and appropriate the Word, and, what is more, to accept it in one's personal situation, particular tasks, deci-

sions, sins, and temptations. What can never enter the corporate prayer of the fellowship may here be silently made known to God. According to a word of Scripture we pray for the clarification of our day, for preservation from sin, for growth in sanctification, for faithfulness and strength in our work. And we may be certain that our prayer will be heard, because it is a response to God's Word and promise. Because God's Word has found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, all prayers that we pray conforming to this Word are certainly heard and answered in Jesus Christ.

It is one of the particular difficulties of meditation that our thoughts are likely to wander and go their own way, toward other persons or to some events in our life. Much as this may distress and shame us again and again, we must not lose heart and become anxious, or even conclude that meditation is really not something for us. When this happens it is often a help not to snatch back our thoughts convulsively, but quite calmly to incorporate into our prayer the people and the events to which our thoughts keep straying and thus in all patience return to the starting point of the meditation.

Intercession

Just as we relate our personal prayer to the Scripture passage so we do the same with our intercessions. It is impossible to mention in the intercessions of corporate worship all the persons who are committed to our care, or at any rate to do so in the way that is required of us. Every Christian has his own circle who have requested him to make intercession for them or for whom he knows he has been called upon especially to pray. These will be, first of all, those with whom he must live day by day.

This brings us to a point at which we hear the pulsing heart of all Christian life in unison. A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner. This is a happy discovery for the Christian who begins to pray for others. There is no dislike, no personal tension, no estrangement that cannot be overcome by intercession as far as our side of it is concerned. Intercessory prayer is the purifying bath into which the individual and the fellowship must enter every day. The struggle we undergo with our brother in intercession may be a hard one, but that struggle has the promise that it will gain its goal.

How does this happen? Intercession means no more than to bring our brother into the presence of God, to see him under the Cross of Jesus as a poor human being and sinner in need of grace. Then everything in him that repels us falls away; we see him in all his destitution and need. His need and his sin become so heavy and oppressive that we feel them as our own, and we can do nothing else but pray: Lord, do Thou, Thou alone, deal with him according to Thy severity and Thy goodness. To make intercession means to grant our brother the same right that we have received, namely, to stand before Christ and share in his mercy.

This makes it clear that intercession is also a daily service we owe to God and our brother. He who denies his neigh-

bor the service of praying for him denies him the service of a Christian. It is clear, furthermore, that intercession is not general and vague but very concrete: a matter of definite persons and definite difficulties and therefore of definite petitions. The more definite my intercession becomes, the more promising it is.

Finally, we can also no longer escape the realization that the ministry of intercession requires time of every Christian, but most of all of the pastor who has the responsibility of a whole congregation. Intercession alone, if it is thoroughly done, would consume the entire time of daily meditation. So pursued, it will become evident that intercession is a gift of God's grace for every Christian community and for every Christian. Because intercession is such an incalculably great gift of God, we should accept it joyfully. The very time we give to intercession will turn out to be a daily source of new joy in God and in the Christian community.

Since meditation on the Scriptures, prayer, and intercession are a service we owe and because the grace of God is found in this service, we should train ourselves to set apart a regular hour for it, as we do for every other service we perform. This is not "legalism"; it is orderliness and fidelity. For most people the early morning will prove to be the best time. We have a right to this time, even prior to the claims of other people, and we may insist upon having it as a completely undisturbed quiet time despite all external difficulties. For the pastor it is an indispensable duty and his whole ministry will depend on it. Who can really be faithful in great things if he has not learned to be faithful in the things of daily life?