

## "NEW PATCHES OR NEW CREATIONS"

### INTRODUCTION

It is likely that the boyhood home of Jesus knew something about patches. How often He had seen His mother put a patch on a old garment. How often He had worn one. And always in a poor home there comes a time when the old thing cannot be patched any more without ruining the whole thing. One day in conversation with some religious leaders, Jesus remembered that and He said, "No man putteth a piece of cloth new unto an old garment". In that small sentence, He opened the door into some large issues.

### DEVELOPMENT

I suppose the oldest controversy in history is this struggle between the old and the new, the conflict between the past and the future. It has never let up. In age after age there are patchers and creators, some who keep trying to patch up a threadbare garment and some who are forever trying to create a better new one. Where do Christians belong in this conflict? In a time of radical change, where do the followers of Christ stand? ~~This is no longer an academic question.~~ We have to face it now and make up our minds about it, because all our lives we shall have to live in an era of continuing unsettledness. There is no use in preparing ourselves for normal times, for we shall not have a chance to live in normal times.

The biographer of Louis XVI said of him, "He was an amiable and upright man and doubtless would have made a good leader in times of peace". Unfortunately his ancestors had bequathed to him a revolution. This is where we are, too; we have inherited a revolution, and we shall have to live out our days where the old and the new are clashing furiously. ~~We carry in our hearts the conflict that is raging without letup through the world.~~

David Rockefeller, when he was named Businessman of the Year, said what many others have said and in many other ways: "In life today, the past is being overwhelmed by the future.....There has occurred a transformation so swift in pace and so profound in social... implications that it has outstripped the perception of most historians." Well, in a time of swift and profound change, where do Christians stand? What are we to be: new patches or new creations?

### I. REEXAMINE OUR OWN FAITH

I believe the first thing we Christians must do in a time of radical change is to reexamine our own faith and understand as clearly as we can the progressive nature of Christianity itself. What is a Christian? I see nothing wrong with Paul's description:

"If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new" (II Corinthians 5:17)

One of the oddest things imaginable is a Christian allergic to change when he himself is the product of the Changer, or a Christian afraid of the new when he himself has been made new. A patched coat is not a good symbol of a Christian. He may sometimes have to wear one, but he was never meant to be one. A Christian is a new creation in Christ

with the life of the living God in him continually renewing his mind, putting off the old man and putting on the new!

The key word of the New Testament is new. However, could it have happened that the name of Christ in the minds of many has been linked with the forces of reaction, and that Christianity in all too many lands has been identified with old systems and institutions which have no kinship with His spirit? It is the great irony of history that the hands of Christ have been so often shackled by some of the very chains from which He came to set men free. Jesus was no patcher of old garment. He made it quite clear that new wine, new teaching and new life was not merely a rearrangement of selfish human nature, or a patch on old material, but a new birth, a new life and a living force to create change both in the hearts of men and in the affairs of men. All these metaphors are living metaphors -- seed in the earth that grows, new wine that bursts old wineskins, a vine that puts forth new branches and new fruit. The world has never realized in adequate clearness, now have we Christian people ourselves realized, how progressive and explosive this faith of ours is: it is a living ~~force~~ in life that must continually dig for itself new channels and make for itself new forms. Nobody puts a new patch on an old garment. Jesus is not a patcher, He is a changer. He is the maker of new creations.

I believe we must go on to understand the processes of change, the procedures of progress and the natural laws that underlie all human advancement. They are clear enough. All progress is made by the simple technique of building in the present on some foundation of the past, taking the gains of yesterday and going further with them today. It was so obvious that Jesus dismissed it with a sentence, "Think not.....I am come to destroy, but to fulfill". "Ye have heard that it was said....of old time....but I say unto you". That is the key to progress in anything. That is how we build our houses: that is how we expand our business: that is how we get an education. We don't plunge in for a PhD at the year of six - at least not yet. We start in kindergarten, beginning with an alphabet and then proceeding in progressive stages to build on that and to expand our understandings of it. What a pity it is that we cannot hold to that simple procedure in the wider school of life. Here we come, all of us, tagged and labeled. We are rightists or leftists; we are conservatives or liberals. We have people who want to stay in the kindergarten and people who want to throw it out - some who want to go back to yesterday and some who just can't wait for tomorrow. I suppose there will never be any cure for this. By temperament some of us are liberal, with our feet on the accelerator, and some are conservative, with both feet on the brakes.

A good observation has been made on this. It takes two hands to make a clock tell time. One hand goes fast and one goes slowly, and it takes both hands to make a good clock. Perhaps it takes both to make a good country or a good church. I heard Stanley Jones say once that if we were all liberal we would blow up and if we were all conservative, we would dry up. It has never been said better than by Sir Winston Churchill: "If we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future."

We need to understand the procedures and the underlying laws of progress. We can never get away from the past, for all of our roots are in it; we dare not disregard it. The student who starts out in a chemical laboratory with contempt for the past, relying on his own originality, is likely to blow his head off before the day is out. All scientific achievement (advancement) is made possible by man's experience in the past. The New Testament is rooted in the Old. Democracy is made out of many strands woven in generations gone. America runs its roots down into many Old-World cultures, and even when we speak of the 20th century we are acknowledging that nineteen centuries are behind us with all of their history...in us. If someone comes saying that Christianity is a conservative religion, he is right, if by that he means that it is profoundly grateful for the past and deeply concerned about preserving values, insights and some of the traditions which are forever true. If we ever get away from them we are lost.

We can never get away from the past, but neither can we stop there. If we see only the conservative quality in Christianity, we have not grasped the heart of it. The New Testament is not a conservative book. It is a New Testament. "Ye have heard that it was said....of old time....but I say...." We cannot stop with the old. That is what makes revolutions. Revolutions are made not alone by bad men who are out to destroy the old, but just as often by good men who refuse to grow, who want to cling to the old, to hold back and to dam up the forces which ought to flow in the normal procedures of progress. Custom - how many rivers grow stagnant in that swamp. How many garments have been torn on that old nail! Custom - the way we have always done it, the things we keep on doing, the words we keep on saying after life has gone out of them or leaped ahead of them.

For instance, examine the sleeve of a man's coat: there are two buttons there, or three buttons, or maybe four. There is no need for those buttons: custom put them there. We are told that in the monasteries the old monks with loose robes had trouble eating their soup, so they sewed buttons on their sleeves to keep them out of the soup. We no longer wear the robes, but we still have the buttons. We have all sorts of buttons brought over from yesterday - all sorts of things we do not need, customs we have outgrown, habits of thought grown stuffy and musty with the years.

Now let me quote a bit of verse, a little jingle with a moral:

"one day, through the primeval wood,  
A calf walked home, as all calves should;  
But made a trail all bent askew,  
A crooked trail as all calves do.

Since then two hundred years have fled,  
And, I infer the calf is dead,  
But still he left behind his trail,  
And thereby hands my moral tale.

The trail was taken up next day  
By a lone dog that passed that way;  
And then a wife bell-wether sheep  
Pursued the trail o'er vale and steep...

And from that day, o'er hill and glad,  
Through those old woods a path was made;  
And many men wound in and out,  
And dodged, and turned and bent about  
And uttered words of righteous wrath  
Because 'twas such a crooked path.

The forest path became a lane,  
That bent, and turned, and turned again;  
This crooked lane became a road,  
Where many a poor horse with his load  
Toiled on beneath the burning sun,  
And traveled some three miles in one...  
The years passed on in swiftness fleet,  
The road became a village street;  
And this, before men were aware,  
A city's crowded thoroughfare;  
And soon the central street was this  
of a renowned metropolis;

And o'er his crooked journey went  
The traffic of a continent.  
A hundred thousand men were led  
By one calf near three centuries dead.  
There followed still his crooked way  
And lost on hundred years a day;  
For thus such reverence is lent  
To well established precedent.

For men are prone to go it blind  
Along the calf paths of the mind,  
And work away from sun to sun  
To do what other men have done.

Some of us came out of cities like that. We shall not mention any names, but there are crooked streets built on the paths of yesterday. Who wants to preserve them or patch them? Who wants to go back to the old worlds of high fences, greedy systems, racial egotisms, unregulated colonialisms and imperialisms? That was a crooked path. We are no more out to preserve them than the slums in the old cities. We say thank God the time is now. A voice is sounding now through all the confusion, the voice of the living, creative God, "Make now the crooked places straight".

If we are to live as creative Christians in an age of change, we must learn to distinguish clearly between the external forms of our heritage and the inner forces that produced it. Often what puts the brakes on real progress is just this: we seem more concerned about preserving the institutions that a progressive past has made than we are in reproducing in ourselves the progressive spirit that made them. That is, we want to keep what the pioneer has created, but we want to curb the pioneer spirit that creates. It is a strange mentality, and we all have it, in some degree. Think of people praising Abe Lincoln for what he did back there but are up here denying the moral principles he stood for. Imagine people every year celebrating the revolution of 1776 but vigorously opposing any revolution going on now! That is honoring the heroes of the past whose chief honor it was that they refused to live in the past.

Jesus faced this in the Pharisees. He accused them of honoring the prophets, gilding the sepulchers of the prophets and putting flowers on the graves of the prophets; yet repeating the same sins, the same stubborn resistance to the will of God that put the prophets in their graves. Surely it should be clear that the only way we can honor the prophets is by doing in our time what they did in theirs. The only way we can honor the fathers of our country is by keeping the progressive spirit, by taking a progressive step in our time as they did in theirs. It isn't necessary that we preserve all the institutions and customs they created. We honor them because that is precisely what they did not do. They broke with old customs and made new ones of their own. Consciously or unconsciously, they obeyed the principle of progress, the voice of the living God. You have heard it said of old time, but I say unto you "Go On". It is far more important to have the power, the spirit and the vision to "go on" to create new kingdoms than to restore or patch up old kingdoms that have served their day and belong to yesterday.

In every age there have been people who have been homesick for old ways, a deep reluctance in everyone to move from our seemingly solid world to the upsetness of an unknown future. There is an old story, a somewhat foolish story, that often comes to my mind when my blood is working overtime and I get fearful, as I often do, about what is shaping up in our world or country. An illiterate man was walking along the old stagecoach road to Boston. All along the road, at intervals, he found slabs of stone set up. He could not read the inscriptions, but he did not want to be lacking in proper courtesy, so at every stone he would stand for a moment, take off his hat and mourn there for the unfortunate dead. Late in the afternoon a stranger met him and asked the reason for his grief. "Oh" he said, "there are so many dead along this road. Ten times I have stopped today". And the stranger said, "My friend these are not tombstones; these are milestones. You are weeping over progress". We have all done a lot of weeping over progress. How often in history people have mourned the passing of a kingdom, the breakdown of a system, the collapse of an empire, or the changing forms in the church - gravestones which in God's good time turned out to be milestones.

No one today is weeping over the passing of monasticism, but that was sacred once. No one is weeping now over the passing of feudalism, but that was once a sacred system. No one is weeping now over the passing of the divine right of kings, but the very name betrays the sacredness with which it was once held. We are in a time again when many old things are passing away and new forces are stirring again, demanding new shapes and patterns. Of all people, we in America should be living at least as creatively as we can, for this nation itself was born out of a conflict between those who wanted to patch up an old thing and those who wanted to create a new thing. Up in Concord there is a grave which holds the bodies of five British soldiers who died on this soil in the Revolutionary War. Over it is the inscription, "They came three thousand miles.... To keep the Past upon the throne". And not alone they, but the colonies too, there were loyalists who did not want to break with the old ties, fearful of what might happen if they did, until some rebels met in Philadelphia and decided not to put back any old thing, but to make something new. No one today is weeping over that.

What I am pleading for is not blind belief in progress - that is too superficial - and certainly not gullible hospitality to everything labeled new. We know that many things paraded as new are not true, and not all revolutions eventuate in progress. In fact, there are many so-called new things which, as Christians, we can only deplore. The new sexual morality, for instance, is nothing but an old immorality, and most of the so-called new theology is nothing but old heresy many times discredited. There are many things labeled new on which we would like to put some brakes. What I am pleading for is a certain slant in the mind or in the heart. Call it faith, the kind of faith that runs all through the Bible - faith in the living God who is moving toward a purpose, and a response in our heart to wholeheartedly follow Him. We are not patchers of old things. We are makers of new creations.

CLOSING In the old city of Haran, a legend grew up about Abraham. He was the first of that long train of spiritual pioneers striking out by faith to follow a voice, looking for a city whose builder and ruler is God. Haran was half way to the Promised Land, and on his way Abraham stopped in Haran for awhile. In his sojourn there, the legend says, he so endeared himself to the people of the place that when he felt the urge to go on they gathered around him and insisted that he remain with them and be their king. They pleaded with him; they begged him; they threatened him and finally they took him to the top of a cliff and gave him the choice of either remaining as their king or being thrust over the cliff to his death. "I have heard the voice" he said, "and I must go" So they threw him over the precipice, but Abraham landed on his feet, the legend says. And where his feet struck, two springs of fresh water sprang up. The Moslem guides today will tell you that story, and if you don't believe it, they will show you the place where his feet struck the rock, the mosque they built over it and the pool of water full of sacred fish. It is quite a tribute to Abraham that his foot prints are so visible after so many years.

We are concerned about our footprints, too, and with what the future will say of us. We honor the fathers of yesterday, but we must remember that we are the fathers of tomorrow. Down there in the future, they will be able to point to some marks in the rock and say, "Here is where our fathers planted their feet; in their time they heard the voice and they obeyed, and they could not be deterred"?