

What Must the Church Do in an Atomic Age?

There are times, I must confess, when it seems to me that we who worship in this sanctuary are withdrawn from the world. Here inside it is warm and pleasing and comfortable. There is a glow about our fellowship. But how can we forget the world outside? Violent storms are blowing throughout our world. Cataclysmic events are taking place and it is possible that the very shape of the earth may be changed. The passions of hate and revenge run like streams of acid through the hearts of men. Sometimes it seems that the whole planet is under the immediate threat of a gigantic time bomb which could explode all life at any minute. Thus as we sit here quietly in the midst of an angry, atomic age, I ask myself, What is the church supposed to do? What difference does it make?

Last summer the Methodist Conference of Great Britain ^{met} quite as usual in its annual session. In the midst of its sessions the conference was startled to hear Donald Soper, one of its former presidents and most influential and distinguished ministers, declare that a casual visitor attending the conference would have a "very hard" time denying that he was "in the presence of a dying church." Furthermore, he insisted, such an outsider would know that the Methodist Church of Great Britain was "irrelevant to the contemporary situation." (C.C. July 30, 1958, p.869) When I was in England in the summer of 1956 I had an interview with Dr. Soper and he told me virtually the same thing. He said that Methodism in England was decadent. If true, what chance has a dying, decadent, irrelevant church got to make a contribution to the atomic age?

Could this be likewise a description of the state of this church worshipping here at this moment? Are we dying, decadent, irrelevant? Do we have anything of any import to say to this atomic age, have we got anything to offer it? Reinhold Niebuhr is certainly one of the greatest voices and minds in contemporary Christendom. Few persons have influenced the serious thinking of American more than he. Recently he has taken a look at the "The Gospel in Future America." He searches for the relevance of the Christian faith and church in our age. He has these things to say:

Our primary task in relating Christian faith to our technical civilization is to guide the Christian conscience in transmuting the purer impulse of love so as to use the instruments of justice for the sake of the neighbor.

The Christian ~~fixxx~~ church must help our nation to measure the depth of this predicament.

The Christian faith does not give us technical knowledge about the relations of our nation to the budding nations of Africa and Asia . . . It can only inspire us to a sense of responsibility and justice. .

(C.C. June 18, 1958, p.)

How close are we coming at the present time to fulfilling these purposes in our trying times? Are we that relevant, that alive? ~~Whxxxxxxxoughtxxxxxallyxxxxxx~~

What we ought really to do in this hour is to inquire of our historic and spiritual purpose as a church. As a church we are, of course, the spiritual descendants of the ancient ~~xxxxxx~~ community of Israel. The Bible is the historic account of the mission of Israel. It is clear that that was a prophetic mission. Not always was Israel true to its mission. Indeed many times it permitted the vision of God's purpose to fade and pass away. At many times in its history Israel sank into the adoration of idols and the worship of false goals. But always God would send his prophets - Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, to warn his people of their sins and to recall them to their divine mission. Their way was rocky and hard. Many times they were attacked by the mightier, ~~xxxxx xx~~ marauding powers, and they were carried into captivity. As exiles in foreign lands they often languished in despair or adopted the pagan culture of their captors. Then God would send his prophet, as he did in the time of Isaiah.

In the ~~great~~ forty-ninth chapter of Isaiah we learn of the great mission of Israel. God, speaking through his great prophet, says to Israel: "I will give you as a light unto the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." And that is our mission too in an atomic age! Like Israel in its own time, we have formerly considered it the function of the church to ~~xx~~ save indifferent persons. In this we have succeeded no better than Israel. As a church we know that we have not registered any great success in ~~xxxxx~~ this field. But now we have weightier duties to perform. Our whole planet is menaced and we have got to take on our conscience now the welfare of the entire world. What must the church do in an atomic age? We must become "a light unto the nations." In the words of James Russell Lowell:

"New occasions teach new duties,
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward,
Who would keep abreast of truth."

Spelled out in more specific terms I think that this "light unto the nations" would mean these things.

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The Church

For one thing, ^{the Church}as "a light unto the nations," begins with its members by providing them regularly with an elevation from which the individual may have a critical view of his involvement in secular society. The light first shines on the church where its members may have a true picture of themselves.

At a football game it is interesting to watch the coach go over to the table and talk on a field telephone to his observers in the press box high above the field. There from a lofty perch an assistant can get a truer and more precise view of what is actually happening to the team below. This information enables the coach to make the necessary adjustments in his ~~xxxx~~ strategy and formations. A church ought to be like this too., From a position high above our involvements in all of the competing interests of our lives we ought to get a look at ourselves as we actually are. We need to tear the blinders from our eyes which distort the images of ourselves.

All of us have primary allegiances which have nothing to do with the requirements of our faith. Our political party, our business or profession, our social class, yes, even ^{our}church, is often far more powerful in determining our actions than our professed religious beliefs. We trim our sails, we compromise, we give in to the lesser pressures and instincts which confront us every day. This we need to~~xxxx~~ recognize in ourselves much more clearly than we do. How timely is the warning which appears in the First Epistle of Peter in the New Testament: "The time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God." (4:17) The church has a responsibility to bring secular society under the judgment of God. But it should never forget that in that judging it must judge itself. For our church has itself altogether too many of these secular characteristics.

Most of us church people, for example, live purely and simply by standards of materialism and we expect religion above all else to provide us with "peace of mind." We tend to indentify our material well-being with our virtue and we want nothing so much as to be sheltered from the miseries of living. Bishop Gerald Kennedy told a group of us not long ago that a young preacher in his California area had recently preached on this theme: "Peace of Mind is for the Birds." His assertion was that the kind of peace of mind most of us are looking for is meant for animals, not spiritual beings. This is a false

goal of religion, but most of us have pursued it.

What matters most to you? The kind of car you drive? The house you live in? Where you live in town? Your social standing? Your acceptance by the group? Indeed these are for most of us the all-consuming passion. But if the church has any relevant meaning it will provide us with a perspective from which we can view ourselves as we are in a critical and unrelenting light.

One of the most stinging indictments of contemporary religion I have heard comes from C. Wright Mills, associate professor of sociology at Columbia University. He writes:

The morality of war now dominates the curious spiritual life of the fortunate people of Christendom. The key moral fact ~~within~~ about this situation (the cold war) is the virtual absence within ourselves of absolute opposition to these assumptions of our ruling elites, to their strategy, and to the policies by which they are carrying it out. And the key public result is the absence of any truly debated alternatives . . . If there is one safe prediction about religion in this society, it would seem to be that if tomorrow official spokesmen were to proclaim XYZ-ism, next week 90% of religion ~~determination~~ would be XYZ-ist. . . As a social and as a personal force, religion has become a dependent variable. It does not originate; it reacts. It does not denounce; it adapts.

(The Nation, March 8, 1958, quoted in C.C. Aug. 20, 1958, p. 946)

I fear that the professor is altogether too correct. There is so little in our behaviour to distinguish us church people from our secular people. We do not originate; we react.

We do not denounce; we adapt. Yet it is the business of the church, extending back into its ancient roots in Israel, to promote a divine discontent among its people. We ought to

be angry at the evils of our society! **Michael Scott: "The trouble with the moderates is that they are only moderately opposed to evil."*

Recently I read of a most unusual fact with regard to the air flight from Jerusalem to Beirut. Known as the "Holy Land Route," the Air Jordan plane cruises along at about 1000 feet below sea level. Having flown this route you receive a certificate enrolling you in the Below-Sea-Level Flying Club. This permits you to make exclusive use of the password: "How low can you get, and still fly?" (Jerome Beatty, Jr. in Sat. Rev., Aug. 2, 1958) One wonders how low the church can sink into the quicksands of modern secularism and still exert its God-given purpose upon the life of the world. What we need is to climb regularly, as we do now, to a higher elevation where we can get a more critical and corrective view of ourselves.

by ~~xxx~~ demonstrating in itself ~~all~~ are one in Christ, and that in Christ there is no East or West. When the doors of the church swing open in welcome to all of God's children then this light will flood out upon a stricken world.

Our problem is that our churches now are so ~~xxxxx~~ severely restricted by race, class, and economic order. More and more our churches are taking on the aspect of class clubs. We have churches for the working man and churches in the suburbs for professionals and managers. We have churches for white people and churches for colored people. And never the twain shall meet. In this respect the church has done nothing but follow the ~~xxxxx~~ organizational lines of ^apurely secular society. Once, before the tremendous growth of suburbs, there were great cosmopolitan churches which embraced in one fellowship peoples from all ends of town and from both sides of the track. Now these churches are fighting for their lives as Christians permit themselves to be attracted to their own kinds. What kind of a picture is this as it is televised all over the world? It certainly cannot mean that we worship a God who is the God of all peoples.

Here I am again with another citation from Pogo. In a recent strip Pogo is seen walking along reading a postcard which has just arrived. "I guess I better be alone for a minute," he says. Then, seated on a log, he ponders the message on the card: "Miss Mam'selle says this postcard invites me to Athens to meet with other ~~xxxx~~ animals from around the world to study how we can preserve mankind." In the next frame he says: "Maybe we just need more room for each other . . . Perhaps instead of makin' artificial moons we could make an artificial world and then . . . an . . ." In the last frame, silhouetted in the sunset, he muses: "But . . . maybe we already got one." (Aug. 18, 1958) Indeed we do have an artificial world. We have made it that way. God did not make the world to be so sharply and hatefully divided among his children. We church people have permitted ourselves in this way to reflect the world. But God calls us to be "A light unto the nations" instead.

Israel was a light unto the nations when she performed her prophetic task on behalf of God. Then she was the servant of all. The church in our time receives this same vision only that it may become the ~~xxxxx~~ ethical leavening of the environment of the world. (suggested by Samuel Terrien, Union Seminary, July 11, 1958)

Harry Golden, the now famous editor of a paper in North Carolina, has developed

and tested what he calls "The Golden-Out-of-Order Plan." In a certain department store where there were two water fountains, one marked "White," the other marked "coloreds," he prevailed upon the manager to shut off the water on the "white" fountain, and put up a sign saying "out of order." For a time, he reports, white people were hesitant, but slowly they began to drink out of the fountain marked for "coloreds." By the end of the third week everybody was drinking out of the same fountain. There were no complaints. This calls attention to a supreme prophetic function of the church in this atomic age: We have got to declare "out of ~~order~~ order" all systems which arrogantly separated any one man from his human brothers.

Perhaps in a few ~~xxxxx~~ weeks the churches in Ohio, and elsewhere, will have a golden opportunity to be "a light unto the nations," in this way. All of us realize how sorrowfully we are split from one another because of the right to work amendment. This pits employer against employee. The battle is strong and bitter. When it is over there could be vast wounds refusing to heal in our society. Then it is that the church can serve its true function and become the healer of the breach, "a light unto the nations," as it opens its doors and readies its fellowship for all people. For then employer and ~~xxxxxxx~~ employee can sit down together here, and worshipping the same God, show the church to the world as a place where all of God's children meet in respect and order.

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But above all else, the most important function of the church in an atomic age is to proclaim the sovereignty of God. The earth is full of ~~xxxxx~~ proud and boastful men strutting up and down, pretending to be gods and laws unto themselves. Because of these men and the great power they wield the earth is in grave danger. But it is the business of the Christian church ^{to} remind men of the sovereignty of God.

Once during a dinner party Senator Daniel Webster was seated next to a talkative woman who had been troubling herself to discover some fundamental question she could ask the famous man. At last it occurred to her to ask this question: "Mr. Webster, tell me what was the greatest thought that ever came into your mind?" The statesman, with great simplicity and quickness, replied: "Madame, that is very simple. The greatest thought I ever had was of my individual responsibility to God." (Christian Advocate, June 20, 1946, p.9)

*Not
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in
history*

What thought have you ever had that is greater than that? Is this not the greatest thought for both men and nations? To hold and proclaim this thought is the ~~unique~~ unique purpose of the Christian church.

The most perplexing problem of this planet is the conflict that develops because many men and nations consider themselves sovereign powers. Religion ought to teach men that they live under the shadow of the Almighty, but apparently it has little effect. Barbara Ward, the eminent English journalist, several years ago made this observation:

Not used in delivery

There is little to suggest that a reviving sense of religion in the West is leading to abatements of sovereignty, to a more eager search~~ing~~ for cooperation and partnership among the nations. In some quarters, indeed, it is almost as though God were being revived as a tribal deity to safeguard and protect the interests of particular nations, a God who is "on our side," a God who can be mobilized as an auxiliary in the "fight against atheistic communism." In the land even of Lincoln, there seems little trace of the great President's sense of his nation standing under the judgment of God, of expiating, even while it struggled against slavery, its own sins, failures and shortcomings.

(NY Times, Mag., "Real Religion and False, Dec. 19, 1954, p. 45)

Now as men break through the gravitational powers of the earth and ~~reach toward the~~ fly toward the moon and the stars, it is more important than ever that we see the God of Christ, not as a mere tribal deity, nor as an auxiliary to our cause, but as the God of the Universe - Creator, Redeemer and Judge.

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In an editorial note the other day the Christian Century expressed its dismay at a proposal made by 175 ministers of the Missionary Baptist Association of Arkansas. They have called upon Congress to enact ~~such~~ legislation which would provide local option elections on integration. Exclaimed the ~~Century~~ Century: "The law as local option! Common humanity as a local option! The divine imperative as a local option! O Lord." (Oct. 8, 1958, p. 1134) Who are men to interfere with the laws of God? Who are men to question the divine imperative? You~~see~~ see we have placed our thousand little sovereignties alongside the total sovereignty of God, and we have expected them to stack up. But only God is great. Only God is sovereign. We mortals have no right to question his imperatives or to thwart his purposes.

In 1859 the Goncourt Journal had this notation: "They say that Berthelot has predicted that in a hundred years of physics and chemistry, man will know what the atom is, and that with that knowledge he will be able to change, snuff out, or relight the sun

at will as if it were a Carcel lamp. Similiarly, Claude Bennard has said that with a hundred years of physiology, man will understand the organic law and be able to create human life in competition with God. We have no objection, but we certainly think at that moment in science, the good Lord in His white beard will appear on earth, swinging His great bunch of keys, and say to the world, as they say in the taverns at five o'clock, 'Closing time, Gentlemen.' (April 7, 1859, printed in HARPERS, March, 1955, p. 72) A great many serious and thoughtful people believe that our world has come perilously ~~near~~ near to closing time. Perhaps we have tried too hard to compete with God. We surely live in a fantastic atomic age in which ~~man~~ has dizzied himself with his own superb achievements. There is only one voice, one aforce in all of the world which can remind him of his folly. That is the Church of Christ which speaks always about the sovereignty of God. That is our most pressing business in the atomic age. We are not physiologists or chemists or rocketry engineers. We are simply those who believe that God is the Father of all man, and that as Sovereign over all, he controls the tides of the seas, directs the pathways of the stars, and haunts the heart of every man. In an atomic age this is what the church has to say.

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