

# The Christian Church in the Latter Half of the Twentieth Century

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IT is my considered judgment that there have been only one or two periods since Christ lived when the Church has been confronted with as great an opportunity as the opportunity that will confront it during the latter half of this century. I say this because the signs of the times point unmistakably that way, and are so convincing that they overcome the logic of my natural pessimism. I wish, therefore, to raise the question of the function and task of the Church in the years ahead.

In thinking of the task of the Church, I am thinking of the Church in part as a molder of civilization. The primary task of the Church is, to be sure, with persons. But a person is not an isolated individual; he is part of an organic social system. If the Church is doing its work with persons, it is inevitably molding the society of which those persons are a part. Where a society is not being molded by the Church, one is driven to the inescapable conclusion that the Church is not properly doing its work with persons. One of the greatest tragedies of our time is that in many nominally Christian countries, such as for ex-

ample Germany, the Christian Church has long ago ceased to think of itself as having a responsibility for influencing contemporary civilization. A dualism has been affirmed between the State and the Church which has resulted in the Church being put outside of the stream of history. As a natural consequence, public policy has become divorced from Christian ethics and paganism has come to its own again in the arena of world politics.

This is not a recent development. We have been passing through a long period during which the influence of the Christian Church upon Western civilization has steadily declined. It is quite true that during this same period, the Christian faith has profoundly influenced the personal lives of countless individuals, but even this influence, great as it appears to have been, did not permeate through individuals to the social structure of which they were a part. Our civilization has remained curiously impervious to the impact of the Christian faith in spite of the evangelical awakening of a century and a half ago, and in spite of the magnificent accomplishments

of the great missionary movements of the latter half of the nineteenth century. While acknowledging that the evangelical awakening and the modern missionary enterprise constitute milestones in the history of the Church, it remains true that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries do not represent a period either of great faith or of great works.

As one illustration of this, I am often reminded of the contrast between the building that the Christian community has done in our age and in other ages. There was a century in the history of the Church when the population of France amounted to approximately the same as the present population of New York City. During that century French Christians built 70 edifices comparable in many respects to one edifice, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, which is being built in New York City in this century. Another striking illustration is the fact that in some of our greatest modern universities, which were organized originally to train ministers for the Church, the gymnasium is now the only building whose external appearance resembles a cathedral. None of the colleges in these universities have chapels, because the chapel is no longer a characteristic or essential part of the American academic community.

### *Three Weaknesses of the Church*

Not only has the Church not determined the main outlines of modern civilization in the West, but it has itself been inhibited by many of the weaknesses of the dominant civilization. Among these weaknesses I would like to mention in particular, three.

First, the superficial optimism about man and his destiny which expressed itself in a naive belief in automatic progress.

On July 4, 1914, I was attending a Student Christian Movement conference at Northfield, Massachusetts. The speaker of the evening had the reputation of being one of the foremost pulpit orators in the country. With complete self-confidence he told his audience of twelve hundred students that war would never again cast its dark shadow over this fair world of ours. Within one month the world was aflame with war. That experience burnt itself indelibly upon my memory. Such churchmen were obviously blind leaders of the blind. Because it had succumbed to the superficial secular optimism of the age, the thinking of the Church was, to a considerable extent, divorced from the actualities of the time. Hence it was impotent to deal with the fundamental issues confronting mankind.

Second, the general acceptance among academic

circles of a pseudo-science which assumed a mechanical universe.

The mood generated by this point of view spread far beyond academic circles. It was particularly popular among lay youth movements like the Christian Associations. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this state of mind occurred during the fantastic 1920's when the Christian gospel was not infrequently described to the young as "adjustment to environment." The Christian name itself was used to deny the truth of the Christian faith. This was the great American heresy of my generation.

Third, as a result of these illusions, men were forced to the inevitable conclusion that their appetites furnished the only absolute standards of judgment or action.

Mussolini's boast that he would rather be a lion for a day than a lamb for a hundred years is a classical expression of the mood of our time. The character of a civilization is known on Judgment Day, and Judgment Day is now upon us. This thirty years' war that began in 1914 has revealed the character of our civilization. In a terrible sense you and I have become through our participation in the war both the recipients and the executioners of God's judgment.

### *The Future of the Church*

In the light of the unrelieved tragedy of the present hour, *how* can anyone say that one of the great days of the Church lies just ahead? To a man without faith such a statement would appear to be the utmost folly, entirely unsupported by any rational or factual considerations. But the man of faith can affirm this expectation with complete confidence.

I. The man of faith can make this affirmation because he understands something about the real nature of man. It is obvious that during the past couple of centuries, men have tried almost every formula that the human mind can devise to solve the problem of life. There has been the cult of rationalism, the cult of science, the cult of communism and the cult of fascism. Each of these cults has represented an ultimate way of dealing with human affairs, and each in turn has proved its incapacity to provide a satisfactory solution. Although other cults will undoubtedly appear in the future, there is at present no material Messiah to whom men can be asked with confidence to turn. Most of our great idols have been smashed or are in the process of being smashed. It is at such moments as this in human history that the work of the Holy Spirit becomes inescapably apparent. If one looks about now he will find everywhere persons who are groping for some deeper explanation of the meaning of things.

The Spirit of God is stirring in men's minds and hearts, and this phenomenon is far more important for the future of the world than the events that are taking place on the field of battle.

I have been particularly impressed the last few months by the number of scientists who have spoken to me about religious matters. The other day I received a letter from a friend of mine who is an authority on aviation. My friend wrote as follows:

"Never having been a churchman myself, even to the extent of the most shadowy of personal denominational affiliations, I nevertheless become increasingly convinced of the impossibility of building any substantial order, either international or domestic, on a purely mechanistic foundation, or with even the most enlightened of self-interest as the only cement. A tolerable future demands the concept of soul and the concept of duty, and demands a reasonably universal acceptance [and even a general postulation] of a reasonably elevated ethical standard. One of the most discouraging features of much of the recent writing on international affairs is its disposition to proceed from the assumption that man is, always has been, and is inevitably confined to be nothing but a collection of appetites."

This letter reflects a mood which is entirely new among engineers and scientists. A generation ago it did not exist. Is the Church prepared to take advantage of this revolutionary change of outlook? That is the challenge that comes to your generation of ministers and priests.

II. The historic situation which will probably exist after this war is over points with equal clearness to the great opportunity that awaits the Church. We are entering a period when our country will have to take the initiative in establishing world order. We can do this either as aggressive imperialists or as trustees for the world society in which we believe. The Church should exert all of its influence to insure that the policy of the United States during the years ahead should be a policy of trusteeship rather than a policy of imperialism. But whether one policy or the other is adopted, the fact remains that our isolation is forever gone, and that henceforth we will have something to do about running the world. Natural forces are, in God's providence, creating a world order. Americans will have much to do with establishing and maintaining that world order.

The great historic moments in the life of the Church have been when Christian leaders took advantage of the existing natural order to forward the work of the Church. It was the Pax Romana and the Roman roads that made the journeys of St. Paul possible, and that made possible the founding

of the early Christian Church as a universal society. The American airlines of the future will be equivalent of the old Roman roads. They will bind the world together into a natural order. Within this natural order, the Church can achieve its universal character. For the first time in history, the Church will have an opportunity to create a real world-wide community of Christians. Transportation made possible by modern science; a world order guaranteed by freedom-loving peoples; these factors will supply the stage upon which the dream of the Church can at long last begin to be realized.

It is apparent that when this war is over, the United States will have a rendezvous with the Maker of history. At that moment we will make the fateful decision; fateful for ourselves and fateful for the world. We will decide whether to use our immense power or selfish and imperialistic ends, or to use our power for the good of mankind. It is quite within the range of possibility that we may do what most other nations in history have done, and choose the path of empire and exploitation. On the other hand, there is still a chance that we may reject that alternative and choose the other path; the path of responsibility and of policy based on the interests of the commonweal.

It is, in my opinion, the destiny of America to choose this second alternative. The destiny of America is not the destiny of a race, or of a class, or of a military imperialism. Our destiny is related to the destiny of men as persons—to the dignity and grandeur of personal life. Man was not made for the state, but the state for man. Our destiny is to create an order within the framework of which all men everywhere can through the service of God realize freedom and security for themselves and for their children. That is America's God-given mission. Will we accept it, or will we turn our back upon it? The answer very largely depends upon the Christian community in America.

#### *Universal Church Necessary for World Order*

The Christian knows well that there can be no world order in a political or economic sense without a Church universal, any more than there can be personal integrity without personal faith.

If the Church is to realize its opportunity, certain conditions will have to be fulfilled. You are the men who will be responsible for either fulfilling these conditions or failing to fulfill them. Your generation of Christian leaders will either seize the opportunity or miss the opportunity. If you miss it, the consequences for our civilization and for the world are too terrible to contemplate.

The first condition is that the Church profess its full faith.

The full faith of the Church is not a minimum faith but a maximum faith. Statements of minimum faith are invariably sectarian. The maximum Christian faith is the whole body of truth assembled from all branches of the Church. I do not mean to say that everything that each Church believes is true. What I do affirm is that in every authentic branch of the Church, whether Protestant or Catholic, there are truths which must be recognized by the Church as a whole as a part of its great Catholic tradition. The recognition of the validity of each segment of the truth as a part of the whole is an essential condition of the formulation of doctrine and of ethical teaching sufficient to the needs of our time.

The second condition is that the ministers and priests of the Church function in the name of one Church—as if there were one Church of Christ in any given locality.

The church in any locality is the total body of believers in that community. The church cannot be defined in terms of any one branch of the Church. It is an actual organic community of all those who acknowledge by faith their citizenship in the Kingdom of God. The tragedy of our time is that this organic community so seldom has an opportunity to express its life as a community. Only bits and pieces of it are ever symbolized or ever become articulate. It is the business of the minister or

priest to function *as if* he were a servant of the whole community of believers in a particular locality. I am not, of course, talking in administrative terms. I am talking about the state of mind in which the minister or priest should go about his work.

The third condition is that the Church witness to the full implications of the Christian ethic for the state and for society as a whole, as well as for the individual.

The failure of the Church to witness the implications of the Christian ethic for the state and for society as a whole is very largely responsible for the catastrophe which has overwhelmed us. The heresy of Luther in this respect has cursed the world for more than three centuries, and generations still unborn will continue to be cursed by that evil doctrine. It was the open door through which paganism returned to Northern Europe. Once the door was opened the wars of the twentieth century became inevitable. Let us not suppose for a moment, however, that the failure of the Church to witness to the implications of the Christian ethic for the state is exclusively a European failure. We suffer in America too from the same fatal divorce between the world within which the Christian ethic is applied and the world within which the state functions. If the Church is to realize the great opportunity that awaits it, it will be your responsibility to judge the state and statesmen by the standard of the Christian ethic and by no other.