

3-1-1962

Christian Persons in the Making

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Recommended Citation

Hulme, William Edward (1962) "Christian Persons in the Making," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 33, Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol33/iss1/14>

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CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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WILLIAM EDWARD HULME

**Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail
of Biblical Language**
LANGDON B. GILKEY

Homiletics

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Volume XXXIII

March 1962

Number 3

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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CONCORDIA

THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Volume 33, Number 1, January 1962

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Christian Persons in the Making

By WILLIAM EDWARD HULME

EDITORIAL NOTE: This article presents the second of the E. H. Bertermann lectures, delivered to a convocation at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., in the evening of April 12, 1961, by Dr. William Edward Hulme, Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. The first lecture, entitled "The Nature of Spiritual Illness," appeared in the previous issue of our journal.

THIS morning we looked into the nature of spiritual illness and did so in a somewhat academic manner. Tonight we are going to look at the subject from a more subjective or existential point of view.

I

"Christians are persons in the making" means that something has happened and is happening to us from without. And the biggest thing that we are aware of is that it *is* happening and that it *has* happened. If we looked at this subject from an academic and objective point of view, we should have to do so from the standpoint of God, and this is beyond us. So we are going to look at it more from the point of view of the recipient and hence from a subjective point of view.

We shall begin with the subject of this morning, the nature of spiritual illness—and now look at it subjectively rather than objectively, and let this particular approach lead us into God's answer to the nature of spiritual illness—His making of Christian persons. We shall examine what it is like to live with myself alone, under the judgment of God's Law.

We have in our seminary program an opportunity for students to take clinical

pastoral education. A few of our internships are located at clinical centers. One of the interns, who had completed his year at such a clinical center, returned to our city and was visiting with some friends he had known before. Later I visited these same people, and the lady said,

"You know, I don't feel quite as comfortable around this student as I used to. With all of that clinical stuff he's had, I get uncomfortable around him. I have a feeling that he's sitting there looking right through me, analyzing everything I say."

I said, "You don't like that, eh?"

"No," she retorted.

I thought I would be really nasty, and so I said, "Is there something you would like to hide?"

At this point her husband came through with true masculine chivalry and said, "Well, who doesn't have something he wants to hide?"

So living with myself alone is to live with something to hide and to live in fear that I will be found out and be cast aside, rejected. It is a fear of failing. It grows out of our contradictory nature as human beings which we discussed this morning. On the one hand, we can be weak, and nobody knows how weak we can be save we ourselves and the Lord God. At the same time we admire the strong; we should like to be strong, and we expend much effort to become strong. We may even surprise ourselves at times at how strong we can be, particularly in moments of crisis. Again we have strong feelings of

dislike, resentment, even to the extent of hatred. At the same time we want to be loved and we should like to think that others believe we are people who *can* love. Again we can be selfish, and nobody knows how selfish and small we can be save we ourselves and the Lord God. Yet we want people to think of us as unselfish and will bend every effort to give an unselfish impression. We admire the unselfish quality. Again we have fears—fears and doubts that we do not want anybody to know about. But we know that God knows! At the same time we have a longing for faith. We admire those who have faith, and we may even surprise ourselves at how much trust we can have in moments of crisis.

This contrast within me in living with myself alone under the judgment of God's Law leads me to show others only the side that I think is acceptable to them and to live in fear that the other side, which contradicts what I am showing, will be exposed—the fear that I will be shown to be insincere, a bluffer, one who has a front, in religious language, a hypocrite. This leads me to push down that part of me that condemns me. A surge of hatred toward a loved one—push it down! an unwholesome attitude toward sex—push it down! the thought that I am a disappointment to those that I want to respect me—push it down! the resentment I feel toward those I supposedly am on good terms with—push it down! The result is that my inner life can become a no-man's land, full of inner conflicts that not only others are not to see but also I myself do not care to see. So I must erect defenses and escape routes to protect myself from seeing it.

While I was teaching at Wartburg College, we had a class called the Psychology of Religion. One of the areas that we discussed was the area of worship. You know how young people can be critical of their elders!

Almost always, when we took this subject up, I would hear this complaint: "Oh, those people in church! When we go through the liturgy, they do not really think of what they're saying; it is not coming from the heart; it's all just lips and conformity."

After hearing this criticism many times I asked, "How do you know?"

They answered, "Well, we just know."

I said, "That's no answer to give in a scientific age."

So I encouraged them to find out whether there was validity to their position. Six of them took up the challenge. Had we known the amount of work this was going to take, we certainly would not have begun. We prepared a questionnaire with the help of our sociology and psychology departments—a questionnaire of multiple choice questions, which we could submit to a congregation immediately following the worship service with the cooperation of the pastor. The pastor asked the people to be seated after the close of the service, and the questionnaire was explained and distributed. No names were to be placed on the questionnaire. All each had to do was check the proper choice. For example, question number one was, "Why did you come to church this morning?" a: because I wanted to worship God; b: someone in the family insisted I come; c: I didn't particularly want to come. The next question was, "Why did you sing the hymns this morning?" a: I wanted to

praise God in song; b: I like to sing; c: I didn't sing. Further down the questionnaire we put in two rather sneaky questions. "Do you remember the content of the epistle lesson read today?" Yes or no. "Do you remember the content of the Gospel lesson read today?" Yes or no. We submitted this questionnaire to about 40 congregations, rural and urban, which we thought comprised a good sampling, and the results were most interesting. After we finally got our tabulations we were amazed to see that 96 percent of the people on that Sunday morning came to church because they wanted to worship God; the same number, 96 percent, sang the hymns because they wanted to praise God. We were doing fine! But then we came to that question, "Do you remember the content of the Epistle and Gospel lessons read today?" You can just see the pencil heading for "yes." But halfway there they thought, "Good night, what *was* it? I suppose the answer is no." And then you see the pencil heading toward no. "But this will not look good! Next question, please!" One out of every three people left the question about the Epistle blank! One out of every four left the one on the Gospel blank! Almost all of them answered the questions about coming to church and singing the hymns.

It is in these ways that we play little tricks on ourselves to keep ourselves from confronting the truth about us that is threatening. We have some socially acceptable escape routes for defense mechanisms. One of the most common ones is "busyness." Do you know anybody except perhaps one who is retired that is not busy today? If you are not busy, it is almost an insult to your importance.

And if you discover that you are not busy, you can be quite panicky as you quickly load up again. Besides accomplishing a few things our "busyness" is also an excellent sop to our conscience for failing to do those things that we feel obligated to do if we had the time—or for not taking into account the many things about ourselves that we plan to take into account once we have the opportunity.

I attended an educators' conference some years ago where this resolution was put forth: Resolved, that the Faculty Conference petition the administrations of our Lutheran colleges to reduce the classload of the teacher. The discussion was in favor of passing the resolution.

Finally one venerable educator arose and said, "Now wait a minute; do you realize what you are doing? You are very busy now, are you not? What you are asking for is to be less busy. Have you ever thought of what you would do if that would happen. Think of all those things you have told yourself that you are going to do once you are not busy. Think of all the things concerning your development you plan to do once you have the time. You are suddenly going to be given this opportunity. Is it not terrifying? Defeat this resolution, and let us keep our sanity!"

The resolution was defeated.

Another escape closely akin to "busyness" is work. We often encourage people to bury themselves in their work and so distract themselves from the things that are bothering them. I would not say this to a layman because I think it could be misunderstood, but I will say it to ministers and ministerial students. It is possible for church work to be abused in this way. It is possible for people to bury

themselves in church work in a frantic effort to keep one step ahead of facing God. Another escape that is particularly common among young people is what we call "running around," "goofing off," "dashing about," getting in the hot rod and going down the highway 100 miles an hour—a symbolic gesture of the mad race to keep one step ahead of the uprush from within with which one is not at all prepared to cope.

An escape that is not very acceptable socially but is gaining ground among us is alcohol. The problem with alcohol is that although it has a deadening effect it is also habit forming. It can create a worse problem than the problem from which one is running. The result may be alcoholism. Yet the person who uses alcohol to get away from himself is employing the same basic mechanism that is used by persons practicing the more socially accepted escapes.

Whatever we push down in this way has a way of returning upon us, and when it returns it usually returns in disguise. If we cannot face the real issue, then the real issue will have to become clothed in something else. Jesus told a parable that I think has some bearing on this. It is the parable of the man who evicted the evil spirit from his house and then left his house all empty and swept and garnished and locked. That evil spirit went out, being without a place to dwell, and found seven other spirits in the same predicament. They joined forces and together returned and assaulted this house—empty, swept, clean, and locked—and they took over with sevenfold intensity. Said Jesus, "The last state of that man is worse than the first."

I recognize that there are different ways

of interpreting this parable. But it seems to me that Jesus is putting His finger here on the pharisaical society of His day—how the Pharisee approached the problem of his own inner evil, the demon within. And how does the Pharisee, how does the natural man, deal with his inner evil? Does he face it openly? Does he face it squarely? Usually not. He will whitewash it, minimize it, rationalize it, and maybe even deny it altogether. But this does not mean that it is gone. Nothing seems to lose itself in God's world. We used to think that if we burned something it was gone; now we know that it simply converts into something else—matter into energy, energy into matter. And so these things about us that are condemning, that we cannot take, that we try to push out of existence, do not thereby become annihilated, but they convert into something else. They come back upon us, and the last state is truly worse than the first because now we are dealing with a disguise.

One of the most common disguises is what the physicians call E.I.I.—emotionally induced illness. When something about our souls is too threatening to face, it may take itself out in the physical body and come back upon us as a physical symptom with which it is much more easily to live. This same inner conflict that I cannot face may lead me to make mistakes or blunders. Fritz Kunkle in his book *In Search for Maturity* tells about a burglar who had an honest conflict about being a burglar because he did not feel right about it. His conscience bothered him. On the other hand burglary was the only profession he knew, and he had a family to support. So he felt compelled to push this conscience conflict down and persist in his

burglary. This does not mean that the conflict did not continue to operate *sub rosa*. Underground the conflict ground out its own destiny, and this man, in one of his jobs, fell down the ladder and broke his leg. In the hospital, with the combined teamwork of physician, chaplain, and psychiatrist, the conflict was brought to light. It was obvious what had happened. He had not faced his own misgivings about being a burglar, and these misgivings had continued to operate underground. They contributed to his fall down the ladder, and this helped him satisfy both selves, both wills. He had continued to burglarize, but at the same time he had stopped.

So we may forget in those areas about which we have conflicts over remembering. In pastoral counseling one of the clues that something significant is at hand is when the person seems completely blocked in memory regarding the subject. For example, if a counselee is able to talk quite freely about his mother, but seems completely to omit his father, not recalling much association or recollection of him, the clue may be that the father is not easy to talk about. Perhaps the relationship was not at all pleasant and was too painful to keep in memory. So we can make mistakes in areas about which we have misgivings about entering, and have accidents in activities in which we have apprehensions about participating.

If this inner conflict causes me to have trouble with myself, how much more will it cause me to have difficulties in my relationship to my fellowman? If I do not want to see what I am like inside, I surely do not want *you* to see. We have three major ways in which we may prevent others from getting too close to us and

seeing what we are really like. One is that we may withdraw from contacts with people. We may do this geographically and simply stay clear of them. We may rationalize and say, "I don't like to be with people; I don't like to be in groups; I like to work with things," or something of that nature. More often, however, the withdrawal is done psychologically. One builds a wall around himself, so that he can go into the midst of any group and be safe. He is the type of person about whom you say, "Yes, I know him, but I don't know him." How can you know him? The idea behind withdrawing is that if I keep far enough away from you, then you cannot see me. Then I am safe.

The second is to lose our individuality in trying to please people, to so ingratiate ourselves with them that if they do see what we are like, we will have so obligated them to us that they will still tolerate our company. I recall seeing at a Luther League convention a young lady of about 16 or 17 years who obviously felt out of her social group. She ended up doing the washing for six other girls, just so they would tolerate her in their company. They took advantage of her for all she was worth.

A third way is to attack. The idea behind this defense is that if you could see me as I am (and you probably will) you would attack me. My only defense is that I attack you first. Rather than letting you put me in the doghouse, I will put you in first. This is an athletic approach, based upon the philosophy that the best defense is a good offense. Be aggressive! There are many ways we can do this acceptably in our society because ours is a highly competitive society. You can beat people out

in competition without any judgment upon you. Here again we refer to athletics—specifically to the wrestling approach. In wrestling you are safe only when you are on top. This means somebody else is on the bottom. It is dangerous if that situation should change. No neutrality exists. One's only safety is being on top of someone else.

Another way to attack is to dominate people. Try to run the show! Some of us are not content unless we are boss, unless we are in the saddle, unless we are running things. Another way is to pick on people—aggravate them. This can be done openly by bullying them around, but more often (particularly in nice circles) it is done more subtly. There are many "innocent" ways in which you can make people feel stupid and inadequate. You sort of "anesthetize" the spot before you plunge in the dagger.

In each of these ways, withdrawing from people, attaching ourselves to them servilely, or attacking them, there is a hostile or hateful attitude toward people. It is quite obvious that this hateful attitude is present in attacking them, but it is also present in the other two ways in a hidden manner. It comes out in our attraction toward hearing the bad—even about people we are supposedly on good terms with.

Someone says, "Say, have you heard about so-and-so?"

We say, "No, what?"

He says, "Well, I don't know if I should say this. . . ."

After a brief silence comes the story. "No-o?" we say, "I wouldn't have believed it. I'm so sorry to hear it; tell me a little more about it. I just can't believe it! I'm so sorry! Just imagine!"

About a week later our informant approaches us again and says, "Say, you remember what I told you about so-and-so last week?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, I just found out there's nothing to it."

"Oh, I am so glad to hear that!" we say as we catch ourselves being somewhat disappointed. But one must not let this be apparent!

Ours is the desire to have things just a little grayer or a little blacker. This is why we put the bad news on the first page of the newspaper, with the later corrections on the back page. We have a comic strip in our Dubuque paper called *From 9 to 5*—with office girls, Hysteria, Wisteria, Calorie, and Coma. These girls get together for coffee breaks and do what people sometimes do when they get together—they talk about an absent member and not too kindly. On one occasion Betty was absent and was getting a rather caustic going-over.

Finally, Wisteria stood up in all of her self-righteousness, and said, "Now, listen, girls, I want this clearly understood. Betty is a friend of mine, and I wouldn't say anything against her for the world—but I'm sure willing to listen."

Have you not caught yourself drawing a little closer to gossip? You would not participate in it for the world, but you do not mind hearing it.

Joe E. Brown, the comedian, says, "It's easy to get someone to sympathize with you when you've had a tough break, but try to get someone honestly to rejoice with you when you've had good fortune." Then the old green-eyed flash goes out—jealousy! But this makes us feel more guilty,

more hypocritical. So there's more to hide and there's more fear over whether that which is hidden will stay hidden. So we erect more defenses to protect ourselves from being exposed even to our own eyes—or to justify ourselves in case we did become exposed. All of this to prevent ourselves from being exposed as insincere and therefore worthless—to lose all respect in our own eyes and in the eyes of others.

II

I think we can see now why the Gospel of Christianity is resisted—even among church people—even among us—because we, too, participate in the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit. This Gospel of Christianity applies specifically to that part of us that is condemning us—that very part of us that we cannot face. To receive the Gospel means to confront this uncomplimentary side of our nature and to face it without trying to justify ourselves. We can see now why the Pharisee is always with us—not that this or that group at the Seminary are the Pharisees but that the Pharisee is inside each of us. The Pharisee tries to qualify by emphasizing something acceptable about himself to cover over something that is not acceptable.

We cannot follow the method of the original Pharisees any more. Jesus ruined their method. I do not even think you can follow it on a theological campus. You could not stand in the Quadrangle and raise your arms with holy hands to God and say, "God, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are." All of your fellow students would say, "What a conceited braggart!" This is socially unacceptable today—to be conceited, or to brag, or to boast. So the old way is ruined.

However, you do not stop Satan by simply blocking one approach. He can find another way—and he has found another. We have found that you can get the same results that the first-century Pharisee got, but you have to use a different method. Instead of pushing yourself up you can get the same result by tearing others down. And this way, I submit, is still rampant.

The judge is always on top. When we become supercritical of others, we are automatically saying, "I would do better." And so we achieve the same basic effect. Or you can get this same result by apologizing for yourself. The idea is that somebody else will build you up.

"I'm no good."

"Of course you are."

"Oh, no, I'm not."

"Of course you are; why do you say such things?"

"Aw, I'm just no good."

"Why there are a lot of nice things about you."

"Oh, no, there aren't—what, for example?"

One thing about this approach is that it credits you with being conscientious, modest, and humble (in Christian circles). These qualities rate high in our midst. There are many ways to the top. The author Thomas Mann was at an authors' party where he was introduced to another writer.

This writer said, "Oh, Mr. Mann, I don't deserve to meet you! I don't even deserve to be at this party when you are here, because you are a great writer and I am just a hack."

Thomas Mann said, "That fellow has no right to make himself that small; he's not that big!"

Paul Tillich said that in the churches of the Reformation it is hard to try to save yourself by your good works—this has been well labeled. But, he says, you can get the same effect by using negative works or emotional works—"O God, I'm so terribly sorry! I just hate myself, God. Now, do I qualify? Now am I worthy? Now can I be forgiven?" Same method, just a different approach. I saw a cartoon of an incident that took place in a prison. There were three convicts in the cartoon, two of whom were looking rather critically at the third, who was off by himself with a very pained, pious look on his face. As the two were looking critically at him, one said to the other, "I can't stand his guiltier-than-thou attitude."

There are many ways to the top. We see why it may be necessary for people to become disturbed—because we are running away from it, running away from facing God the way we are. I was in a pastoral counseling relationship once with a young man for whom atheism had a strong appeal. He wanted intensely to be an atheist. I can understand somebody being an atheist, but I have a hard time understanding one who ardently *desires* to be one—particularly in this instance, since this young man had been brought up in what we would call a Christian home, had been confirmed, had been a member of the young people's society of the church, the Sunday school program, and the like.

I asked, "How come you want to be an atheist?"

"Oh, that's easy," he said, "when I get to thinking there is no God, I get the most wonderful, peaceful feeling that I have ever known—until I begin to have my doubts—maybe God is!"

I said, "And then what?"

"Oh, then I get the most terribly anxious, despairing feeling that I have ever known."

I said, "Do you have any understanding why?"

He said, "That's easy—if there is a God, I'm AWOL [absent without leave]."

Belief in God for this young man was disturbing because he felt condemned by God. Here is a common psychological basis for atheism—get rid of your guilt by getting rid of God! But disturbed he had to become because this is the necessary avenue to God—to despair over ourselves before Him—to stand transparent in His presence—to say with the psalmist of old, "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned." And when we give up, He takes over.

He comes to us in the Cross of Christ. In fact, it is here the message of the Cross makes sense. The message of the Cross says it is God who qualifies rather than we, that in Christ He has taken upon Himself this very conflict in which we are suffering and suffered in it unto death. And in His triumph over it through His resurrection we also triumph. The Cross is our everlasting assurance that no sin can separate us from God because "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself." The solution therefore is in God's character, not in ours. This is what we mean by salvation by grace. This is what we mean by forgiveness in Christ.

III

This brings us to living with myself—not alone under the judgment of God's Law—but living with myself in Christ under God's grace. There is no need now for defenses. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" This is what the Cross is

saying—God is for you! If God can take us the way we are, then we can be encouraged to take ourselves. This does not mean that we condone ourselves or excuse ourselves. But it does mean that we can start where we are in order to get to where we should like to be. The experience of forgiveness takes away the need to run away.

Here we see the basic meaning of the word *love*—to love is to forgive. Jesus said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Somebody has said, "This is a very fine formula for human relationships, but how can we help people love themselves so that they *can* love their neighbor as themselves." I think there is a point here. If we think of love for self as selfishness, then, of course, there is no problem. There is certainly plenty of selfishness already! But if we look closely at selfishness, we can see that it is anything but love for self. By his very selfishness, the selfish person brings misery upon himself in proportion to his self-centeredness. If this is the meaning of love it is a radically different definition of the word love than we normally understand. Actually selfishness is a form of self-rejection, self-hatred. On the other hand if we think of love in terms of God's love, then the picture is entirely different. God's love centers in forgiveness, and as I behold my God in the person of His Son suffering in His cross the agonies that should have been mine and triumphing over them in His resurrection, I see that He forgives. Overwhelmed by this I am enabled to come to peace with myself. And then—and only then—can I extend this peace and forgiveness to my fellow-man. "We love," says the Scripture, "because He first loved us."

When we are no longer afraid of ourselves, then we can get to know ourselves a little better because the deep places of our soul where ghosts were hidden behind locked closet doors can now be opened for deeper development in spirituality. Also our relationship with others is improved. We are made secure from within by our relationship with God. Therefore we do not rise or fall by the opinion of others concerning us—this mental image of us in the other's mind. We are no longer afraid of people because they no longer have this club over us, and then—and only then—can we love them. "Perfect love casts out fear, because fear has torment. He who fears is not made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18). This is the fear which means "to be afraid of," in contrast to the fear which Luther couples with love to describe the creature's adoration, awe, and reverence as he stands before the Infinite One. When we are no longer afraid of people, there is no need to withdraw from them. Their rejection of us does not hold the threat over us that it once did, for we are anchored in God.

Nor is there any need to lose our freedom in trying to please people, to lose our individuality in being servile to them, so that they will take us under any conditions. We can give now without having to have a return. We are not so needy, because our needs have been met in Christ. Luther spoke about poor love as contrasted with rich love. When our love is poor, we cannot afford to part with much of it because we have to be sure we are going to get a return. We have not enough to spare as it is! But when our love is made rich in Christ, we can freely give because the

sources are unlimited. We do not have to count the cost in terms of a return.

For other people's sakes we may have to displease them when they want us to please them. We may have to disagree when they want us to agree, or agree when they want us to disagree. But this gives us more of a personality. It makes of us more interesting persons. This self which God has created and redeemed can now come out and be seen.

Nor is there any compulsion to have to get on top of people. Our value does not rest in how we compare with our neighbor. Our value rests in our Maker's evaluation of us—and this is settled! When God's entrance into history through Jesus Christ becomes an entrance into our life, then we

know that God loves us. Here is our value, our dignity, and our respect.

No wonder the apostle Paul in Philipians could say, "Rejoice. Again I say, Rejoice! Rejoice evermore!" The Christian life is a victory life. Hear it from the New Testament: "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" Hear it from the Old Testament: "Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive tree shall fail, and the fields shall yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stall, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation." (Hab. 3:17, 18)

Dubuque, Iowa