"A word to honest doubters"
by his advice. Nor was it for the purpose of giving such advice that he had given the hint that I should have a conference with him.

In the course of a half minute or so he had made an end of his counselling. Then he turned and looked me straight in the eye with his own warm, tender eyes and said, after a very brief pause: "Will you not become a Christian, Hallesby?"

Those words and that moment I shall never forget, no matter how old I become.

Like lightning the thought flashed through me: It is true, I am a heathen! That day I received a mortal wound, which within a half year brought me to my knees before my crucified Saviour.

At the time I sought bravely to parry off the well-aimed blow. I summoned to the occasion all my doubts and intellectual difficulties. He listened quietly and patiently to everything I had with which to defend myself. I believe, too, that he answered some of the objections I raised against the intellectual crosses in the Christian faith. My recollection of that, however, is no longer very definite.

Then he suddenly broke off the whole conversation with these words: "Why force this? It will come; it will come!"

My young friends! Today I would send this question along to you. I would ask each one of you: Will you not become a Christian now?

I have now told you a little about why I became a Christian. When in my thoughts I dwell upon the in-calculable and unspeakable riches which have been showered upon me since I became a Christian, a warm desire burns in my soul: that you all may become Christians! Every one of you!

**BOOK FOUR**

The Mysterious Element in Christianity

ALL LIFE contains something through which our mind is unable to penetrate. It is this phase of life which we usually term the mysterious element in life.

The higher the form of life, the greater the element of mystery becomes and the greater becomes that realm of life through which our mind is unable to penetrate. Since Christianity is the highest form of life, it will not surprise us to find that in it we come in contact with the greatest of all mysteries.

In trying to speak briefly about the mysterious element in Christian life, I shall by no means endeavor to make the irrational rational, nor seek to explain the inexplicable. Permit me to concentrate our attention about the following points:

First, that there is a mysterious element in Christianity. Second, where does the mystery lie? And, third, how can this mysterious element be experienced?

Christianity has, from the very beginning, maintained that it possesses a life which is qualitatively different from all other forms of life.
This qualitative difference is brought out in various ways in the New Testament.

We read, for instance: “Wherefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature” (II. Corinthians 5:17). Here the apostle expresses the common and well known Christian truth that something qualitatively new has been created in every Christian. The same apostle even says that a new man has been created (Ephesians 4:24). Christians have a common conviction that they are the possessors of a new kind of life not found outside of Christianity; and in which no one can share unless he becomes a Christian.

We see in the New Testament that the impartation of this life, this new creation, is a fruit of the Messianic salvation. More closely defined, it is a fruit of that fundamental Messianic gift, the gift of the Spirit. It is the Messianic giving of the Spirit which mediates this new life.

Therefore, too, the apostle distinguishes sharply between the Spirit-born, the pneumatic man, and the non-Spirit-born, whom he calls the psychic or the natural man. That the apostle conceives of this difference as a qualitative one, a difference in kind, we see clearly from his words in I. Corinthians 2:14: “Now the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him, and he can not know them, because they are spiritually judged.”

Seen from this fundamentally apostolic viewpoint, it becomes clear to us why the New Testament writers used the strongest words which their language possessed to designate the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian. It is, they say, a difference as between life and death. “And you did He make alive, when ye were dead through your trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). Or: “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren” (I. John 3:14).

For this reason, too, salvation is called a raising up from the dead (Ephesians 2:6; 5:14).

In other contexts this qualitatively new thing is brought out by means of an even more graphic expression, namely, birth.

It is said of the Christians that they “are begotten of God” (I. John 3:9). And this “by the word of truth” (James 1:18), or “through the Gospel” (I. Corinthians 4:15). This birth is referred to as a birth number two, in Greek: palingenesia (Titus 3:5; I. Peter 1:3, 23).

This birth is different from our first birth, our natural birth. The reason for thus differentiating between them is to emphasize the fact that no one becomes a Christian through the natural birth.

The reason that the first birth can not mediate that unique life which is known as the Christian life is that the first birth is “of the flesh.” “That which is born of the flesh is flesh,” while only “that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).

* 

Here we come in contact with the mysterious element in Christianity. The Christian church, from the days of the apostles and down to our day, has recognized the Spirit-born life as the real secret of its existence.

The Scriptural thoughts cited above also show that the mysterious element in Christianity is most intimately bound up with the supernatural element in Christian life. Because the Christian life is supernatural in its origin, it is also supernatural in kind.

The Christian knows that his life has been touched by
God in a supernatural way, that is, in a way that natural morality and religion is not able to affect him and, therefore, in a way that no religion or system of morality can affect him.

Christians neither deny nor underestimate the value of other religious life. But they do maintain categorically and unequivocally that only the Christian religion imparts life in God, that is, that only through Christ can men be saved and enter into fellowship with God.

This is clearly stated in the New Testament in a number of passages. Jesus says: “No one cometh unto the Father but by Me” (John 14:6). Because “neither doth any one know the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27). And the apostle bears witness: “And in none other is there salvation: for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

This does not mean that it is in accordance with the Christian faith to say that other religions have no significance. On the contrary, in the last instance these, too, are from God and are intended as a preparation for the one saving religion. God has endowed man with a religious-disposition, “that they should seek God, if haply they might feel after Him and find Him” (Acts 17:27).

However, none of the non-Christian religions lead to fellowship with God. All of them, the more advanced as well as the more primitive, represent the natural man’s attempt to think, feel, and demand God and the eternal realities. They are important insofar as they incline men toward that “fulness of time” when God, after a preparation covering thousands of years, could meet the religious aspirations of man and, through the suffering and death of His Son for man’s sins, afford man access, not only to surmise, postulate, and worship God, but to live with God and to be received into fellowship with Him.

The mysterious element in Christianity is, therefore, this, that the Christian is certain that he possesses that life in God of which other religions have only a more or less vague idea, but to which none of them have attained. The Christian is happy in the assurance that his religiosity does not consist in religious self-exertion, stretching himself upward toward a holy and distant God on high. The secret of his religion is that God himself has come down to him, has laid hold on him and lifted him into a most intimate and blessed fellowship with Himself.

Here, therefore, we touch the vital mystery in Christianity, that which makes a man a Christian, which transforms his religiosity into Christianity.

*

But here, too, we come in contact with Christianity’s worst stumbling block, its hardest saying.

From the very beginning it has been so. Allow me at this point to adduce the account of the first man who felt this stumbling block:

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came unto Him by night and said unto Him, Rabbi, we know that Thou art a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that Thou doest, except God be with him.

“Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except one be born anew, he can not see the kingdom of God.

“Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”
“Jesus answered, Verily, verily I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and of the Spirit, he can not enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born anew” (John 3:1-7).

This simple little account shows us clearly how the statement concerning the new birth and the new life threw the pious and noble Nicodemus completely out of equilibrium. We see this most clearly from the question he asked as to whether regeneration was to take place by his entering a second time into his mother’s womb and being born again. This question was either foolish or impudent. In either event it shows that Nicodemus had lost his mental poise.

Let us try to put ourselves in his place and see how it must have affected Nicodemus.

He was a Jew. The average Jew awaited the Messiah and the establishment of the kingdom of God, at which time God would set free his oppressed people and show all the world that He is God and there is none beside Him. Israel was to become a world-ruling people; Jerusalem, the capital city of the world. The Gentiles were to be hewers of wood and drawers of water in this glorious and mighty kingdom. That the people of Israel were to be citizens of this kingdom was self-evident, of that every Israelite was firmly convinced. Publicans and brazen sinners, who boldly disobeyed the revealed will of God, were, of course, not to be admitted. They were to be given their portion with the Gentiles when the Messianic judgment was consummated.

And now Jesus says that no one, without exception, can enter the kingdom of God except he be born again!

The fact that one belongs to the house of Israel does not exempt him!

Nicodemus was not only an ordinary Jew. He was a Pharisee. That means that he belonged to that group in Israel which took its religion most seriously. It is true, as Jesus says, that the Pharisaic party of His day had fallen deeply both morally and religiously, and he reproved the Pharisees strongly for their hypocrisy; but Jesus has never said that all the Pharisees were hypocrites. From what we read in the New Testament about Nicodemus we can understand that he was no hypocrite, but, on the contrary, one of the noblest figures we meet in the religious life of that time.

Furthermore, Nicodemus was highly respected within the Pharisaic party. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, in truth a select company.

He is now told by Jesus that it does not help him that he is a Jew and a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin of the chosen people. He can gain entrance into the kingdom of God only by being born anew.

That was what was so unintelligible and such a stumbling-block to Nicodemus.

Permit a little Biblical plentuy.

Suppose that Jesus had answered Nicodemus about as follows: “You have made a good beginning. You take your membership in the chosen people of God seriously, submitting to the holy law of God and living according to it in all things, the small as well as the great.

“Now you come to me and ask me if there is anything more that you must do in order to inherit eternal life. To this I would say: You pray three times each day. That is well. But it would be still better if you prayed six times each day.
"You give a tithe of all your earnings. That is well, because that is exactly what the law requires. But since you ask my advice, I would say: Give twice as much.

"You fast twice a week. That is well, for by so doing you do more than the law requires. My advice, however, would be that henceforth you fast four times a week. That will rightly prepare your heart for the great kingdom age which we can look for at any moment now."

Had Jesus answered Nicodemus thus, I can imagine that the latter would have gone home towards morning happy and contented, saying to himself: "This remarkable rabbi has a deep insight into everything. He is right also in this. I will begin even today to follow his good advice."

But when Jesus broke off his whole line of Jewish thinking about the law and the works of the law and told him that he would have to be born anew, then this good, pious man balked.

*

Since that night this has been repeated again and again down through the centuries.

No aspect of Christianity is more unintelligible and offensive to the natural man than the truth concerning the new birth. This soon becomes apparent to every one who speaks with his fellow men about these things.

In these days it is not easy to get people to talk about religion. It is not considered proper to speak about such things. It is proper and a sign of culture to speak about the weather or one's health, the latest betrothals or deaths, and the latest books or theatrical productions.

But suppose that we should succeed in engaging an ordinary, average, good, worldly person in religious conversation and suppose that we should speak to him in the following manner: "It seems to me that you ought to take your religion a little more seriously. You scarcely ever attend the house of worship. You must not continue in this way. Do come and hear the Word of God."

I think that a large number of these fine, worldly people would understand us and accept our well-meant little exhortation with good grace. They might even add: "Yes, you are right. I am not doing as well in this respect as I formerly did. And at times I have not felt just right about it. My conscience has often bothered me on Sunday mornings while I sat home reading the newspapers. I will promise you that I will go to church."

On receiving such a friendly reply, we might perhaps take courage and say a little more: "You understand, of course, that it is not only a question of hearing the word; you must also be a doer of the word. You must begin to struggle more earnestly against your old, besetting sins. You take the name of God in vain every now and then. I have heard you do it a number of times this very day."

I can imagine that many of these good-natured, worldly people would answer: "Yes, you are right also in this. I must struggle more earnestly against my besetting sins. Have you really heard me take the name of God in vain? I thought I had gotten over that. However, now I am honestly going to quit."

After which we would perhaps get courage enough to say even a little more: "That is not all, either. You know that you are living only for yourself and family. You are no doubt a good provider and kind to the members of your household. But you know that it is not right to live such a selfish life as you are living. You must do a little for others also. You must take part in
Christian work, give to home and foreign missions, and support all good Christian enterprises in general.”

Many of these good-natured, worldly people would admit also this: “You are no doubt in the right. I am too busy with myself and my own interests. But I shall try to be different in this respect from now on.”

Likely that is the answer many a man would give. It is not at all unlikely that one of them would take out his pocketbook and say: “Here are fifty dollars. I can not give more today. But I shall in the future contribute more to these causes than I have been doing in the past. Would you be kind enough to remind me of this from time to time? I forget so easily.”

Most worldly people would understand a conversation of that kind. A large number of them would also try to act accordingly, as far as they could.

But when we tell them that they must be born again, they balk exactly as Nicodemus did nineteen hundred years ago. They become irritated and even offended. They look upon this as something unreasonable. They say to themselves, and many of them say it also to others: “Can God require a person to do more than the best he can, namely, hear God’s word, read, pray, struggle against one’s besetting sins, and take part in and contribute toward Christian enterprises?”

Here we have the reason why these people approve of pastors who speak sternly about sin. After all, there are very few people in our country who like a worldly pastor, one who lets everything pass and who dishes out a milky mixture containing neither thought nor seriousness. People like those pastors who speak sternly and appealingly, best of all perhaps when the tears trickle down the cheeks of both the speaker and the listeners. Note well that this is the case only as long as the pastor speaks sternly and yet avoids mentioning conversion and the new birth, avoids making the Biblical distinction between regenerate and unregenerate men.

If he does that, people will, as a rule, have a large number of faults to find with the pastor. Of course, they never intimate that they are criticizing him because he speaks of conversion and regeneration. It would sound a little unreasonable to belittle him because he speaks the plain word of God. Instead they bring up many other things about the pastor as a reason for not caring to hear him.

I can well understand that men who believe that it is possible to change and improve upon Christianity feel called upon to cut away these words about the new birth. It certainly is one of the greatest intellectual crosses in Christianity. They think that it will be easier to spread Christianity among the masses of the people if they remove this ancient and unreasonable idea.

However, that is not so easily done.

The essence of the matter is this: Christianity can not be changed. It is a fact. And it is well known that facts can not be altered, even though some people would like to do so and imagine that they are intellectually qualified to make the changes.

The great fact of Christianity is Jesus Christ as He is given us of God and proclaimed in the New Testament writings. And this fact can not, God be praised, be changed. A part of this fact is also the statement concerning the new birth. This truth will follow the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the end of time.

*  

This is one of the points at which Christianity deviates
most sharply from all other religions and systems of morality. Take them all, the new as well as the old, theosophy, spiritism, anthroposophy, sufism—and what all they call these Oriental cults. And take the newest religious innovations which hail from those two countries which excel in inventions of all kinds: Germany and America. Take rationalism, liberal theology, Christian Science and Russelism.

No matter how they may differ, they have one thing in common: they believe in once-born religiosity only. They admit that man is in a sense sinful, but deny that he is wicked. And they all tell us that eventually man will become good. Do good and you will become perfectly good.

Christianity occupies a unique position with respect to all these cults. It says: You are wicked. You can not do anything that is good before you yourself have become good. For it is the attitude of our heart which makes an act good or bad.

Jesus says expressly that He does not expect to gather figs from thorns. An evil tree can not bring forth good fruit. That is why he told Nicodemus that he must be born again and be given that new heart which is necessary in order to do good deeds and speak good words.

We can say, therefore, that this statement concerning the new birth is the greatest moral cross which has been put before the world, the highest moral ideal. It deals with the very foundation of moral life, the attitude of the heart. It is not satisfied with acts that are outwardly correct or words that sound well. It inquire concern- ing the attitude of the heart, the source of all our sayings and doings. If the attitude of the heart is not right, Christ calls an act evil, even though it may appear to be both pious and self-sacrificing.

But at the same time, this passage concerning the new birth is the most beautiful Gospel message which a sinner can hear. If we have come to realize that our heart is evil and if we have found that we ourselves can not change this wicked heart of ours, then it is indeed a beautiful message which is proclaimed to us when we are told that we are to receive a new heart, receive it as a gift from God.

Furthermore, we are to receive our new spiritual life in the same way in which we received the gift of natural life. It was given to us by others, without our moving a finger. Thus we are also to receive our new spiritual life by birth, by a new birth. God promises to put this new life into our hearts.

That was what Jesus wanted to tell Nicodemus that night long ago. And that is what He wants to tell all poor and helpless sinners today.

At this point there is an exceedingly great amount of misunderstanding.

It is, perhaps, no exaggeration to say that in this world of misunderstandings no one has been as terribly misunderstood as God. And God has not been misunderstood so badly on any point as that which deals with the question of becoming a Christian. Indeed, the misunderstanding here is greater than most people suspect.

If we should ask ordinary, average worldly people what it means to become a Christian, their answers would vary somewhat as to form, but the substance would be the same and would be about as follows:

"Well, this is what happens. A man becomes restless and unhappy and can no longer be glad and enjoy life, due either to sickness, sorrow, poverty, or old age. This
inner unrest compels him to seek peace with God. And the God to whose will he must conform his life is a severe and exacting Lord. The least He requires is this:

“You must quit practically everything from which you derive any pleasure, such as dancing, drinking, card-playing, the theater, and the society of congenial and interesting people if these people are worldly. And then you must begin to do things which you do not care to do at all. You must go to church and hear sermons which have a beginning but scarcely an ending. You must read the Bible, which is, of course, a good book, but exceedingly tiresome, because you have already heard everything that it contains. You must pray to God every day, yea, several times a day if the Lord is to be satisfied. You must begin to associate with these believers or ‘Bible readers,’ who, as a rule, are good people but helplessly stupid, narrow, and tiresome. For they must, of course, always sing and read and pray when they get together. And you can never get a sensible word out of them about ordinary things.”

That is, I believe, about the answer you would get.

I am prepared to hear some one raise the objection that I have exaggerated the matter somewhat.

But this is no exaggeration. Every worldly minded person is a proof of what I have said. They will not repent, even though most of them are convinced that they must change from the life they are now living.

Why will they not repent?

Simply because they look upon Christianity as an evil, a necessary evil to be sure, but, at all events, an evil, which should be avoided as long as possible. Therefore they postpone their conversion as long as they possibly dare.

They would rather “enjoy life,” as they say, while they live. Then when they become ill or reach old age, have an accounting with God, receive the Sacrament of the Altar, die a nice death, have a beautiful funeral sermon preached by the pastor, and enter directly into eternal bliss.

Most people look upon such a life as the ideal, the best way of making the most of life’s opportunities. Their lives prove it.

To them Christianity is an onerous burden, a yoke beneath which they must bend in order to satisfy the Lord. Here we are at the very core of the misunderstanding.

In days past believers were called hypocrites, without qualification and without exception. It was taken for granted that believers were inwardly exactly like other people, with no desire to read or speak about God or pray to Him. It was also assumed that the believers retained precisely the same desire as they formerly did toward a worldly and sinful life. The only difference, therefore, was this, that the believers pretended to be better than others by feigning a desire for God which they did not have and an aversion for sin which they likewise did not have.

Nowadays there are not so many worldly people who say this as openly as they said it in days past. But that they still think it, is shown by their fear of becoming Christians. They look upon earnest, vital Christianity as a heavy yoke, as an unnatural life, in which one must stifle life’s natural desire for happiness, and live a life in which neither head nor heart can enjoy the things they are supposed to enjoy.

I have read about a terrible instrument of torture
known as the Spanish coat. It resembled a coat and was put on the wretched victim in order to compel him to renounce his faith. The coat was made so that it could be screwed together tighter and tighter. If the victim refused to renounce his faith, his tormentors would keep on applying the screws until life was screwed out of the wretched man.

That was terrible, indeed. But if Christianity was what the ordinary man thinks it is and as I have just described it, it would be an even more terrible instrument of torture, a Spanish coat, by means of which all natural human life would be pressed out of people. And think of never being able to get rid of it, but to be compelled to endure it for a life time!

How strange that people can think such thoughts about God! He who so loved the fallen race of men that He left glory and became a man! And as a man He suffered through thirty-three long years for our sake, until He on the cross had given His last drop of blood. That He should do anything so gruesome toward the poor children of men!

If only ignorant people had such ideas, the whole thing would be easier to understand. But that is the way many people think who otherwise exercise sound and practical judgment. That is what makes the thing so unintelligible. It shows that this line of thinking has originated in the nether regions and comes from him who is the sworn enemy of both God and man.

*  

However, the religious life described above never has been true Christianity, although one runs across it now and then even yet. It is a common imitation of real Christianity. People do not care to pay the price of true Christianity. It can not be had except through repentance and the new birth, which is exactly what people desire to avoid. But they do want to be considered Christians. So they try in their own strength to read the Bible, pray, and go to church. Likewise, they force themselves to renounce the things which they see believers renounce.

Naturally this becomes a hard, onerous life, full of compulsion and fear and without inner joy and willingness of spirit. If a child grows up in a home where such an imitation of Christianity as this blights not only the spiritual life of the parents but also the home atmosphere, it is easy to understand how such a child may come to cherish a deep aversion for and hatred of Christianity.

In case this book has fallen into the hands of such a person, permit me to say: You are entirely mistaken in believing that that is Christianity. I can, of course, account for your mistaken viewpoint; you have perhaps not had an opportunity to observe true Christianity at close range. Consequently, you have not had the opportunity of making comparisons. As a result you have taken what you have seen for what it was pretended to be, namely, true Christianity. But it was not.

It was, on the contrary, an unregenerate man’s attempt to serve God with the old, unwilling heart. Such a worship of God is as diametrically opposed to Christianity as it is possible to find. It is a worship of God which lacks that inner attitude of heart which is the vital mystery in Christianity and which gives the Christian’s relationship to God its essential truthfulness and its joy.

You can become a Christian only by a divine miracle. Jesus calls this miracle the new birth. By that is meant the supernatural impartation of that life which is God’s
life, that life which is holy. That life we did not receive at our physical birth, for the reason that the human race through the fall has lost vital connection with God.

This supramundane or heavenly life was brought to our earth again by God through His Son. Now all who hear the Gospel may share in it, if they will. But to do so they must experience the second birth.

This miracle consists in this: God creates us new within. He creates within us a new heart. We again rejoice in God and in the will of God. The moral commandments are no longer a demand upon conscience which we would prefer not to heed or at best submit to unwillingly, but have become the law and delight of life, a law which we with an inner desire and joy seek to fulfill.

This is the miracle about which I should like to speak briefly.

I know, of course, that no man can understand a miracle and can not, therefore, explain it. And that is not what I have in mind. But I would like to speak briefly about the experiences we have when God performs the miracle of the new birth in our hearts.

Behold the sinner standing before God. He has seen the condition of his own heart, and knows from experience that he does not love God and does not hate sin. He has also tried hard to convert himself. That means that he has tried to change his own heart; for conversion is, of course, a change of heart. In this he has not been successful.

With all the energy of his soul he has tried to make himself love God. But, honest as he is, he must admit that he is tired of reading the Bible, although he forces himself to do it every day. He is also compelled to admit that he has no desire to pray, although he prays every day, because he knows that without prayer all is lost.

The Mysterious Element in Christianity

He is compelled to admit, furthermore, that he loves sin. In truth, he says to himself, I wonder if there is a single sin which I do not love if I could only commit it without incurring its harmful consequences.

He has now reached the point where he is at a loss to know what to do. Then in despair, but with unimpeachable honesty, he tells the whole dreadful truth to God: “Dear God, thou seest that I love sin and that I am unable to overcome this sinful love. And Thou seest that I do not love Thee. I tremble when Thou art near. And I am indifferent toward Thee when Thou art far away. I can not change this. I am eternally lost if Thou dost not help me.”

Then the miracle takes place.

God lifts this sinful wretch up from the mire and washes him white in His own blood. Permit me to use the rich and picturesque figures of the Bible. He opens the book of heaven and strikes out all the sins which are written there, the one after the other. He casts them behind His back into the depths of the sea, to remember them no more. Then He opens the book of life and enters the sinner’s name among those of all the other children of God.

Then He takes the trembling soul and lifts him into His lap, folds His eternal arms about him, and whispers into his aching, anxious soul: “You are My child now. Be not afraid. Once there was a reason for your fear and trembling, but not now. You are dead unto sin. And I live that I may help you in life, in death, and in judgment. My grace is sufficient for thee. You need nothing else. I am your Friend and Protector.”

The bewildered sinner can not grasp or comprehend this at once. He sits in the lap of God and weeps bitter
tears. Now and then he sees a few gleams of light, but most of the time all is dark to his inner eye. However, it is true of him as it was of Asaph: “My flesh and my heart faieth; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:26). No matter what may come, he clings to God in earnest prayer and confession.

Then it comes to pass.

Light from above falls into the darkness of his soul. He sees everything in the full light of heaven. Jesus has died for his sins. He is a child of God. He does not need anything besides his Saviour. It is as though his heart would burst with joy! He gives thanks, he sings praises and songs of joy to the wonderful God who saves sinners.

Now no one needs to tell him to love God. His soul is full of grateful love to God. Spiritually speaking, he nestles himself close up to God, even as a little child throws its arms about its mother’s neck upon her return from a long, long journey.

* * *

Here we are about as close to the heart of the mysterious element in Christianity as it is possible to get.

To be a Christian means to have the great privilege of living one’s life close to the heart of God. God Himself has, through the new birth, lifted us up to this new plane of life. And we ask triumphantly: Is it difficult to love Him when we know Him so well?

Something new has now entered your heart. You love God. That is the new, the decisive thing. That was what was lacking before. Then you were afraid of God and tried to make yourself love Him. Or you were indifferent toward Him and tried to force yourself to respect Him so much that you would do as He commanded.

Now you are happy in God. You do not have to force yourself to seek Him in prayer or to read His Word. On the contrary, your most delightful hours are spent in so doing. You love the secret chamber. You almost steal away from people to be alone and undisturbed with God. You feel that you are in your proper element when you are with God. Like the fish in water.

It is the same mysterious element which we find in other spheres of life. At the home of a friend you meet a beautiful little child. You and the child become intimate, and you two prattle and play most gleefully. You and the little one agree that the child is to go home with you. To this the child readily consents. Now you two have a real good time. You give the child goodies and candy, and you play together.

But after a little while the child grows very quiet. You offer it some more candy. All is well again. But soon the little one stops abruptly and cries out: “Where is my mother? I want to go to my mother!” It would not help now to have a whole house full of candy. The child wants to go to its mother, even though there may not be a single piece of candy at home.

Why? Because the child was born of its mother to be with its mother. That is the whole secret. So it is with every one who is born of God. He is born unto God to be with God. He feels happy when he is where God is, even though he can not always be speaking with Him. Just like the little child; the child can not be talking to its mother all the time, even though it is adept at prattling and thinking out loud.

It is the experience of God which is the real heart and secret of Christianity. As long as one merely thinks about God, postulates God, longs for and reaches out
Why I Am a Christian

after God, one's relationship to God will, in the main, be a chaos of theoretical and practical problems. From the moment, however, that a man experiences God, all this is entirely changed. Paul has expressed it in these words: "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17.)

We might say that this lies in the very nature of the case. We are created to experience God and to live our lives in the presence of God. And God is such that if we will but experience Him, everything else in our life will become properly orientated. For our hearts have been made right, which gives us the necessary prerequisite for taking the right attitude in all of life's relationships.

God is such that He takes captive and lays hold on our heart and thus binds us unto Himself. We become occupied with Him instead of with ourselves. When His love for us becomes something that we have not only read or heard or talked of, but something we have experienced, it fills our soul and gives it a new content. We also enter into a new relationship toward sin.

* * *

God Himself has no other means of overcoming our sin than to give us Christ. By accepting and experiencing Christ we receive the antidote which overcomes the poison of sin within us. If we have experienced Christ as our Saviour and have been given to see that we have in Him the gracious forgiveness of all sins, then we have that grateful love toward Him which overcomes our sin from within.

We begin to notice that it pains us to do anything against Him. Just as a child has no better safeguard against disobedience than its love of father and mother, so love of God becomes the believer's best safeguard against temptation.

With the new birth God puts into our heart a new moral power, which enables us to wage warfare in a new way against our old sins. The worldly man, too, struggles against sin; but in a worldly way. That is, he strives against sin because of the unpleasant and unprofitable consequences of sin. Sin itself he loves, but he must discipline himself into abstaining from it, because by sinning he brings injury upon himself.

With the new birth this too is changed. We now hate sin itself. The fact that our sin is against God is now the worst thing about it.

Understand me rightly. I do not mean that the regenerate man is sinless. As long as we live here on earth "the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh," as the apostle says (Galatians 5:17). The believer will, consequently, also after the new birth, experience a lack of desire for the Word and for prayer and an unwillingness to do the will of God. He will also have the painful experience of lusting after sin.

But he knows the apostle's comforting words to all earnest souls: "if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 2:1-2). And not only that, he knows, too, that the only way of overcoming sin is to experience anew the love of God in his heart. Therefore, he goes directly to his Saviour and tells Him the truth, that he does not love God, but sin. He asks Him out of sheer mercy alone to take him back to His heart and warm his lukewarm soul through and through with His wonderful love.
This is the real secret of sanctification, which does not come to pass by the will of the flesh, nor by the will of man, but by God alone. More definitely expressed, it is only the experience of God which can set the believer right again with respect to sin, when he through unfaithfulness or disobedience has fallen back into his old sinful ways.

The apostle of love exclaims: “Behold what manner of love the father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God” (I John 3:1).

Let us for a moment dwell upon that grace of God which saves us into childhood with Him. He does not want us as slaves, who tremble at their master’s voice and who carry out even the least of His commands unwillingly. Nay, He transforms His former enemies into friends. He delivers us from the spirit of bondage and gives us the spirit of adoption whereby we cry: “Abba, Father!” and by which we experience love’s innermost desire: to ascertain and to carry out the will of the loved one.

What grace from God that He saves us in this manner! Christianity brings inward deliverance and joy to man. The Christian life is, therefore, the truest and best life that a man can live.

Let us consider somewhat more in detail this gracious aspect of God’s salvation.

By His tender love He woos us away from our sin and our old life. Can you think of anything more beautiful! With the glow of love He melts the chains which bind us to sin. With His unfathomable love He beckons us to cast ourselves directly into His open arms. And with the same love He gives us courage to tell Him the truth and confess everything to Him.

The Mysterious Element in Christianity

From now on He can begin to reveal to us the full glory of the invisible world. Lovingly He beckons us to enter farther and farther into it. And the more we experience in this divine realm, the easier it becomes for us to renounce sin and the more scrupulous we become with regard to all evil. We experience a new and rich life, which enables us willingly and gladly to surrender the old life. “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God!”

* 

This vital element of mystery in Christianity has analogies in other realms of life. A little boy sits on the floor playing with his toys, as occupied as if there was nothing else in this world but his little boy-doll. If you take the doll away from him, he will cry and be very sorrowful. To him it seems as though you have taken his very life away from him.

But wait awhile, until he becomes twelve or fifteen years of age, for instance. Now give him his old plaything, and you will see him blush to the tip of his hair and throw it as far away as he can. What has happened? He has outgrown his toys, of course. He has reached a new plane of life, where he neither needs nor cares for them. Other things interest him now and occupy him even more thoroughly than his playthings formerly did.

The man who has been born again has also reached a new plane of life: the life of God, the holy life. Much of that which he formerly deemed indispensable, he has no use for any longer. He has a new purpose in life. His life has been filled with a new content. His interests lie on a different plane. For that reason, too, many things which formerly irritated him and even offended
him, have now become his life and joy. Let me illustrate by an example close at hand.

This man's daily work now becomes new to him. Before this, it had been a burden, as a rule. It was especially difficult to practise fidelity toward it. He yielded usually to the temptation of getting out of his day's work as easily as possible. Often he caught himself stealing time and watching the clock. A remarkable change has occurred. In living his life as before God, his daily work, too, has taken on a different aspect. He feels intuitively that he is working for God even when he is doing the most menial kind of work.

This exalts his labors and fills his working hours with something unspeakable. Often he can be so happy in the midst of his daily work that he experiences a joy fully as rich as that which he finds in the secret chamber or in the sanctuary.

In the next place, it makes him a more capable and a more industrious worker. The more he lives his life as before God, the less he feels tempted to steal time and to work only when watched. And the happier he is in his work, the better work he does.

Little thought is given to this phase of Christianity in our day. The New Testament, however, emphasizes strongly this new element which enters into a person's daily work when he becomes a Christian. Luther, with his clear, spiritual vision, uncovered again also this pearl of the Christian faith.

Few things, indeed, in a Christian's life are of greater importance than this: to have one's daily work lifted up and put upon a higher plane.

In our day but few seem to succeed in this. Most people look upon their daily work as a burden. This burden becomes still more onerous when they imagine that it prevents them from "sacrificing themselves" for God and serving Him. They think that the only work they can do for God is the work they do outside of their secular calling, such as taking part in religious meetings, in societies, in singing, in testifying, in preaching, and in board and committee meetings of various kinds.

Such work is, of course, both good and necessary. There must always be some who stand ready to do these things in the kingdom of God. The misunderstanding arises, however, when people think that these are the most important and even the only work that can be done for God. On the contrary, of all the work we do for God first and foremost in importance must at all times be the doing of our daily tasks as before Him. In this way we are to "let our light shine before men; that they may see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

Not until then have we grasped the significance of real spiritual service, which, according to Paul, consists in "presenting our bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Romans 12:1).

That this service is of utmost importance in promoting the kingdom of God in our homes, in our communities, and in our whole country, I shall not discuss in detail at this point. Permit me, however, to point out how important it is to the believer himself to have his workaday life lifted up to this new plane.

Every normal person spends the greater part of his day at work. If his work is a burden to him, possibly even altogether distasteful to him, anyone can understand what an unhappy life his must be from day to day. We do not become victorious and happy Christians until we do our
work as before God, until we experience the nearness of God in our daily tasks. Not until then does our whole life become a service, as God intended it to be.

* 

Through the experience of God gained in the new birth, the difficult question of the Christian's relation to the world is also solved.

Is it sin to dance, to play cards, to attend the theater, or to be present at worldly functions? These questions often become the starting point of heated discussions. And it is difficult to arrive at any definite conclusion, because so much can be said both for and against them.

We will never get a clear and definite answer to these questions as long as the questions themselves are stated wrong. When the questions are put in the aforementioned way, they arise, as a rule, from an erroneous way of thinking and from a wrong attitude toward Christ.

An illustration. Two young people love each other and are living for each other. Suppose that some day the young man should ask his betrothed if it would be wrong for him to flirt a little with other young women. Only a little, he adds, hoping to placate both his betrothed and his own conscience. To this we would all say unhesitatingly: There is something wrong with that young man. The mere fact that he asks a question like that is enough to show that his love for his betrothed is gone. For one who is in love does not ask himself how much attention he can give to other girls. He asks rather: How can I best serve her whom I love and make her happy?

Likewise, he who has had the love of God shed abroad in his heart and no longer has that slavish fear of God which desires to do His will as little as possible, but has become a happy child of God, he does not ask: How far dare I venture out toward those things which are dangerous or forbidden without losing the favor of God? Nay, he turns the question right around: How can I best honor, please and serve my precious Saviour?

Can I honor and serve my Saviour by dancing and playing cards? That is the real question, in this connection, for every earnest disciple of Jesus.

He who can answer yes to this question before the face of the Lord, he will have to try to serve his Saviour at the card table and in the dance hall. He who must answer no to this question and say: so far from serving my Lord and being a blessing to my fellow men in such surroundings, I feel, on the contrary, that I would be injuring myself and the most precious part of my life by so doing, he must desist from dancing and card playing, etc., even though friends and acquaintances assure him that it is not in the least sinful or dangerous. He will refrain, even though he gains the reputation of being narrow-minded and pietistic. To him it is more important to serve his Saviour than to please men.

This is true Christian liberty: "All things are lawful for me; but not all things are expedient. All things are lawful for me; but I will not be brought under the power of any" (I Corinthians 6:12). "All things are lawful, but not all things edify" (I Corinthians 10:23). "For though I was free from all men, I brought myself under bondage to all, that I might gain the more." "And I do all things for the Gospel's sake, that I might be a joint partaker thereof." "I buffet my body and bring it into bondage: lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected" (I Corinthians 9:19, 23, 27).
Have you life in God?
You may answer perhaps: "I was baptized as a child. I was instructed in the Christian faith. I pray and I read the word of God. I go to church and do church work as well as I can in my humble way."

All of which is good and well. But that is not what I am asking you. I am asking you if you have life in God, that is, if it is love which brings you to God, if you are living the free, joyous, and blessed life of a child of God? Or is it the onerous, unwilling life of the unregenerate heart that you are living with God?

Examine yourself. Be earnest. Your eternal destiny hinges upon the answer you give to this question.

Remember the plain words of Jesus: "Except one be born anew, he can not see the kingdom of God." "That which is born of the flesh is flesh."

Have you experienced what the apostle speaks of when he says: "Wherefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new?"

Does your moral and religious life consist of what Scripture calls "dead works," that is, works which are good and proper, outwardly considered, but which do not spring naturally and vitally from a saved and grateful heart?

At this point many deceive themselves.

Today this form of self-deception lies closer at hand than has been the case for the last two generations. True, there has been awakened again a wide-spread interest in things religious after the religiously lean years of materialism. But there are too many who are satisfied with religiosity, being unwilling to press on through the narrow gate to real Christianity. They are content with seek-

ing after God instead of persevering until they find and experience Him.

The temptation to do this is very great for many, because up to this time they have lived very far away even from religiosity. They think that because there has been somewhat of a change in their inner as well as in their outward life, therefore they have become Christians. The religious longings which they now experience and the religious activity to which they now feel impelled, such as prayer, reading, meditation, and Christian work, seem to them to constitute such a great change of heart that they think they have experienced Christian conversion.

For many it is very easy to make this mistake, because they are ignorant of what true Christianity is. This ignorance is quite general and very profound, especially among the higher classes of society. In very recent times this ignorance seems to have spread rapidly also among large numbers of the laboring classes.

I ask, therefore, again: Have you experienced the miracle of the new life? Have you been lifted by God Himself into a new relationship with Him? Or does your religion consist in worshipping and serving God with your old, obdurate and unwilling heart? Is your ethical life a requirement forced upon you by your conscience, a demand which you would prefer to ignore and to which you submit unwillingly at best; or has it by the divine miracle of regeneration become your life and your delight?

*

Perhaps some one of my readers is saying to himself: "I have not experienced this new creation. My religious life is a heavy, burdensome duty, which I often neglect and which I must force myself to perform. Often I do
Why I Am a Christian

it in an absent-minded and spiritless manner. Dead works! That is without doubt the right name for my Christianity.

How can I get life in God?
What must be done on my part in order that God may perform this miracle within me?"

My friend, it is not difficult to tell you what you must do. You have nothing to do but to turn to your Saviour and confess to Him that you love sin and not God, and ask Him to perform the miracle in your heart.

The moment you truly go to God in this way, He will perform the miracle of regeneration within you.

I am prepared to hear somebody say: "I have already done this some time ago. But I did not experience what you have described as the effect of divine regeneration. I have not felt the nearness of God of which you speak. Not the joy and bliss. Nor the peace and inward calm. Nor the dislike for sin. Nor the desire to do God's will. So far I have experienced practically nothing but restlessness and fear, now and then exceedingly great distress. Between times I have had a few brief periods of calm.

What is the matter with me?
What shall I do further in order to experience what you have described?"

In reply to this, permit me to say, first, that every birth is a painful process. Spiritual birth is no exception to the rule. The spiritual pains you are experiencing, in the form of restlessness, doubt, fear, and anxiety, are birthpains.

The Holy Spirit of God is at work creating something new within you. But the new life can not be born within you except the old die at the same time. It is God who

The Mysterious Element in Christianity

killeth and who maketh alive (Deuteronomy 32:39). Paul says in the account of his conversion that he died (Romans 7:9-10). He has reference to the painful process by means of which God through His holy law convicted him of sin, "that sin might become exceedingly sinful" to him (v. 13). Or, as he expresses it in another place, "that every mouth may be stopped and the sinner be brought under the judgment of God" (Romans 3:19).

What you are now experiencing in your spiritual distress and restlessness is this life's first beginning: death. Jesus Himself pointed out the organic connection between death and life in the familiar words about the grain of wheat which must fall into the ground and die before life can come forth from it (John 12:24).

You must first see the sin in your heart and life, which sin must die. Just to see this is a painful and fearful experience, enough to fill a soul with hopelessness and despair, because men do not realize how sinful they really are. This, too, Paul has described in a classical way: "I was alive apart from the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived." "Sin, finding occasion, wrought in me through the commandment all manner of coveting" (Romans 7:9, 8).

This experience becomes still more painful when one not only sees the wickedness of one's life, but also discovers, when trying to battle against it, that one is not able to overcome one's sins, either in word or in deed, and still less in thought and fantasy. This, too, Paul has described: "I am carnal, sold under sin. "I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing." "Wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?" (Romans 7:14, 18, 24).

If you have begun to have these inner experiences, do
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