

## "MAN ON THE BOUNDARY"

INTRODUCTION The late Paul Tillich wrote a book which, unlike most of his other books, is quite understandable to those of us who possess only the ordinary powers of intellect. He called it, "On the Boundary" - and it's the story of his own inner conflict between "extremes" and "opposites".

"All my life" he said, "at almost every point I've had to stand between alternative possibilities....."

That is - he could never give himself wholly to this and he could never feel quite at home with that. And so he lived his life, as he put it - "on the boundary" between the two extremes, once saying, "That's where the oxygen is...the best possible place for acquiring knowledge".

DEVELOPMENT I thought of his remark on Tuesday evening as I walked home after our board meeting. We had a probing and stimulating discussion of the role of the church in the life of this community and in our own individual lives. It was the second such discussion of this nature that we've had in the board in the past four or five months. It came about this way.

Mr. Witmer and I were asking the board members for their thoughts and their evaluations of the Canvass for Christian Mission which we conducted in December. This was supposed to be a major emphasis in the life of our church, but it didn't quite come off this way. The response was poor. Only 13 persons out of 350 responded with a commitment of time to a program of service - either in the church or community. Somehow the poor response just didn't measure up to the depth of concern and willingness we feel is in this congregation. We were trying to come up with answers as to why the response was so poor. Was it the timing? Everyone is so busy in December. Would we have done better to hold it in January or next month, in February? Was it the flu? So many were sick? Was it the weather? You'll recall that Sunday, December 15th, the Sunday when we presented the program it snowed, and the congregation was way off in attendance. Only 75 made it to church.

As we reviewed the matter together in the board, it became apparent once again that divergent opinions about the church and its role in the community are represented in our congregation. This is not unusual; I think it's true in most churches - a tension, if you will, between what we call the "pietist" and the "secularist". And those of you who have read Robert Raines fine book, "The Secular Congregation" will remember how in the first chapter he describes the differences between the "pietist" and the "secularist" in today's church.

Said Paul Tillich, "All my life - at almost every point I've had to stand between alternative possibilities....on the boundary". Now we're not talking here this morning about neutrality - the middle of the road sort of thing that's getting more and more impossible. In the world in which we live, we have to commit ourselves to something. But rather I'm thinking of the healthy balance between the extremists whose hardnose rigidity in almost every area is tearing at the peace and order of the world.

I'm reminded of a magazine that sent out a questionnaire recently to its subscribers on the question: "How To Hold Your Wife". More than 200 men answered it, and one man in prison sent back this word: "How to hold your wife? - holding her by the neck is one possibility, but that can be vastly over-done."

A TIME OF GREAT TENSION

Today we have to live our lives in the complexities of issues - in a tension between extremes, between the right and the left, between too much and too little, between the overdone and the underdone. It's an axiom of history that one force creates a counter force - a militant left develops a rigid right. And so the pattern of protest gets deeper, the mood uglier, the opposing positions harder with no one willing to give an inch. Someone has said:

"In controversial matters,  
My perception's mighty fine,  
I always see both sides of things,  
The one that's wrong and mine!"

TENSION BETWEEN OLD AND NEW

And now we're seeing on a large scale what happens in a society when strong feelings get hardened into rigidity, where there's no bridge of understanding and communication breaks down. Suppose we look at one or two areas.

First, see it in the widening gap between the old and the new. Just where can you stand on that? Stand at any point in history and something old is going out and something new is coming in. Of course you don't have to go very far to find the problem. Under every family roof, the past and the present meet, where parents and children look at each other across the table - often with alien eyes, biologically near to each other, but spiritually, intellectually generations apart and often strangers to each other.

Back in the late 1930's and early 1940's there was a popular radio program called "One Man's Family". Remember how it always began with the announcement that the program was "dedicated to the mothers and fathers of this generation and their bewildering offspring". Now in the late 1960's those bewildered offspring are the bewildered parents of another generation, and the generation gap is widening. Isn't it odd that just a decade ago we were complaining about the silent generation? Our college kids then seemed to be on the fence about everything. Today they're on the march - at least great numbers of them - demanding change, storming the halls of government and learning and calling for "student power". Within this past year, they have closed at least 3 dozen universities in 20 countries and in some staid, old places like Columbia almost wrecked the institution. What do they want? What are they after?

In 1959 a man named Wright Mills wrote a book "The Power Elite" in which he pointed out that American society is controlled by a few big institutions: big government, big business, the army and the university, whose interlocking leadership forms the elite. That's what they are protesting: the establishment, the power structure, what they regard as a conspiracy of big institutions defending the things that are.

Dr. Eugene Smith, who wrote the church-wide study book, "New Forms of Mission" recently said to a group of ministers that underlying the student revolt throughout the world - in Communist as well as Capitalist countries - was the cry for a voice in the decision-making that effected their lives. There have been revolutions before, people with sticks and bricks storming the citadels of law and learning, but never before has the tension between the old and the new been so epidemic or the contempt for authority gone so deep.

However, I find myself, as perhaps you find yourself, on the boundary. It takes two to make a quarrel and two kinds of drivers on the highway to make a collision. The too fast driver is a menace, so also is the too slow driver.

I like the words of Osborn Elliot, Editor of Newsweek to the graduating class of Chapin last June:

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Revolutions aren't made by radicals only. Just as often they are made by traditionalists who try to dam up the forces that should flow, who refuse to initiate changes before they are demanded. So while deploring the excesses of the younger generation, I find myself, on occasion, even more impatient with the "stand-patters", those who create the climate of resistance in which no evils can be cured and no improvements made. Remember what the old country parson once said:

"When we're young we want to change the world. When we're old, we're afraid our children will".

It's the business of youth to shake the things that are, to stand up to the council of the elders and to call for new solutions. I like to say to the Seniors, the 12th graders I'm teaching on Thursdays at the Chapin School here in our community:

"Keep heating it up - but let the heat be accompanied by some light. Don't settle for things as they are - but don't settle either for just tearing them down. Probe, challenge, demand answers - and supply some answers of your own. And above all, keep your perspective".

The young people involved today in campus unrest were born in the year of Hiroshima and find it hard to accept the moral judgment or even the good sense of a generation that produced wholesale bombing and no other answers. The boundary is the place of understanding where at least you can see and understand what Alfred North Whitehead said:

"We must preserve order in the midst of change. But we must also preserve change in the midst of order."

#### OLD AND NEW: IN THE CHURCH

Now when we bring this tension between the old and the new into church life, it takes on the nature of a conflict as old as the church itself: the inevitable clash between the ultra-conservative and the ultraliberal mind, both of which hold some partial truth but either of which by itself is incomplete.

Back a few years ago an able churchman said:

"I went over and sat down with the fundamentalists. I found them good people and sincere. I respected them but I found myself mentally suffocated. I went over and sat with the liberals. Here also I found good people and sincere, but I came away from them spiritually chilled to the bone. I've been searching ever since for a church with all the spiritual conviction of the old fundamentalist faith and with all the freedom of the liberal, scientific mind"

I think what makes an extremist in religion or anything - right or left - is the tendency to pick up a fragment and run off with it as though it were the total truth. Part of our trouble may be that there are too few people who have learned how to use the word AND. The word we pounce on is OR. It must be this OR that. We insist on the life of prayer or the life of service, or evangelism or community involvement, personal religion or social action. We never seem to understand that in clinging to one to the exclusion of the other we are setting up false alternatives and dividing the house of faith against itself.

It's like asking the question: "Which foot do you walk on - this or that?" Both!

"On which wing does a bird fly?" Both! Of course the Christian mission must be personal. If it doesn't start in the individual, it doesn't start. But - on the other hand, if it ends in the individual, it ends.

Now the Christian Church today is going through an agonizing experience of re-examination and re-appraisal of its role in the social order. In some parts of our land it is being attacked by extremists - both left and right - when it dares to speak out on social and political issues. Can you keep the church out of social and political issues. How simple is this Gospel of Christ? How private is a Christian? The people who think the Christian should stay inside the church and say his prayers and do nothing more had better not read the Bible. For they are apt to be upset to discover how those first century Christians managed to get themselves into hot water and into jail. In trying to save the souls of people, they got themselves in trouble with the local authorities time and again. How can we say that we're interested in saving souls, but not interested in the conditions in which their souls are shaped and often mis-shaped. I find myself - as perhaps you do - on the boundary....deeply concerned about personal commitment and what goes on in the church and in the interior lives of its members, but also just as concerned about social involvement and what goes on out there in the streets of the secular world and in the lives of people who never pass through the doors of the church.

If you lose either one - you're lopsided. It's like Kate Smith use to say about her mother. She said her mother was always in trouble with either her father or the furnace. Everytime she watched one - the other would go out! You need both!

I suppose if you were to ask me what the main purpose of today's sermon is, I would say that it is an appeal - a call - for a bit of Christian understanding - what we sometimes sing about in our hymns. We live in a time that has some great issues and momentous problems to face, problems that involve us all. The time has come for some fair and honest thinking - to say nothing of Christian compassion. The time has come for Christian people to stand "on the boundary" - to avoid the extreme positions that harden and then thwart communication - to help create a climate where solutions can be found before it's too late - to do something more intelligent and helpful than mouth the old cliches and arm ourselves to the teeth to keep down a potential explosion.

Jesus had a parable about this: The Day of the Last Judgment when the judge of all the earth himself will divide the people - some on the left and some on the right. And the final judgment will hinge on this question: "What did you do about it. The poor, the sick in mind and soul, the dejected man down under... inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me".

In closing I should like to ask of you one thing. Tomorrow morning before you begin your work-a-day week - if you're a housewife, before you begin your chores in the home; if you're a student, before you trudge off to your first class; if you're a business man, before you begin to wkr through your pile of letters, or the sheets on your desk, sit down and ask yourself these three questions:

"If not me, whom?  
If not here, where?  
If not not, when?"

I quote from a full page ad recently seen in the newspaper:

"I do not believe that the greatest threat to our future is

from bombs or guided missiles. I don't think our civilization will die that way. I think it will die when we no longer care....."

LET US PRAY "Give us, we pray Thee, O God:

Understanding hearts....  
eyes to see, ears to hear, and  
courage and the willingness of the hand to do."  
Amen.