WHY I AM A CHRISTIAN

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"A word to honest doubters"

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not permit yourself to become frightened or confused. It is the Lord’s work in your soul. It is painful, to be sure. All such curative experiences are distasteful to our pampered natures, but they are necessary. Give thanks to our merciful God, who in this way has begun to put to death your old life.

The disturbing experiences with yourself and with your sin through which you are passing, should not frighten you away from God. On the contrary, what God has shown you of your sin should rather drive you to your crucified Saviour, make you hunger for the grace of God and seek salvation, and become one of those whom the Lord calls blessed: “Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3-6).

After the Lord has put to death, He also maketh alive.

Be calm, therefore. Let the Lord Himself take full charge of this work. He Himself will perfect the good work which He has begun in your soul. In His time the veil will be drawn aside, and you will rejoice in salvation with unspeakable joy. You will experience God’s blessed presence, peace, and rest. You will be given an inward dislike of sin and a holy desire to do the will of God.

Meanwhile, wait humbly and patiently for the Lord. Plead your distress before Him each day. Read His Word and cling to His promises. Look to the Saviour who suffered and died for you.

Remember this: You experienced the new birth the moment you turned to your Saviour and honestly confessed your sins. What you have felt so far has been principally its mortifying and painful aspects. But that, too, is a part of the vital mystery of Christianity.

BOOK FIVE

The Logic of Repentance

REPENTANCE, according to the New Testament, is the condition whereby man becomes a partaker in God’s great gift to the human race: the kingdom of God.

Already in the time of John the Baptist this was made clear: “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:2). Jesus reiterated it: “From that time began Jesus to preach, and to say, Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17).

When, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit had preached his first mission sermon, and the people had been convicted of sin and had begun to ask what they should do, he answered: “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins” (Acts 2:37-38).

All of the apostles preached in the same way. See Acts 8:22; 11:21; 17:30; 26:18, 20; II Corinthians 3:16; 12:21; James 5:20; II Peter 3:9; Hebrews 6:1; Revelations 2:5, 21, 22; 3:19.

This was exactly what the Lord Himself had commanded them to do: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name unto all the nations” (Luke 24:46-47). He had also said that repentance was absolutely
necessary in order to enter into the kingdom of God: “Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

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I do not know, my dear reader, what your relation to God is. But I believe that I make no mistake when I take it for granted that you long for fellowship with God. Perhaps more, perhaps less, according to the varying times and circumstances in your life. You feel drawn toward God. You hope some day to succeed in finding peace with God. Above all else, you hope to turn to God in your old age, when you are to depart this earthly life, that you may go home to God, to the kingdom of glory, to eternal rest and peace after the ceaseless turmoil and strife of this life, with all its difficulties and hardships.

Nor do I think that I take too much for granted when I assume that you have had many wonderful experiences with God, precious moments when God drew very near to you. The things of this world faded in significance, while the world of eternal things pervaded your soul with remarkable reality and with an almost irresistible attraction. You felt insignificant and very small when you stood in the presence of our great and holy God, and you felt that you were extremely unclean and sinful. Small and great sins came to mind and crowded before your inner eye. There was something strangely solemn about it all. You had nothing to offer in your own defense, no way of concealing yourself. It was like standing unarmed and without shield in a hailstorm of bullets.

Instinctively you folded your hands. Perhaps you bent the knee also. And you began to cry to God. Every-

thing was strange, and you scarcely recognized yourself. The following day, as you thought of it, you felt somewhat uncertain of yourself. You were glad that no one knew what had happened. Now and then you were tempted to look upon it as a case of overstrained nerves. But deep down in your heart you were convinced that you had never been yourself at any time as much as in that wonderful and holy hour in the presence of God.

You have, perhaps, not had many such experiences. But your longings have been awakened, and you love to occupy yourself at frequent intervals with religious thoughts and to read religious literature. Little by little, too, you have come to the point where you desire to be perfectly clear in the matter of your relationship to God.

Listen: Christ is your divine Friend. He is not what you have often been tempted to think that He is: reticent, cold, and unmerciful. He is your Friend and is therefore interested in you. He is interested in having things made clear to your own mind concerning your relationship to God, in order that you might become a free and happy Christian.

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He tells you clearly and plainly: “Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

I am certain that I do not presume too much concerning you when I take it for granted that you acknowledge the absolute authority of Jesus. You fully recognize Him as the only one who is perfectly qualified to deal with these questions. At least, I do.

Now, He says that repentance is the only way into the kingdom of God, into vital fellowship with God.

I can readily imagine that some do not recognize Jesus
in these words. Otherwise so gentle, kind, and full of understanding when dealing with sinners, here He seems so hard and stern: If a person be not repentant, he can have no part in the kingdom of God.

But we should remember that love is both gentle and stern. According to the Gospels, Jesus was not merely a gentle optimist, as many would make Him in our day. He was also a stern realist, who was faithful to the truth in love. His love was so great that He spoke the truth to all who would listen to it.

It was love, too, which prompted Him to speak the hard word about repentance. He saw how people were deceiving themselves, not least the religious people. Because they were religious, they thought that they were on the right path. But Jesus saw that, in spite of their morality and religiosity, they were on the broad way to perdition. He sees, too, how this self-deception is repeated in every age.

Accordingly, He steps into the midst of seething humanity and cries out with all the power of His love: That way will end in perdition. If you wish to go to heaven, turn about. There is only one way to heaven, the narrow way, which begins at the straight gate of repentance.

My reader, are you repentant?
This is an insistent question, it is true. But truth is insistent. And upon this question depends your eternal destiny.

If you are not repentant, you are unsaved, no matter how much you hope and wait and long and think and worry, even read and pray. This is the simple meaning of Jesus’ quiet but earnest warning: “Except ye repent, and become as children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven.”
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I had not. Why should it be wrong of them to say, that they were converted?

If you were to ask me: “Are you married?” I would answer: “Yes, I am.” If you were to ask me: “Are you converted?” I would answer: “Yes, I am.” But, of course, in this case I would feel like adding: “By the wonderful grace of God.”

If I have experienced repentance I must say so, and not say that I hope or desire to experience it. That would not be the truth.

Meanwhile, I can well imagine that you have met some folks who say that they have been converted, and yet really are conceited and cock-sure in the matter. But they are not repentant, no matter how much they say they are. For Jesus says in the passage I have quoted above that they who turn to God become as little children, that is, become humble, not great, in their own eyes.

There is not a little of this non-genuine article, this imitation of true Christianity. Jesus Himself foresaw it, and prophesied that it would come. But, in the name of truth, you must not blame Christianity for that. If you meet people who have so little Christianity that they have become proud and conceited, you must try to help them, because they are deceiving themselves. You ought to go to them and say: “Your conversion will not bring you to heaven, because it has made you proud instead of humble.”

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I have thought a great deal about repentance, both before and since I was converted. There are perhaps few things which I have given as much thought.

I have said to myself: If Jesus had not made conversion the condition whereby we must be saved, would not perhaps more people have reached heaven? In fact, now and then I have asked myself if almost all of them would not have consented to be saved.

I have observed how religious everybody is, after all. Most people want to have at least some dealings with God, especially during adversity, illness, or old age. Even though they do not care to be particularly intimate with the Lord, yet they do not want to be at odds with Him. Therefore we notice that they go to church occasionally and even to the Lord’s Supper. They contribute to missions and to other good causes. In a way they struggle against their sins, even though the opposition they put forth is not very great nor leads to very outstanding and decisive battles.

But I observe also that as soon as you mention a word from the Bible about repentance to these people, most of them balk. They can follow you no farther. Insistence upon repentance seems unreasonable to most of them; at least, it is an insurmountable something which they seek to evade in one way or another. Like those in the parable, who were bidden to the feast, they reply more or less courteously: Have me excused!—And proceed, more or less religiously, on their way to eternal perdition.

Now, I am certain that Jesus did the right thing when He made repentance the condition upon which admission into the kingdom of heaven is possible. He did not do it in order to make it difficult for men to be saved. He did it because it was absolutely necessary. Not even an almighty and all-loving God can save sinful men if they will not repent.

To me the question resolves itself into this: Why is repentance necessary before God can take us into His kingdom?
In order to arrive at an answer to this question, we must take as our starting-point the query: What is repentance? Repentance is a well-known and yet somewhat hazy expression. In the New Testament the word “metanoia” is used, which means about-mindedness or change of mind.

This little bit of information throws light at once upon the question we have raised. It tells us that there is something wrong with our mind, which, unless it is changed, makes it impossible for God to get us into His kingdom.

The question is now changed for the third time and reads as follows: What is there about our mind which makes it impossible for God to receive us into His kingdom without first changing it?

This question is very easy to answer as long as we think only of the openly ungodly. If a man has such a mind that he kills his neighbor, either out of desire for revenge or for gain, we all realize that he must have a change of mind. We simply can not live together with such people, and for that reason we put them in prison.

Or if a man has a mind to destroy women and children both physically and spiritually, we all realize at once that such perpetrators of immorality must have their minds changed. If not, because of the danger to society, they must be interned until it can be established that a real change of mind has taken place.

The question becomes more difficult when we turn to a consideration of those people, who in our country are, of course, in the majority—who are good, decent, honorable, useful, able, conscientious, generous, yea, even religious.

Is there anything wrong with them? Must they, too, have a change of mind?

I know full well that there are many who think that such people do not need to be converted. They think that such people need only to become more religious and more moral, that is, that it is only necessary for them to develop further along the same line. To speak to these people about repentance is looked upon as spiritual rudeness, as methodistic manhandling of souls, as pietistic narrow-mindedness and superficiality, akin to fanaticism, and which drives others into fanaticism.

I know, too, that even some pastors have this view with regard to repentance. For that reason they never in their preaching draw the Biblical distinction between the converted and the unconverted, between the children of God and the children of the world. In their preaching they proceed upon the theory that all their listeners are Christians, and treat them as such. To be sure, they recognize a difference between them, but only a difference of degree: some are zealous Christians, others less zealous.

I shall not take up this matter for discussion at this point. I assume that we all submit to Jesus Christ as the sole and final authority in things pertaining to salvation. His decision in the matter is as follows, and in clear, plain words: “that which is born of the flesh is flesh” (John 3:6). “Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

But, some say, these words of Jesus apply only to ungodly people. They can not be applied unconditionally to people who are baptized and confirmed and who live a good moral and religious life.

To this I must reply as follows:

First, Jesus and the apostles directed their exhortation about repentance not only to the ungodly, but also to the moral and religious people of their day. The words cited
were spoken first to Nicodemus, one of the finest characters we come in touch with in the New Testament. Both Jesus and John the Baptist directed their admonition about repentance to their religious contemporaries. They could scarcely reach any of the others.

In the second place, it is true that there are people who ever since the time of their baptism as infants have been at home in the Father’s household. They have remained in the grace of their baptism throughout their childhood years and up through the period of youth, until they entered into that conscious and direct relationship with God which adults have. However, they, too, have experienced conversion at one point or another during the transition from childhood to maturity.¹

But a large majority of the people who have been baptized in infancy leave the Father’s household, as the prodigal son did, and go into the far country. As soon as they reach the age when they determine their own inner life, they forsake the God of their childhood and their childhood faith. They do not care to live in fellowship with God, do not care to make an honest accounting of their sins each day before God. Consequently, they flee Him.

Let us notice that the Bible speaks of such people as having fallen from grace. They live a worldly and unrepentant life, away from God. They are children of the world, and not children of God, even though they have been baptized. The life that was given them in baptism they themselves have stifled and put to death. They are “dead in trespasses and sins,” as Scripture expresses it. Jesus says about the prodigal son when he returned: “This thy brother was dead, and is alive again” (Luke 15:32).

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We come back to our question: Why must such people repent, who have been such decent, useful, good, religious people?

I am happy to know that the question is not as difficult to answer as might appear at first glance. Neither great ability nor a great deal of knowledge is required. The only thing that is necessary is that we honestly examine our own minds. That will give us the answer as plainly as anyone could require it.

We must look at the mind. Jesus has shown us that it is our attitude that counts both in morality and in religion. It was at this point that Jesus threw His new and revolutionary light upon the moral history of mankind.

Jesus says that what makes an act good or bad, sinful or not sinful, is not the doing of it, nor its successful or unsuccessful outcome, but its motive, the impulse from which it springs.

Consequently, when Jesus passes judgment upon our religious relationships, He does not look only upon the religious acts which we perform: whether we go to church and to the communion table; whether we read, pray, do church work, strive against sin, etc. On the contrary, He looks first and foremost upon the heart from which these religious acts have issued. If our heart is right, He is exceedingly patient and longsuffering, even though our deeds are not as well done as they might be. But if our heart is wrong, none of our religious or moral acts have any value in His sight.

If you desire a few clear gleams of light into this view of Jesus with regard to religion and morality, read, for

instance, Matthew 5:21-26; 6:1-6; 6:16-18. These passages show that Jesus does not accept as a sop a few correct religious ceremonies or mere outwardly moral conduct. He cuts straight through outward things and goes to the very secret motives of the heart.

The first part of the gracious work of salvation which Christ accomplishes in sinful man is this; to show him what his mind is like in a way that can not be denied, and to help him to understand that his mind, his attitude, must be changed, and that from the bottom up.

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Let us now consider this briefly.

My reader, do you pray to God each day?

In reply many of my readers will no doubt say: “Yes, God be praised, I pray to God every day, some times many times a day! Otherwise I do not see how I could live my daily life.”

But, no doubt, some will answer: “No, I do not pray quite every day. Is that really necessary? Does the Bible say anything about praying every day? Does God expect that? Now when there is so much to do and so little help to be gotten? That old and sick people pray a great deal, even every day, is natural, because they do not neglect anything by so doing. But we who are well, do we not please God more and perform a greater service by working diligently and conscientiously rather than by being on our knees a great deal in prayer? Are not busy hands more pleasing to God than folded hands?”

I do not know whether or not you have any further reasons for not praying every day. Nearly twenty-five years have passed since I busied myself with such reasons, and it is very possible that I have forgotten some of them.

My friend, study your own attitude calmly and quietly and you will see at once what must be changed. You will see why repentance is necessary.

Your very attitude must be changed. You do not will to pray to God every day; that is the whole thing. Why not? Well, simply because you do not love God.

Without having the only thing which God desires to find in you, namely, love, you are striving to do what you know God ordinarily requires of Christians. And, like a lazy and unwilling schoolboy, you are trying to get a passing mark and yet do as little as possible. Furthermore, your unwillingness rises to new heights every time you realize that more morality and religion are required of you than you at present are able to produce.

And have you not in some quiet hour had a feeling that what you lacked as far as religion was concerned was the very essence of man’s relationship to God: the willing and grateful surrender of the heart to God.

This is what Jesus sees. And for that reason He says to you as well as to other sinful men: “You must repent. You must have a new heart. I must create within you what you lack more than anything else: love to God.”

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Now a word to you who pray each day.

He who sees in secret rejoices that you each day enter into your chamber and shut the door. But here, too, it is your attitude which is the important thing. What does He see in you?

Does He see a heart which longs to be alone with its beloved? A heart which can not begin the day with its tasks, its struggles and temptations, without first having a quiet hour with the Almighty Friend?

Or does He see a heart which is distracted by many thoughts and has very little time for prayer? You bend
the knee, and you fold your hands. You begin to speak with God. But you are soon through, because you have prayed that prayer so many times before. Meanwhile, your thoughts are occupied almost constantly with other things. However, you come to an end and say, Amen.

You have prayed! You feel easier. But your invisible Friend wonders, no doubt, what you wanted of Him, what you wanted Him to do for you. But you do not seem to realize that; you have already risen and are through praying.

Do you read the Bible daily?
In doing this, too, it is your attitude that God looks upon.

What did He see the last time you read the Bible? A heart which could not endure the thought of taking another step on the narrow and dangerous way of life without first being filled with the blessed, life-giving, regenerating word of God? Or a heart which distractedly and absent-mindedly turned to the same page in the Bible which you read last, read it again, perhaps finished the chapter, and then closed the Book and put it aside?

If somebody had asked you at the door of your room what the chapter was about, would it have been hard for you to answer?

When the good Lord sees this attitude, He says: This must be changed. All the forms are correct enough. Nothing is lacking in this respect, but the very heart of religion is absent. Now and then you have no doubt also felt, my religious friend, as you listlessly and unwillingly forced yourself to pray, that you do not love God. Your heart is not in it, no matter how regularly you do it from day to day.

The Lord looks upon our attitude, our mind.
What does He see in you? He sees an ocean of sin and iniquity, bottomless and boundless. Think for a moment how you would feel if you were transparent and people round about you could see at all times what sinful desires, fantasies, and thoughts were going through your mind. You would, no doubt, fall into despair, or hide yourself like a hermit in order that no one might see you.

But God knows your attitude by night as well as by day. And it is for this reason that He tells you with all the power of His love: You must turn, your attitude must be changed.

 Permit me to mention one thing more which shows the inner necessity of repentance.

 How have you reacted to the authoritative message of the Bible about repentance each time it reached your conscience? In general, unconverted people react in one of two ways.

 The one way out is to try to wriggle away from this truth. Men try to make themselves believe that things can not be as the Bible says they are. Is no one really saved except those who repent? Then there will be only a very few. Will God actually condemn all the rest? That is impossible, of course. Then He can not be Love. Neither can He be righteous if He condemns all these good honorable people merely because they have not been converted!

 In our day we are accustomed to decide things easily and expeditiously by a majority vote. Standing before the Lord with an overwhelming vote on their side, these people feel fairly safe and say: He can not condemn so many of us!

 Furthermore, there are many pastors who think that
conversion is unnecessary. Consequently, these folk take refuge beneath the pulpits of these preachers. There they will not be disturbed. If, in spite of everything, they do happen to hear a man who preaches the Biblical truth concerning repentance, they shield themselves fairly easily by saying to themselves and to others: These hell-fire preachers are a great curse to the church in our day. They scare people away from the Church and from Christianity. They should really not be allowed in the churches, but stay with the religious fanatics where they belong.

Thus they silence the voice of their own consciences, and persuade themselves to believe a lie.

The other way out, which unconverted people make use of when the Biblical message about repentance strikes them, is much more frequently used. Those who take this way do not try to explain away the truth of the Bible. They admit that repentance is necessary and that they themselves are not converted and, therefore, not saved. They acknowledge the truth, and say to themselves: I must be converted, and I will repent. There is really nothing that I am more in earnest about than that. But just now it is too inconvenient, too hard. I will, therefore, wait a while. Not long, only a little while, because then it will be so much easier.

My friend, have you had such thoughts? Many times, no doubt.

Have you not at times felt the insincerity of it? This is a case of inward guile which is very grave. And for that reason it is very dangerous.

You admit the truth of the Biblical admonition concerning repentance. But you will not repent. And in order to satisfy your conscience in the easiest possible way, you try to make yourself and God believe that you will repent, but not just now. This form of deception, practised by those who postpone their conversion, is very dangerous.

Jesus said on one occasion: Every one that heareth My voice shall have life (John 18:37). This means that every one who is called by Jesus and does not heed His call, that is, does not repent, is not of the truth. He is practising deception, both toward himself and toward God. If it were true that he desired to be converted, he would not postpone it a single moment. This lies in the very nature of conversion.

The Lord sees this mind in you. And for that reason He says that your mind must be changed. It must be changed immediately. A man can not practise such inner deception very long until he will be hopelessly lost.

This is according to the very nature and the very laws of spiritual life.

He who has a clear, strong conviction and does not follow it out becomes first a weak character; thereupon, he loses his character completely. That is, he gradually loses the power of following out his convictions. A man thus devoid of character is, as a rule, a man of many and great plans, strong desires, pleasant dreams, and beautiful words. But every time he tries to realize some of them, some little thing always happens to him; something invariably intervenes, usually something very insignificant. But it is always enough to prevent him from following out his convictions.

What then? He lays new plans, develops new longings, dreams new dreams, and speaks more new words. But again he has some little mishap; some little thing goes wrong just as he is about to realize his new plans.

The life of the soul can not endure this. After a
person thus misuses and does violence to the soul’s finest capacity, he loses all ability to have a conviction. By convictions we mean thoughts related so intimately to the life of our conscience that they in a definite way drive the will to translate these thoughts into action.

When a person loses the ability to have a conviction, all that remains to him is his dreams, longings, and thoughts, perhaps good thoughts too. But there is this about them that they can no longer drive the will to make a definite decision. Like Peer Gynt, they always avoid this.

Then that soul is lost, hopelessly lost, even though the man leads an outward life which is not at all out of the ordinary. On the contrary, such people as a rule lead conventional lives and resemble the average man very closely.

Such a soul is hopelessly lost because not even God can save him. He has no other way of saving men than by convincing them. Jesus, too, said that it is the work of the Spirit to “convict of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment” (John 16:8). And when a person has reached a point where God has no way of convicting him and causing him to heed His call unto conversion, then that person is eternally lost.

And we have it from Jesus’s own lips that when a person gets to that point, He gives him up. I am thinking now of His words in the parable of the barren fig tree (Luke 13:6-9). It is touching to hear Him intercede for the barren tree. When He prays that it be spared, it is because He can still point to some means whereby it may be saved. But He adds with solemn earnestness: if it does not bear fruit then, cut it down.

That is, a person is not given up until the Saviour has tried all the means at the disposal of His power and love. As long as all these means have not been tried, that person lives, because Jesus intercedes for him. He prays life into him.

But when everything has been tried and nothing has brought repentance, then that person is lost. Listen to this, modern man, with all your doubts and misgivings. It is Jesus who says so, whom you, too, acknowledge as the sole authority in eternal things. He says so clearly and unmistakably. Read His words in Matthew 25:41, 46; 12:31-32; 5:29-30; Luke 12:5.

And quit making use of that worn-out, meaningless argument that God would not be love if He suffered any one to be lost. I fear it will be a long time until we reach the stage when we will be in position to reproach Jesus for lack of love. You and I lack both truth and love. Jesus has both. He loved sinners so greatly that He died for us. And He loves us so much even now that He tells us the plain truth, even though it smart in the ears of modern weaklings.

He tells us truthfully that a person will be lost if he does not repent, that is, experience a change of heart and follow out the sacred convictions which He has received through the call of divine grace.

Observe: it is not because of lack of love that God suffers a person to be lost. It is because the mighty God Himself is impotent to help that soul which has destroyed itself and can no longer be saved. If you would like to learn a little of the love which Jesus has even for such people as have brought themselves into this spiritual state, read Luke 19:41-44. There we read that Jesus wept over the city which He knew had already hardened its heart and had nothing to look forward to but the judgment of God.
My friend, you who sit here today, weak, vacillating, slothful and unable to come to a decision, consider for a moment the necessary, unavoidable consequences of a life in sin, and it will be easier for you to see the sacred logic of repentance.

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I have not been engaged as an attorney for our Lord. He does not need us to defend Him. But I can not deny that I occasionally feel a desire to say a word about the reasonableness of Christianity.

Many in our day think that reason and Christianity are as incompatible as fire and water. Many even of those who are convinced that Christianity is necessary to salvation, think that it has very little to do with reason. I feel a desire, therefore, to point out the inner rationality and logic of Christianity. In this illogical and meaningless world of ours, I see at least one thing that is rational. And that is Christianity.

Permit me to say a word about this also while speaking on conversion.

When God makes repentance the necessary condition whereby we can be received into His kingdom, He does just what we would do under similar circumstances.

Some of my male readers are, no doubt, married or engaged to be married. Do you remember your courtship days? Perhaps it is a long time ago for some of you. But you will never forget the blissful moment in your life when you stammeringly told her that your heart was filled with love for her.

Suppose now that she had answered you as follows: “Yes, I shall try. I shall do the best I can. I will live with you and work with you, make our home cozy, and save all I can for ourselves and our children.

But—you must from the outset remember that I love somebody else. And you must allow me to continue to love him. I can not live without him.”

What would you have said if she had answered you thus? It certainly would not surprise me if you had been struck speechless. But if you were not and could still say something, you would undoubtedly have replied: “You misunderstand. I have not come to engage a hired girl. I am asking you to become my wife. I am not asking you for your assistance; I am asking you for your heart, as you have mine.”

Whether any woman would give such a reply or not, I do not know. One hears many strange things these days. This I do know, that the Heavenly Bridegroom often receives such answers when He courts His poor and sinful earthly bride.

Many answer Him: “Yes, I will serve you. I will go to church; I will attend the Lord’s Supper; I will read the Bible; I will pray daily; and I will participate in Christian work. I will honestly do all these things and do them as well as I can. But—you must excuse me—I love the world. And I can not think of living without permission to love it. But do not let that worry you. I will not be remiss in anything that you want done. And if I should ever forget anything, just call my attention to it, and I will at once apply myself with greater diligence to the exercise of my religious duties.”

Thus they answer Him, generation after generation, daughter after mother, and son after father. And, to climax it all, they think that this is a “reasonable” service, in contradistinction to that of the pietists and enthusiasts, who, they say, always overdo things and go to extremes in religion.
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But the hardest thing to change is his heart.
He prays every day, but, to be honest, he has to admit that he has no desire to do so. He also reads the Bible every day, but he has no desire for that either. He must force himself to do it. He likes to read the newspaper which lies beside the Bible. He reads it eagerly and reads it through every day. It interests him. But when he reads the Bible, he is often so absent in spirit that he reads along without really knowing what he is reading. He knows why: His heart is not in it.

He struggles against his sins every day. But, to be honest, he must admit that his love of sin is just as great as it ever was. In fact, he often wonders if his love of sin is not even greater than it was before his awakening.

He sees with disconcerting clearness that his attitude is unchanged, that his heart is not in his religion.

At first he is deeply and painfully grieved because of his sinful life and corrupt mind. Gradually, however, this fades away. He begins to look upon the whole affair with the attitude of a cold, indifferent spectator. He sees how corrupt and sinful he is, but it does not affect him. He has become hard-hearted and unemotional, very much as he was before he was awakened.

Besides, he has a feeling now which he can not recall ever having had before during his life as a worldling.
He feels a spirit of opposition amounting almost to rebellion against God, because God has apparently made the way of salvation too narrow and untraversable for frail mankind. This rebelliousness is due to the fact that the man is now inwardly convinced that God is absolutely right when He demands a changed mind, when He asks for the heart, and declines to accept a heartless relig-

When a man realizes that to repent means to yield his heart to God, then he is spiritually awake. And when he has been convinced that repentance means a change of heart, he has been projected into the greatest conflict which a man can experience.

It is more difficult to change one's heart than anything else. One may observe a marked change in one's outward life. One may pray and read the Bible each day, and struggle earnestly against one's old sinful habits. And even though one does not fully overcome them, nevertheless, a marked change will result. Others will notice it also. They may see such a great change in a man that they think he has been converted and treat him accordingly. This pleases him. He even feels good when old friends or acquaintances poke fun at him a little because of his godliness. It, too, indicates to him that a change of some kind must have taken place in his life.
iosity. At the same time this man is convinced of the fact that he can not change his own heart. He can not make himself hate sin. He can not compel himself to love God.

This makes him think that God is unreasonable, because His requirements are such that it is impossible for any human being to fulfill them.

This is one of Christianity’s great paradoxes, one which the casual onlooker scarcely sees, but which plunges the earnest, awakened soul into despair. He feels in his conscience that God can not lower His requirements one jot; and, at the same time, he also feels that it is absolutely impossible for him to comply with them.

The earnest soul then asks in despair: How can I be converted? This I shall now try to answer.

First, however, I would like to tell you what conversion is not. So great is the misunderstanding at this point that I deem it necessary to clarify things a little more.

A person can not convert himself, can not by the sheer force of his own will cut himself loose from his former life and his old sins. He who tells us to repent knows that we are slaves of sin (John 8:34) and that we are sold under sin (Romans 7:14). He knows that not even by the strongest exercise of will-power is it possible for us to rid ourselves of our sin. This He alone can do who is the Saviour of sinners. That is why He said in the first sermon He preached in His home town: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to . . . release the captives, and set at liberty them that are bruised” (Luke 4:8). To repent, therefore, you, a captive of sin, need only turn to Christ, reach out your shackled hands and feet to Him and say: “Lord, I shall never be released unless You release me from my sins.”

Whether you are held captive by open sins and everybody around you knows of your shame, or you are held by secret sins and only God and you know how sin has disgraced and humiliated you, He alone has the power to release you from the bonds of sin. He is the only one who can set at liberty the sin-bound slave and pour consolation into the troubled heart.

To repent is not to press forth by your own will-power a hatred of sin and a love of God. He who admonishes us to repent knows that this can not be done “by the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:1-3).

No sinful man can of himself bring forth a true change of heart. God must do that. We have spoken of this in a previous chapter where we dealt with the mysterious element in Christianity. God must by the miracle of regeneration bring forth in the sinner that new heart which loves God and abhors sin.

* * *

But then some one asks: What part does man have in bringing about this change of mind? Is it not we who are admonished to turn about and repent?

After what I have already said, this is comparatively easy to answer. We sinful men can not change our own hearts, begin to love God, and hate sin. What we have to do in conversion is something entirely different and exceedingly much more simple.

It is this: When the Spirit of God begins to convict us of sin, we are simply to permit ourselves to be convicted, and to acknowledge the truth of what the Spirit says concerning our outward life as well as our heart. When this is done, a great change has taken place in our hearts, a change which, it is to be noted, is a result of our own choice.
Formerly we would not permit ourselves to be convicted by the Spirit of God. We sought rather to avoid every serious reminder of sin in our consciences. Now we turn to God and tell Him the whole truth where we formerly tried to conceal ourselves from Him. Now we desire to be reconciled to God and have even the smallest sin forgiven; formerly we tried to avoid reconciliation, or else tried to compromise with God and our own consciences and get away as easily as possible.

What a change of heart!

Here comes the sinner, formerly thoughtless and frivolous or self-satisfied, now humiliated and crushed by the truth, poor and helpless. Behind him towers his sinful life, heaven-high in its accusations against him. Within him is a heart filled to overflowing with sin, a heart which loves sin and not God. And, worst of all, he is unable in his own strength to change this heart of his.

Here he comes, wavering, groping, shy and fearful, because he feels that he can not come to God in this condition. But Jesus beckons to him and says in His friendly way: "him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37). Then the sinner takes courage and goes directly to the Saviour, with all his sinfulness and the heart which he himself can not change.

He is saved.

For now, since Christ has died for sin, a sinner need do nothing more to be saved than to conceal or spare no sin, but lay everything before the Saviour. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1. John 1:9). "But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

BOOK SIX

The Choice

"Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction."—Matthew 7:13.
"No man can serve two masters."—Matthew 6:24.
"Whosoever therefore would be a friend of the world maketh himself an enemy of God."—James 4:4.

As I observe the people I meet, I notice that there are two distinct classes who have made a definite choice of the course they are pursuing in life.

They are the avowed believers and the avowedly ungodly.

Both of these classes live a life which shows that they have made a clear and definite choice.

But between these two groups is that great mass of human beings which has made no choice, which does not will to make any, and which is even afraid to choose.

It does not surprise me that they are afraid.

Everybody has a native fear of a great and decisive choice, that is, a choice which involves many and far-reaching consequences. There is something within us which seeks to avoid all choosing. We do not care to burn the bridges behind us. We want a way open for retreat in case too many difficulties should arise.

This fear naturally becomes twice as great when a person comes face to face with the most decisive choice.