

2-1-1962

## The Nature of Spiritual Illness

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### Recommended Citation

Hulme, William Edward (1962) "The Nature of Spiritual Illness," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 33, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol33/iss1/8>

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# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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WILLIAM EDWARD HULME

Ezra and Nehemiah: A Review of the  
Return and Reform  
MARTIN W. LEESEBERG

Brief Studies

Homiletics

Theological Observer

Book Review

**VOL. XXXIII**

*February 1962*

**No. 2**



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Volume XXXIII

February 1962

Number 2

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*Published by*

**THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD**

*Edited by*

**THE FACULTY OF CONCORDIA SEMINARY  
SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI**

**CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE  
SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI**

**CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY** is published monthly by Concordia Publishing House, 3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis 18, Mo., to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. \$3.50 per annum, anywhere in the world, payable in advance. Second-class postage paid at St. Louis, Mo.

**PRINTED IN U. S. A.**

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# The Nature of Spiritual Illness

By WILLIAM EDWARD HULME

**EDITORIAL NOTE:** This article presents the first of the E. H. Bertermann Lectures, delivered to a convocation at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, in the morning of April 12, 1961, by Dr. William Edward Hulme, Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. The evening lecture, entitled "Christian Persons in the Making," will appear in a subsequent issue of our journal.

**O**ur purpose this morning is to describe the nature of spiritual illness, a theological perspective of the person—as this person lives in our kind of world. All of us are sick to a degree, and so, when I talk about the nature of spiritual illness, I believe that you will see yourself in some of the things I say. In a sense, then, we are holding up a mirror. Since we have such a glorious answer to the spiritual illness, this need not be the cause for despair as it would be if we had not the good news.

## I

Ours has been characterized as an age of anxiety. Basically we are sick with anxiety. And so we shall begin our understanding of spiritual illness by looking into the nature of our anxiety. We will begin with what we might call "given anxieties," existential anxieties, anxieties that go with being a human being. These cannot be avoided because they are part and parcel of human nature in this kind of world.

The first such anxiety is finitude anxiety. We are aware of the finite—that we are limited—only because we can compare it with an unlimited or an infinite. We perceive a strong sense of the infinite within us because every evidence of the finite

about us meets with strong and immediate protest. One of the basic evidences of our finitude would be our failures. How we suffer over our failures! Another would be our sicknesses, those physical ills that lay us flat on our back and the mental ills that more or less put us on the shelf for the time being. How we fight for health! And, of course, the biggest sign of our finitude is the fact that we die. There has been a quest among all peoples, of all cultures, to find the secret of immortality because the human being protests against the reality that he must come to an end. Charles Clayton Morrison has said that the early church grew to tens of thousands in the first generation after Christ because it conquered death, the final enemy of every living soul.

This finitude anxiety plays a large role in Christian experience. It expresses our dependence. The prayer "Lord, save me" is an elementary form of prayer, and the sentiment of dependency is a dominant religious sentiment. It is expressed in the prayer of the Breton fisherman: "O God, Thy sea is so large, and my boat is so small." This is the experience of finitude and the anxiety it produces—feeling so small in such a vast world. We are therefore overcome with an awareness of our weakness, and the very fact that we are weak, and there are so many challenges before us, creates anxiety. We have faith at times to meet these challenges in spite of our weakness, but this very faith is continually being challenged by doubt, doubt



over whether or not we are too late and will be swallowed up. Is life after all a big cosmic farce whose futility is symbolized in the fact that all life shall end in death?

The second anxiety that goes with life is estrangement anxiety. Here we are confronted with the aloneness of our individuality. And this can be a very terrifying thing to adolescents, as for the first time they come into the full realization of what it means to be a person cut off in the depths from all other persons. A child feels almost indistinguishable from his family, but as an adolescent, he begins to grow into the awareness that he is a distinct individual. And he begins at that time also to comprehend the extent of his finitude and in particular that unique experience that is before him, the personal experience par excellence — death.

I recall one teen-ager describing this experience in terms of a recurrent dream in which she saw herself as a whirling ball, whirling, whirling out into space, going nowhere, lost in the tremendous magnitude of nothingness. Because it was repeated over and over again in her life, this dream was obviously a symbol of the terror in which this aloneness, this individuality, was bearing down upon her in her growth into adulthood. And in the midst of this aloneness, this estrangement, we seek relationships to bridge the gulf of solitude. We seek human relationships, we seek to be close to people. The quest is also religious — the quest to relate to the Creator, the Infinite One.

This very aloneness of estrangement is aggravated in our day by the increased urbanization and industrialization of our living. We can have extreme cases of loneliness in the midst of our most heavily

populated areas. As one who has lived in rather small towns for the last 12 years, I am usually impressed when I visit a city like Chicago by the fact that I do not walk very far before I pass somebody talking to himself, oblivious to the fact that there are many people all about. If he were to do that in my town, he would soon be accosted by a policeman and sent to a mental hospital. But here, where there are so many people, you can have such extreme cases of individuality and loneliness that one can commune with himself out loud and others not even notice it. People can be grouped together in apartment houses and not only not know their neighbors, but not even care to know them.

Here we have, then, a loss of the sense of identity, a loss of the sense of communion, of belonging. This degeneration of fellowship and communion extends also into our rural areas. We are experiencing a decline in the solidarity of the rural community. Where heretofore the rural area had its own community, today, with increased migration to the cities, with transportation so easy, and with the decrease in the number of people needed on farms because of farm machinery, the farm community is being broken up. One by one these communities are ceasing to be genuine communities. As a result we are finding the same sort of anxiety and illness in the rural areas that we find in the heavy population centers.

There are many superficial attempts to heal this sickness of estrangement anxiety. A great deal of socializing may go on in our day, but it can be very superficial also. We have much grouping instead of much relating. In the midst of all this grouping, however, at the bottom of the soul, there

is this strange sense of emotional isolation. We see this in its extreme in the alcoholics, whose numbers are growing dangerously in our society. Alcoholism is almost at the stage of a national emergency. The alcoholic is one who cuts himself off from society and by the use of alcohol lives in his own fantastic world in which he is king and no one else exists.

The third anxiety natural to life is moral anxiety. Moral anxiety comes out of the dialectical nature of man; in fact, it is the climax of this dialectic mentioned previously in regard to the anxiety of finitude that the fact that we are mortals disturbs us, for we long for immortality. We do not want to end. And so we are overcome by an awareness of our mortality, and yet we protest it. Also we have mentioned the weakness that we experience because of this finitude. At the same time, in the midst of our weakness, we admire the strong, we should like to be strong, and we work toward being strong. We mentioned also our faith which carries us through some of the challenges that face us in our weakness. We also referred to doubt as the contradiction to this faith, continually gnawing away at our faith and challenging this faith to rise above it. There is also a dialectic within the very evil that we experience within us. Even our evil assertions have their protest, the protest of conscience pulling us toward the good. We can have an admiration for the good in the midst of this awareness of our evil. This is not a conflict only in the Christian; it exists also in the natural man, although in the natural man there is a distorted idea of what is evil and what is good. Nevertheless, the tension between the two exists.

This moral anxiety is described most fully by St. Paul as follows:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very things that I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the Law is good. So, then, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. [Here is the dialectic.] For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the Law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? [Rom. 7:15-24 RSV]

Here is the tension of moral anxiety. The real anxiety behind this weakness is over the will to evil. In other words, the evil that I would not is also the evil that I would, and the good that I would is also the good that I would not. No wonder we experience guilt. We fear the consequences of our duplicity, our perverseness; we fear the judgment, the condemnation upon our hypocrisy.

We can look at guilt from three dimensions. The first would be the contrast between genuine guilt and neurotic guilt. Genuine guilt comes out of the realization of this dialectical anxiety in the moral area, where I see not only my impotency due to my limitations but my perverseness due to my misuse of freedom. Neurotic guilt is an attempt to cover over genuine guilt. In

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neurotic guilt one cannot stand to face this basic guilt of his own insincerity, and so neurotic guilt is a defensive guilt. I become very much disturbed over a smaller thing in order to concentrate my guilt on this smaller thing to avoid the condemnation that I feel in my soul over the larger.

Another dimension is the contrast between conscious guilt and unconscious guilt. Conscious guilt is obviously that of which I am aware. But a great deal of my guilt I am not able to face. I have pushed it into the area of my unawareness. We call this unconscious guilt.

The third dimension is the contrast between psychological guilt and religious guilt. In psychological guilt we are disturbed because our public relations have been impaired by our actions. We are primarily concerned about what people will think; we are primarily concerned about the mental image of us that others have in their mind. Any indication that we have disturbed this mental image in an adverse way creates the pangs of guilt. But this is a psychological type of guilt. I want to get along with people and am disturbed when it seems I am not. Religious guilt is of more mature stature. Religious guilt is concerned about standing before my Maker, and about my Maker's evaluation of me. In pastoral care our challenge is to help guilt mature, that is, to help neurotic guilt develop into an awareness of the genuine guilt behind it so that one no longer needs the defense of neurotic guilt. It is to help unconscious guilt to come into one's consciousness, where it can be faced by the increase of our courage. It is to help psychological guilt to grow to the dimension of religious guilt. Only when guilt has reached its religious

height has the Gospel any relevance for it. I am afraid that most of the time our experiences of guilt as a people are in their immature form.

One of the things that helps us keep our guilt immature is self-deception. In an attempt to still the anxiety that is produced by the moral dialectic, we make use of our ability to deceive ourselves to some extent—that is, we can will not to see what we do not want to see and will not to know what we do not want to know. In the concept of Plato's Socrates the essence of sin is ignorance. The Christian religion can go along with this concept only to the extent that the essence of sin might be in the *will* to be ignorant—the determination to be ignorant in order to escape the judgment that I know I deserve. We can see this self-deception at work in the story of the Garden of Eden. Adam and his wife knew what they had done; they had rebelled against their God by partaking of the fruit they were told they should not partake of, for if they would eat of it they would have the knowledge of good and evil. They would be as God, said the tempter. After they had partaken of the fruit they began to experience what the Creator meant when He said, "the day thou shalt eat of it thou shalt surely die." They began to experience the estrangement that guilt creates, the shame over their rebellion. But they identified this inner misery that they were experiencing with the fact that they were naked and attempted to cover this nakedness—in a sense, to cover their guilt. When God confronted the man in his hiding, He said, "Why are you hiding?" And the man said, "Because I was naked." Here is a beautiful illustration of how we can de-

ceive ourselves, and I think that Adam half believed his story by this time, because his many followers can do it in about that same amount of speed. God refused to be fooled. He at once penetrated the rationalization. "Who told you you were naked? Have you eaten of the fruit?" And what is the reaction of the man? "The woman that *You* gave me, God!" When we are trapped, when the self-deception is pulled away and we stand nakedly exposed, we become angry, lash out and blame others. "Don't blame me, God; You gave me this woman; she did tempt me." Of course, when the woman was confronted you know where she placed the blame! Anything but to stand before God and say, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!"

The significance of this is that if one is going to deceive himself in order to protect himself, he must automatically reduce his sense of consciousness. Our *person* develops as our sense of consciousness develops, and therefore to deceive ourselves we have to shorten the area of consciousness and to increase the area of unconsciousness. The more one shortens the area of consciousness to protect himself from those things in his life that he does not wish to see, the more he shortens his life, the more he becomes a little island, something far less than the person that he could be. But fortunately self-deception is never complete. Even if we have been endowed with this ability, we have not been endowed with it completely. We can never fully deceive ourselves. Regardless of how far Adam had gone, the minute God penetrated his defense he knew he was caught. Around the edges of the little island into which we shrink ourselves the truth

threatens always to come up. In defense we have to keep shrinking. This awareness of the truth always threatening to come up on the edge of our consciousness keeps us on edge, keeps us jittery, keeps us anxious. Such a reduced consciousness leads to a stunted life, and this is tragic.

Now let us look into another area of spiritual illness—the problems that we face in living. First of all, there are the frustrations in self-expression. We have a need, as human beings, to express our will, to express our individuality, our *personhood*. And when this is thwarted, there is rebellion. Every human being seems to believe with all his heart and mind that he should be free. The way to prove this is to try to take somebody's freedom away from him. I can just imagine what you students would do if your administration took away some of the liberties that you have now. You would protest. This is our inalienable right, as it were. If this freedom is taken away from us, we will rebel. We will rebel overtly if we can, that is, if we can get away with it, but if it is too threatening to rebel overtly, we rebel covertly. We will thwart conformity in some way or other—either passively if we cannot do it actively, or subconsciously if we cannot do it consciously. Recall the story in the Bible where Jesus told the story of the father and two sons. He said to the one, "Go, work in the vineyard." He said, "I go, sir." But somehow or other he never got around to doing it. This is the way that rebellion which is not faced may work itself out in some other manner. We sabotage giving our whole heart into what we really cannot believe is our own free choice. We notice in college, for instance, that it is really hard for a student to give his all

when he thinks he is in college only because of somebody else's decision. The same is true in the seminary. When we cannot rebel openly, we rebel under cover, we sabotage.

This need to express ourselves is a natural thing; it goes with being a human being. But like everything else in this world, it is distorted by the flesh, by the egocentric tendency to express oneself in the will to power instead of simply to express oneself. This can very easily become a lust for power. And power means power over somebody else. We can see this tendency operating in our society today.

The second frustration in self-expression concerns the expression of our creative nature. You are created in God's image, and this means many things. But for our purposes here it means that as God is Creator so those created in His image are creative. We have a need to achieve, a need to accomplish, and if this is blocked, we become ill in one way or another. We have a need to express whatever creative urge we have been endowed with. Out of this comes a need for one's own sense of self-worth, one's sense of purpose, one's sense of fulfillment of his purpose. Also closely associated with this is the need for approval, a need for my own approval of myself and for the approval of others. Here the conformist and the rebel may conflict. In order to get people's approval for my achievements and my accomplishments, I may have to conform. The dominant note of our society is our *outer-directedness*. But at the same time we resist conforming where we would rather do otherwise. So we have a conflict between going along with what we believe is necessary for our approval, or sabotaging

this conformity, losing approval but experiencing freedom.

This need to express myself creatively in terms of achievement is a stimulus for competition. In our age it is not only what you do but how well you do it compared with somebody else in the same pursuit. For example, if your professor gives out corrected test papers today, as you look at your grade, your immediate thought is, "I wonder how this 'stacks up' with the others?" And so you will begin to inquire, subtly or otherwise, "What did you get?" Your main interest is not, "I hope you did well." Your main interest is, "I hope I did not do too badly, and I may find out if I know how well you did." And when he says, "A," you say, "Oh, good!" but inwardly you say, "Oh, good night!"

Accomplishments are comparative things, and comparison easily becomes involved with the flesh. The main idea seems to be not only to accomplish but to reach the top. You can see this already in terms of children and their parents. The child comes home with his report card. The parents say, "Well, fine, son! Were there any other A's?" If there were, his A is not quite so good. If somebody received a 99 percent and the boy only received 97 percent, the parents says, "Work hard, son, get on top!" Get on top! This is all that really matters.

This is a type of competition before which some people give up. They know they cannot get to the top—so why try at all! At the same time it is the kind of competition that some seem absolutely compelled to enter. They must be on top. Either way there is an extreme compulsion. Either the competition is too much, and there is no use in even trying, or one feels

compelled to excel because if he is not on top he is not worth anything.

This takes us to difficulties in personal relations. Out of the estrangement anxiety we saw that we have a strong need for union with others, a strong need to belong. I am sure you experience this in your own student group. You want to have a place in your student group, and you want to think that others think well of you — value you. This is natural; this is normal. And having this assurance helps very much to overcome the pain of estrangement. You know how lonely you can feel when you are a new man in a community in which all others seem to know each other. Therefore we have a strong need for evidence that we are a part of the group, that we have a relationship with others. You might call it a need for affection in the broad sense, a need for evidence that we are liked, that we are of value, that we are appreciated. Consequently we are strongly moved in this area of personal relating to create a good mental picture of ourselves in the minds of others whose opinion we value. Even the fellow who says, "I don't care what people think," is very careful to make sure that people get that impression of him. It would frighten him very much if he thought that people got the impression that he did care what they thought. This is part of his status. This he thinks is respectable. It gives him independence, and people like independent individuals.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that many of our efforts are devoted to improving the mental image of ourselves in other people's minds. And there is always the fear that we shall fail. We are very sensitive to any indication that

we are not succeeding. A lack of response can be frightening; it sets up the destructive powers of fear, anxiety, and guilt. "What kind of person am I?" "I don't seem to be able to make it." Where our bid for affection and appreciation is refused openly, we can become genuinely hostile toward such a person. This is why love and hate can alternate with each other, depending on the response. It is not too uncommon in our newspaper to see that as a result of a broken romance a rejected suitor, in a fit of temporary insanity, slays his former lover and says, "I loved her so much I could not stand to see her with anybody else." What he really should say is, "I hated her so much for not responding to my love that I could not stand to do anything else but kill her."

The resentment that I experience toward those who fail to supply the evidence that I am making a favorable mental picture of myself in their minds creates an additional anxiety. What might happen if I ever carried out my anger toward them? Once I start to release my anger I may not be sure whether I can control the situation. Nor would I want anybody else to know about my resentful feelings. If people would see how resentful and jealous I am and how small I can be about my acceptance, they certainly would not want me. We always have a feeling that we are half exposed. No matter how many clothes we have on, figuratively speaking, there is always the fear that people can see through them. And so we can see how the anxiety is perpetuated.

In being dependent on people we are trying to be one with them. This is our need in terms of our estrangement anxiety. However, in terms of our own self-worth

we become something less than free people in our overdependence. We hate this because it is a restriction on our basic integrity as a person. Also this dependence leads to exploiting people. We feel guilty about this too. The tendency is to like those whom we need and to try to ingratiate ourselves with those who can help us. So we come to the conclusion at times that we use these people rather than relate to them.

We have to be very careful of this in the ministry because we shall have key persons to please. These are the ones in the community and the congregation who can do us much good in furthering our plans for progress of the kingdom of God in our particular local congregation. So it is easier to see these key people first when we look out upon the congregation.

The third area in the problems of living would be disturbances in sexuality. Freud thought of sex as an undisciplined, biological urge. I think many Christians agree with him. It is, of course, an undisciplined, biological urge, but from the point of view of the Scripture it's much more than that—it is a divinely endowed gift to man by which he relates intimately to another in the most intimate of all unions, marriage. And it is rather significant, I think, that where there are problems in relating, where people feel cut off emotionally from others, there we also find sexual problems—in compensation, if not in protest. In pastoral counseling with people who are disturbed over their apparent sexual agitation, we often find a very lonely person—at least one who at the very depth of his being does not experience any real sharing with anybody else. Here you have the spiritual dimen-

sion of sexuality and the evidence of the oneness of body, mind, and soul as an expression of the total person. The biological urge of sex is accentuated and agitated when people feel cut off from others in terms of intimate relations. It is a compensation for this deprivation coming out in a physical way. The biological sensation alone would leave one empty. This is illustrated in autostimulation. When one fantasies a relationship in autostimulation, and it is swallowed up in the awful reality of his aloneness following the autostimulation, there is the sense of being cheated, an overwhelming realization of being deceived. And this "letdown" intensifies the guilt of autostimulation.

In spiritual illness sex can serve the cause of *immediacy*, in Kierkegaard's term. It becomes a defense against the preoccupation with despair. One can use food for the same purpose. There are people who when they feel depressed, cut off, rejected, will eat more, particularly more sweets; others will drink more, particularly more alcohol. Promiscuity in sex is another way to dull the sense to despair and to lose oneself in immediate satisfaction. A socially more acceptable escape is simply to go to sleep. The idea behind all these means is to bring immediate satisfaction through superficial comfort or immediate anesthesia. But also in the words of Kierkegaard, when we use things to bring an immediate satisfaction to distract us from the obvious reality of despair, we never become a self.

## II

Finally there are the defenses against these disturbances. On the one hand there is the defense against recognizing that one has a spiritual illness. We have a good

example of this in our day in what we call the psychosomatic illness. I am positive that you as future ministers are going to have people with psychosomatic complications referred to you many times by physicians. More and more physicians are referring such people to their pastors. The psychosomatic illness is becoming recognized much more today than before by medical people. Physicians are estimating that from 30 to 50 percent of the people in their offices have not only something bothering them physically but something bothering them spiritually. Something is wrong with the inner self, and it is manifesting itself in a physical way.

It is easier to live with a sore back or with a stomachache than it is to live with some of these inner problems of guilt and shame and fear. You can talk much better in our society about your headache than about your despair over your unhappy marriage. And so the resistance to recognize one's problem in our day is likely to show itself in some physical complaint. Unfortunately it is a physical situation that pills are not going to cure because one needs the illness. He will hold on to it.

The second defense is known as projection onto others. If I cannot stand to look at my own threatening evil, I can look at it better if I see it in somebody else. If I see it in somebody else, I also have a good object upon which to release my disgust at my own evil vicariously. This is why parents, when they see their child follow in a weakness of theirs, can get doubly angry — once for the child and once for themselves. Also we find that if we have irritations towards others, maybe even hatreds that we cannot bear to face, it is convenient to project these

onto others indicating that it is they who have them toward us. Therefore we are justified in the way we feel about them. It is ruses such as projection that are necessary if we are to be enabled to live with our negative feelings.

The third defense is overcompensation. To overcompensate is to overdo the opposite. If I have much anger toward people, I may compensate by becoming a compulsive smiler. Some people even smile when they tell you bad news. It is always present as a defense. Or I could become a crusader for some reform and try giving evidence of an extreme sense of rightness. Compensation is overdoing an outward manifestation to make sure that nobody can recognize the opposite reality. The only trouble is that these defenses do not work with God, and we know it. In the language of St. John, "He knows what is in man."

On the other hand there are defenses against solving the problems. Some may recognize the problem and even come to you for help, but they are not going to be very happy about finding that help. In other words, there are people who would rather complain than do much else. It is much easier to be remorseful than to change. The problem has a purpose — it is the lesser pain, and if one gives up the lesser pain, he is thrown toward the greater pain — the deeper despair. People who defend themselves against solving their problem obviously need the problem. It is a type of a crutch or support for them. It may even be a way in which they avoid other obligations. If I am disturbed you cannot ask of me the same things you'd ask of other people. There are many reasons why people may not want to give up



their sicknesses. We discover this resistance to healing when we witness their resistance to any change in their situation. They are running from responsibility. Their problem is a means of remaining immature, and the very thought of becoming mature is frightening because it is more demanding.

One's illness may be also a point of contact. As long as I have this problem people will pay attention to me, particularly the pastor. If I let him help me solve it, will he be as attentive to me after this? We may not think of this continuously, but it is lurking at the edge of our consciousness. Also, the problem may be a means of protest. An illness that one does not want to give up may be one's way of saying, "Look how I've been wronged!" If I allow myself to become well, I would not have a way to protest the way people, and maybe even God, have treated me. When we feel this way, we are like Kierkegaard's printing error. "The printer made the error, but the error would not allow the printer to correct it, because it wanted to stand in testimony to what a poor printer he was."

There is a resistance to change in people; there is a certain loss of pride in giving in to a solution. Repentance therefore is probably the most difficult activity the Holy Spirit can effect within people because of its radical nature. In pastoral care and in pastoral counseling we have abun-

dant evidence in our experience of the perverse and devious character of human resistance.

So we see that our illnesses can come about from a situation in our environment which make us ill—for example, a terrific tragedy, a disappointment, something which confronts us with a given anxiety of life in intensity. We also see that the sickness may be inside a person and reaching out may create an environmental situation which is negative in character. The latter condition is the most difficult to heal. When we come to our present situation with past influences, we color the present with what we are. And what we are has emerged out of our past. So we can say that for every present situation there is a past which is making itself felt. The person himself has interacted and colored the situation. On the other hand, the past of a person's life is only important for pastoral care when it is still living in the present in some different guise. The present is also affected by the pull of the future, its goals and its threats. For those of you who are about to graduate the future has a tremendous influence upon the way you think, feel, and act. The future has a decided influence upon us in the present. So present fears anticipate future catastrophes, and present drives anticipate future fulfillment.

Dubuque, Iowa