

## "A TWENTIETH CENTURY REFORMATION"

### INTRODUCTION

We would not be doing what we are doing here this morning if Martin Luther had not done what he did on the last day of October in the year 1517. You may remember what he did. You may remember that it was on that day that he posted an invitation on the door of his church in Wittenburg, Germany - an invitation to the scholars of the church to come together to debate and discuss ninety-five propositions concerned with various things in the church of his day. You may recall that this was the match that set fire to the movement that led to the split in the western branch of the Christian Church - a division that has existed right down to our own day.

### THE DIVIDED CHURCH

Martin Luther was truly the great reformer of the 16th century. Another great reformer was a man by the name of John Calvin. Calvin is to the Presbyterians what Luther is to the Lutherans, what Wesley is to the Methodists. In the year 1552, John Calvin sent a letter to Archbishop Cranmer in which he wrote:

"Amongst the greatest evils of our time must be counted the fact that the churches are so disunited. So far as I am concerned, if I can do anything to help, I shall not hesitate to cross ten seas to serve this cause".

What would Calvin say if he were alive today? In 1964 far more than in 1552 the Church, the body of Christ, is broken and dismembered. Consider the predicament of the person who decides to join the Christian Church. He wants to be a Christ, but he has to make up his mind whether he will be, to cite only a few of the alternatives, a Lutheran, a Roman Catholic, an Episcopalian, a Baptist, a Presbyterian, a Methodist. He wants to join the trunk, but he cannot find anything except branches. He is bewildered by the many divisions.

Many of us have followed with keen interest the sessions of the Ecumenical Council in Rome. Protestants who had thought of the Roman Catholic Church as a monolithic structure have been made aware that Catholicism, too, has fundamentalists and modernists, conservatives and liberals, and that there are deep cleavages and sharp divisions and differences among its leaders. And this ought to heighten our concern about our own situation. American Protestantism is shockingly divided. There are over 200 Protestant religious bodies in the United States. It is true that the majority of them numerically are very small, though the smaller they are the more aggressive they seem to be; but think of it. Over 200 Protestant religious bodies in this land alone.

It's a mistake to suppose that they all owe their existence to theological differences, for instance after instance they follow national, racial and economic patterns. Some years ago a Norwegian visiting America found himself in a Minnesota City. A friend drove him around showing him the sights. They came to an intersection where there were four churches, one on each corner. The visitor said, "This seems to be a very religious city. What are all these churches?" His

host replied, "Yes it is a religious city. That is a German Lutheran Church, that is a Swedish Lutheran Church, that one is a Finnish Lutheran Church, and that one is a Danish Lutheran Church". Over and over again, this has been the story. National churches have been transplanted from Europe to America, and then from America to South America, Africa, and Asia.

THIS SPLIT - INDEFENSIBLE

Whatever the origin and occasion of our divisions, they are, I feel, indefensible in times as crucial as these when civilization is engaged in a race with catastrophe; the many divisions can not be justified in this day and age when the basic principles of Christianity are widely challenged and in instances expressly repudiated. By comparison with the major issues that are at stake - the Christian interpretation of life versus a naturalistic and secularistic interpretation, versus an ideology as atheistic as Communism - how significant are our denominational differences?

At the Lausanne Conference on Church Union when there was prolonged debate about historic creeds and confessions, Bishop Azariah, his mind on the "untouchables" in his vast Indian diocese, exclaimed "Fathers and Brothers, be patient with us if we cannot very wholeheartedly enter into the controversies either of the 6th or the 16th century". The plight of humanity is too grave, the forces of evil are too powerful for any of us to be spending our energies in perpetuating denominational distinctions. The call to the church today is to close up its ranks for combined operations.

Moreover, how can we expect people to believe our claim that the Church can heal the divisions of the world when the Church is itself so sorrowfully divided. From many a pulpit across our land there goes out a plea to the members of the United Nations to compose their differences. Are we so naive that we assume that nobody notices that such pleas are made by representatives of an institution still far from realizing the unity for which its Lord prayed.

Canon Raven tells of a conversation he had with a young business man in Britain, a person of keen mind and progressive outlook, a partner in an international banking company. They talked at length about politics and economics, about the importance of enlisting all possible support for the cause of peace, about the necessity of bringing management and labor together in a closer relationship. When Canon Raven rose to go his companion said:

"Just a moment, padre. There is one thing more I must say. You are a damned fraud. You come here talking about the need for statesmen to meet in friendship, and for employers and employees to collaborate in industry. When I see Anglicans and Romans and Presbyterians and Methodists and Congregationalists and Baptists and Unitarians and Quakers and the Salvation Army and the rest of you Christians meeting and collaborating here in Liverpool, I will feel that you have some right to expect others to do so"

Canon Raven's comment afterward was that the charge was not unjust, its logic unanswerable. The Church, when it talks about a new world order, will command a more attentive hearing if it first sets its own house in order!

WASTEFUL AND INEFFICIENT

The surprising thing is that more of the laity do not explode as the British man did over our sectarian divisions. Economically, they are wasteful. I think of a community, typical of many across our land, numbering some 3,000 persons. It has one Roman Catholic Church and seven Protestant Churches - one church for every 400 or so persons. In effect, if not in intention, they compete rather than cooperate with one another. Religion tends to be divisive, rather than a unifying influence. Attendance at each place of worship is small and the congregations spend the bulk of the money contributed on building maintenance and the salary of the minister. The loss to the Kingdom in money and energy wasted in duplication of service, the loss in terms of frustrated lives and under-developed power is appalling. My common sense tells me that one vital, well-staffed, well-equipped church in a community can achieve more for the Kingdom of God and the service of humanity than five or six small, sparsely attended churches.

JUSTIFICATION?

You may wonder is there justification for our divisions? How real are the old controversies? Are they relevant to contemporary situations? Most of the people in our churches today know nothing about the differences which long ago gave rise to the denominations and the chances are that those who once did know have forgotten the details or cease to attach much importance to them. I think the laymen see little difference between the denominations. Many of them change their denominations as they change their place of residence. To a large extent the legacy of the past is what is keeping us apart - not present day realities.

I think if we were united at the circumference and divided at the center, there would be reason for staying apart, but the reverse is the case. At the great ecumenical gatherings of recent years - New Delhi, Evanston, Amsterdam - our unity in essentials is such that we should no longer tolerate purely sectarian differences. Some years ago a fisherman on the coast of Maine, faced with the proposition that his church should join its neighbor in a merger, said, "Well....I don't know whether we can do that or not.....they sing three hymns you see, and we sing only two". Surely those days are gone. The words of Jesus come to mind:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees - hypocrites... for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law - justice, mercy and faith. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel."

"Christ" said one of the Church Fathers is "Truth - not tradition". And we do not honor our spiritual forbearers by making ruts out of the paths they hewed for themselves. In the tangled field of human relations, in our great cities with intermingling of classes and colors, the Church has a healing and unifying ministry to perform. It is commissioned to say to the nations: "Have we not all one Father. Has not one God created us?" Our churches must compose their differences and present to the world a united front.

### DISAGREEMENT

I am aware that there are many who disagree with all of this. There are those who say that if the people in the churches know nothing and care nothing about the factors that divide Protestants, the reason is that their religious experience is superficial and their convictions about the nature of the church are shallow. Yet, what continues to amaze me and should not be overlooked is that some of the keenest spirits among us have lost all interest in sectarian Christianity, in denominations operating as autonomous, self-contained bodies. For these great spirits of our time the vital issues of Christianity today are not bound up with church polity, but with the Christian doctrines of God and man and society, with the foundation principles of morality, putting an end to racism, for example, and abolishing nuclear tests and missiles. It is because they believe the battle for the minds of men rages around such issues that they long to see the denominations close their ranks and combine for the task of world evangelization.

### RANKS ARE CLOSING

The ranks, thank God, are being closed. In recent years, millions of Protestants have been included in consummated acts of church union. Conversations are under way for the establishment as one church of four communions: the Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the United Church of Christ. Through mergers, through the inter-church councils, through the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, Protestants are composing their differences and presenting a more united front.

The winds of change are blowing with great force through the Roman Catholic Church. Thanks in large measure to the vision and initiative of Pope John and his successor, Pope Paul, a new day has dawned in the sphere of Roman Catholic - Protestant Relations. John was considered the "caretaker" pope because of his age. Now we know that this was the correct name for him. For he has done more for the care of the church than anyone in the last 400 years. Things are happening and happening quickly in Rome. Already we are feeling this change trickling down here in our own city - Catholic priests at the inauguration of John Bennett as head of Union Seminary, Cardinal Spellman attending a funeral service in Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church; think of the honored place of non-Catholics observers at the Ecumenical Council in Rome, of the exchanging of pulpits by Protestant pastors and Catholic priests in Holland in recent months. Three weeks ago I received a phone call from Monsignor Byrne of St. Thomas More on 89th Street inviting me to stand robed with him at the Altar of his parish while a young lady of this church married a man of the Roman Catholic Church. I have seldom before experienced such warmth, such wonderful give and take with a Roman Catholic priest. Our East midtown Ministers Association two weeks ago decided to invite the priests of Yorkville to share in our future meetings.

### CONCLUSION

Some are critical of all this; some afraid of it - afraid of compromise of principle and position. I for one am not. I rejoice in this growing climate of unity. Ought we not to see it as the leading of the Holy Spirit. To be sure, there are still great differences that divide us; it may take years to unravel those theological differences - yet, given what God has done in the past five years, who knows what may yet happen.

If you see this as the leading of the Holy Spirit, then do not be silent and inactive. Let others know of your care and your concern. Speak out. Be heard. Those who are silent are simply voting for the status quo.

An editorial in this week's Life magazine entitled, "Rome: Great Battle of Ideas" closes with this word:

"Theologian Karl Barth has warned his fellow Protestants that Rome may be stealing their clothes: that in the quest for the Word and Spirit of the Gospel, 'We might be left far behind by a papal church that is making a dynamic recovery' that there may be 'an exchange of positions and roles' between the Protagonists of the Reformation. Such a change and challenge could mean renewal for all of Christendom, Protestant and Catholic"

Calvin said he would not hesitate to cross ten seas to serve this cause. What will you do to advance it. About one thing there is no doubt. Hand in hand with the crusade for an open society for all men, this is the supreme opportunity facing the church in the 20th Century.

PRAYER: We are thankful, O God, for the church which across the centuries has continued the ministry of Jesus Christ. May the church never become complacent; may its doors always be open to all men; may it never lack the courage to follow the leading of Thy Holy Spirit. In the spirit of Christ we pray. Amen