

"CHANGING THE SCRIPT"

INTRODUCTION

If you have ever been to a pre-Broadway tryout performance of a play in Boston, or Washington, or Philadelphia and then later on had the opportunity to see the final show here in this city, you may have been surprised by how much is changed. Whole new acts are created, new songs introduced, sections are cut or edited, characters that were minor are developed in importance so that their roles become a part of the main theme. The script undergoes numerous production changes which are designed to bring the play to its peak as a work of art. It's constantly in process of being worked on through changes in the script of the production.

This morning I want to talk to you about the shape of the church of tomorrow. I have been wanting to do this for some time and it seemed to me that today would be a good time to do it - this Sunday before Thanksgiving when with grateful hearts we pause to dedicate our new basement room, our *Community Room*. It's ours to use and it's ours to share, I feel, with others as this Church extends its ministry and its mission into the community that surrounds us. The future of this church is tied up with what takes place in our community room - the use to which we put it.

To me it seems that there is a close analogy between this process of developing a production of a play and the activity which is currently going on in the Christian Church. And if I understand what is taking place in the church, it's very much like updating and the sharpening of a play. We have, just as a play, the basic script from which to work. The story line is complete, and the church has to be faithful to that story because it doesn't change. But how the story is produced, and how the story is told from age to age - this varies.

DEVELOPMENT

Now not everybody would agree that the church has done much adapting, in fact there are those who claim that it has been the least adaptable of human institutions. The institutional church, for this very reason, is taking a tremendous beating across the country right now. Many there are who have placed a large question mark under it. I came across these lines this past week:

"How odd of God.....He left us in the lurch.....When He chose the church"

Now I'm not sure that I understand all of what is implied in those lines, but from what I think I understand, I see the contemporary mind looking at the church, wondering how in heaven's name God could have entrusted his message to this institution.

There is a good deal of justification for such feeling and I'm willing to acknowledge that we of the church stand guilty to some charges. We have perpetuated a specialized vocabulary which at times seems incomprehensible to the average listener. A great deal that goes on in our ceremonials is mysterious and to some meaningless. The language of the Bible written in a pre-scientific time comes through as an offense to some who feel it no longer communicates. But we are at our worst, I think when we begin to focus time and attention on those things which divide Christians into various denominations. Few things seem more irrelevant to observers outside the church than the fine points of structural or denominational difference.

To return to the analogy with which I introduced this subject, I think that in spite of its imperfection, the church has a good basic script, but it's obvious that it needs a number of changes in the production end before the play will be ready to meet the demands of today's critics. The encouraging thing is that there are signs that such changes are taking place. Most are familiar with the vast set of changes brought about by the Vatican Council. And within Protestantism the ferment is finding expression in a number of ways. One is the testing of the role of the church in the

matter of civil rights. Another is the emphasis upon spiritual renewal, still another is the movement toward Christian unity. All of these provide for the church times of testing, and as they are incorporated into the life of the church, changes in the script of the production results. There are innumerable changes taking place, but here today I want to focus on two changes that I believe are going to be permanent changes in the script which will make the church of tomorrow different from that of today.

RELIGION: EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

The first change in the script is the new awareness that religion is everybody's business. By this I mean that there is a new feeling moving through the church that somehow the church took a wrong turn when it allowed itself to become dependent upon a professional clergy. The new move is an awareness that the people of the church will have to be responsible for their own faith, that they cannot hire someone to be "religious" for them. There seems to be a new standard growing in churches that all persons in the church are engaged in a ministry to each other and that the clergy are simply the "other ministers" in the group. This understand, I feel, is all to the good. The only trouble is that it puts my job in jeopardy. Central Presbyterian Church here in our own city has printed on the bulletin cover: "Ministers - All Members of Central Presbyterian Church".

The Dean of an Episcopal Theological Seminary once said that the great days of the church were those of "the missionaries, the monks, and the Methodists". What he meant was that Christianity has always been at its best when it was a laymen's movement. Its periods of decline have been when it has been left in the hands of the professional leadership. Its strength has been when the lay people have caught the vision, have been set on fire, so to speak.

If you look at the history of the church you can understand how he could make that claim. The early disciples, the missionaries who carried the gospel across the world were not ordained clergy. They were fishermen, tax-collectors, tent-makers. The earliest monks, of course, were laymen as well. One of my favorites, Francis of Assisi, was a former playboy, but he founded the order dedicated to poverty and Christlike love. His first followers were a banker, a lawyer, a real-estate agent, all laymen. And as for Methodism in its early days, John Wesley, though he was ordained, achieved his remarkable renewal through a host of lay preachers who were not ordained. When the American church moved west it was those churches who were not dependent upon a professional clergy that moved with it and brought religion to the new territory.

The days of the missionaries, the monks and the Methodists were all times when the lay people of the church were deeply involved in its leadership. One of the changes which I think is coming in the church of tomorrow is that we are moving to the place where lay people will accept more and more responsibility for the message, the mission, and the ministry of the church. People, in the church of tomorrow, will be doing many things which today we think of as being done only by the clergy. The clergy will become more and more the resource person, the man who trains others to do the work effectively. Here in this church, as in most churches, we need to encourage each other to be less dependent upon the professional clergy to get the work done. In this church, as in most churches, the clergy are doing things which the laymen can and should be doing. As we look ahead, let's each one of us look upon our self as a minister to others.

THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

Now a second change in the script is the change in the relation of the church to the world. The world has sometimes been viewed by the church as the sum of man's afflictions and tribulations through which he passed on this earthly sphere. When Emerson retreated from Boston to Concord, he wrote this farewell:

"Goodbye, proud world! I'm going home;
Thou art not my friend, and I'm not thine,
Long through the weary crowds I roam;
A river-ark on the ocean brine,
Long I've been tossed like the driven foam,
But now, proud world, I'm going home."

Now if that sounds extreme, let me point out that this was the prevailing mood in many churches for many generations. It's difficult to find one of the favorite hymns which does not share this estimate of the world. We sing, "Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land". (Do we really consider it a barren land?) Even in Luther's triumphant "A mighty fortress", we're reminded that "though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us". If this is your view of the world, it is understandable that a great many people of the church should have tried to avoid the world then as much as possible.

You see a great deal of Christian preaching in the past has been based on the assumption that the world was totally evil. It was on one side and the church on the other. The world was here to serve the church, not the other way around. Church going and participation came to be represented as an end in itself, a kind of virtue, no matter what we meant by it. Leslie Weatherhead tells the story of an experience in the hospital where he was once a patient. He was called on each day by a parson of such mournful countenance that he was a damper on the whole ward. The gloom the clergyman brought with him was relieved by a cheerful little nurse who was not above dropping an expletive now and then when she lost her temper but who raised the spirits of all the men in the ward. He says that there was a good debate in the ward whether one would rather go to heaven with the mournful parson or to hell with a cheerful nurse.

This is almost the kind of trouble that Jesus got in to with the people of his time who could not understand that religion had nothing to do with separateness. They saw him having a great time with people who, according to the rules, were not religious at all. He countered by pointing out that the hypocrites were people who acted out the role of good people on the stage of life, keeping themselves separate from the world, watching every act to be sure it was correct. In so doing they lost their spontaniety and integrity. Their religious commitments were for their own ends rather than an expression of the fullness of their faith. We all know of people like this, but they are not, I think, the religious people of tomorrow.

Now I hope that all of you are hearing what I am trying to say to you. I'm trying to point out that one of the major affirmations of the Christian faith is that God so loved the world. He made it. The Bible affirms that He loved it enough that He entered into it in the person of His Son in order to help it. We are commanded to love it and to serve it because He did so. He was even willing to give His life for it and we are commanded to do no less. We are not to be sheltered from the world, we are to enter it to live victoriously. Our time is going to see a new emphasis upon the role of the church and the world.

In all of this, I think there will be a change in the script regarding the use of the church building. I think more and more the emphasis will move in the direction of community rooms where the church can serve the community, where we can enter into dialogue and discussion with the world far more easily than we can in the sanctuary. The secular world isn't in the sanctuary on a Sunday morning. And there's no guarantee that the secular world will even enter into the community rooms. But, at least, as I look ahead, there is more opportunity to be involved with the world at that point than in the sanctuary. The church that attempts to harbor its resources

of plant and personnel ends up eventually losing its life, but the church on the other hand that is willing to lose itself - its facilities, its personnel, its people - in serving the world rather than self - this is the church that finds its life.

Now I don't know how all of this affects you. It may come as a great threat rather than a promise to some of you. Some of you may grumble and say "you mean people from the outside are going to use this room". Yes - this is what I mean. I hope we can put our community room into maximum use. I'm not looking to bring groups in just to get them in from out of the cold, but if the group is rendering a service with which we are in sympathy - Alcoholics Anonymous, for instance, or the Community Planning Board. Incidentally we have been approached already by Community Planning Board #8 to see if they can meet here on Wednesday, December 18th. This is commendable I think and the sort of thing we want to do. To me the changes which are being made in the script of this church are exciting and bear hope for the future if they can be made fast enough. We're changing with the times in order to meet human need without losing our message. This we must do. The changes in the script are sharpening and focusing our ministry.

It may not be fast enough. Sam Shoemaker, who for so many years served as the minister of Calvary Episcopal Church here in the city and who passed away two years ago, speaking to such critics said this about the future of the church:

"I fear that it will just continue on its own self-centered way, keeping up its old institutions, more or less looking after its own people, but having nothing with which to grip the world's imagination or stir its heart. I go along with you if these are your misgivings. But instead of stirring discouragement in me, they stir a will to put my shoulder to the wheel all the more enthusiastically - for what the church has been given to give to the world is what the world needs more than any other thing"

How odd of God to have chosen the Church? I hope not, for in spite of its imperfections, I believe in the church. I want very much for it to be adaptable to serve the needs of our age and the age to come. If not, I believe God can and will find new channels to make His will known to men. But the opportunity is still ours, and we have not yet lost the initiative. Whether we shall hold it for the future depends on the people of the church and the changes they are willing to make the script. Yes, my friends, it depends upon people like you and the use to which you put this building in the community.