

"THE NEED FOR UPDATING THE CHURCH"

INTRODUCTION

We would not be doing what we are doing here today if Martin Luther had not done what he did on the last day of October in the year 1517. You know what he did. And you know that what he did 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 down to this present day, a division that we hope and pray will one day be healed. On this Reformation Day Sunday that we associate with Martin Luther, I have chosen for a text words from the J. B. Phillips translation of the book of Hebrews:

"Let us leave behind the elementary teaching about Christ and go forward to adult understanding. Let us not lay over and over again the foundation truths.....No - if God allows, let us go on"

These words summon us as a bugle note to an updating of the church in our time and indicate to us the spirit in which we ought to work. We do not know who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, but these words tell us a few things about the writer. He treasured the past, but he had his eye on the future. He was rooted and grounded in the foundation truths of the Christian faith, but he was eager to relate them to his own day. He was not suspicious of change, not fearful of it as a danger to the faith or a betrayal of it. The dead of traditionalism was what he feared. He was an adventurous, forward looking, progressively minded Christian.

DEVELOPMENT

This is the type of person Pope John was. In the service of the church he had moved about in the world, eyes and ears open, contacts with people of every class, because he was a great human. And he knew what was being said - religion snores while science marches....the church a venerable anachronism, at home in medieval society but outmoded in the nuclear age....often throwing its weight on the side of political and social reaction. When John was elected Pope he at once set himself the task of opening the church to the world, making it relevant to today's explosive conditions and a power for unity, for peace, for justice. He spoke forthrightly of the church's need of updating itself, modernizing itself, renewing and reforming every aspect of its life.

The influence of that one great and good man has extended far beyond the Roman Catholic Church. His influence has been felt throughout Protestantism. Dr. Visser't Hooft, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, said this about Pope John: "He changed the history of church relations". To be sure, there is a changed atmosphere and spirit today in all branches of the church. There is a recognition of the need of taking a searching, critical look at every phase of the worship, the work, the structure of the church. There is a readiness to break fresh ground, an openness to the future, a toleration of variety and diversity based not on lack of conviction but on trust in the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit. The gulf between the church and the world is narrowing. | The church is less insulated, isolated, self-absorbed, and is taking on its conscience the millions who are estranged from it and indifferent to it. It sees its place more and more is in the crowded ways of life and at the heart of human need. It knows that it has to address itself to all mankind - the secularists of the west, the anti-Christians of the East, the non-Christians of Asia and Africa. This is the immense missionary task with which the church is confronted. |

I have been speaking in broad general terms about the church at large, the church universal. I turn now to the local church, the parish church - in particular this church. What can we do and how can we help in updating, modernizing, renewing and reforming the work and worship and structure of this church so that it can communicate the Gospel of Christ to the community and city in more effective fashion and be the servant of the community and city.

THE MATTER OF COMMUNICATION

Consider first the matter of communication. What are the facts? I have the feeling that the traditional doctrines and symbols of the Christian faith are widely unintelligible. The language of the Bible, of hymn books, prayer books, anthems has ceased to be any part of the furniture of the modern mind. For some church members of long standing the language has been hallowed by its use down through the centuries, but I would suspect for the mass of people today it is apt to be remote from everyday life, so remote to be meaningless. Am I mis-stating, or exaggerating the case? A Bishop of the Church of England has said that the Book of Common Prayer, the prayers in Tudor English, the hymns mostly in an old world idiom - all of this is no more congenial to the young modern mind than the equator to the polar bear.

Those are the facts. What is to be done about them? The foundation truths of the Christian Gospel have to be presented in a vocabulary intelligible to the 20th century. It is no easy task. It is the task of the preacher, the teacher, of all who give leadership in the church. It is also the task of every church member. If the Christian faith is to be intelligible to you, and if, as is your duty, you are to commend and advocate it in intelligible forms to others, you recognize, do you not, the necessity, instead of repeating words after the life and power has passed from them, of translating them into the terminology of today of communicating the abiding experiences of the Gospel in current categories and thought forms. This is why you should have and use a modern translation of the Bible and have a good commentary near at hand as you study it. This is why alongside of a prayer book that is classic and ancient you should have one that is modern, its language the language of our day, its subject matter covering the concerns of our day. This is why you should study books that interpret the Christian faith in the speech of our day - Dr. Fosdick's Dear Mr. Brown, Bishop Robinson's The New Reformation, Georgia Harkness's Understanding The Christian Faith.

Pope Paul, before the Ecumenical Council reconvened last month, spoke of the danger of schism in the Roman Catholic Church. About that danger, a Catholic layman, writing from France, had this to say:

"If there is a schism which threatens the church in France, it is that which involves ten or thousands of the baptized and confirmed every year. They leave the church on tiptoe, without saying anything, for a thousand and one reasons, of which the principle one is their impression that the church does not understand their needs, their aspirations, that the religion and teaching they receive is incapable of entering into their life and giving it sufficient nourishment, and that their problems of family, profession, social and political life are not understood."

This is the case for reform, for renewal, for updating, modernizing. And what has been said of the Roman Catholic Church could easily be said about branches of the Protestant Church. One of the places to begin is with the re-interpretation and re-vitalization of the perennial truths of the Christian Gospel. And it is not enough, I feel, for the clergy to do this; the laity must be involved in this through study, through the reading of books and discussion. The communication of the Gospel.

THE MATTER OF NEW FORMS

In addition to a new vocabulary, we need new methods, new forms of organization, changes in the structural organization of the church. In every influential area of human activity there is an updating going on - in science, industry, business, all the professions. The church should be just as progressive, just as alert to meeting new situations with new strategies. No organization should be kept in existence simply on its past record.

AS HARVEY COX reminds us:

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The church needs to get to where the action is....where the action is taking place..

No program should be maintained that has ceased to meet a human need or discharge a Christian responsibility. The criterion right down the line should be the relevance of the service offered to the contemporary situation. Whatever has outlived its usefulness should go. And yet - what are the facts? Of all institutions, churches tend to be the most rigidly conservative. Many are governed by traditions long out of date. ~~Ministers spend a great deal of time and energy squirting a little oil into the institutional machinery to try to keep organizations going that perhaps should be permitted to die.~~ Pastors, for instance, who suggest changing the time of the worship service from 11 a.m. to 10:30 may encounter strong resistance despite the fact that the 11 a.m. time was set by an agrarian society to avoid conflicting with the time for milking cows. Many of them have taken for their motto, "The thing that hath been shall be". Many are out of touch with the times. The rolling tide of humanity sweeps past their doors, unheeding and uncaring.

Some of you have worshipped in St. Martin's in the Fields, that great historic church in the heart of London. I remember worshipping there one evening in the winter of 1954. The church was packed. And yet, from what I know of it when Dick Sheppard was appointed Vicar it was practically empty; some would say dead, defunct. In a short period of time it became one of the most vital churches in the world. What brought about the transformation. There were many factors, but one was this: Sheppard and the people he inspired updated that old church, modernized it, re-organized it, introduced new methods, new techniques and set themselves to relate and apply the Christian faith to London life. There were, of course, some people averse to and horrified by the changes. One of his critics complained to Sheppard, "What with the air-raids outside the church and you inside, there seem nothing but explosions".

I would think that Riverside Church here in our own city in certain ways resembles St. Martin's in the Fields. Dr. Fosdick and Dick Sheppard had much in common. Dr. Fosdick was a modernizer. He was embroiled in controversy because of what was essentially an up-dating activity. He will long be remembered in this city for his preaching, lecturing, writing and counselling, and by the Riverside Church for the new trails he blazed for the ministry of that church - open seven days a week, closely related to the community, serving contemporary needs, facing contemporary problems, new methods at work for a new day.

And that church, one of the great ones in America, is still blazing new trails - trails that other churches ought to be following: working toward an interdenominational church, advancing the cause of church union, implementing in aggressive terms ~~that~~ the principle that a church of Christ must be a church of all people, regardless of race, class or creed.

~~The updating process is an on-going process.~~ The necessity for it is permanent. Somebody has said that the Reformation is not a date in past history, but it is a present process. New ideas, new plans, new methods of operation - all are welcomed in this church in our effort to serve the community and the city in a more effective fashion. Less traditional in approach and more adventurous some...

THE ROLE OF THE LAYMAN

Now a final point and a very important one. There can be no effective updating of a church, no effective relating and applying of its message to the needs of the times unless the whole congregation is involved and actively participating in the task - members as well as ministers. Keep in mind our Lord's last commission. The church is to go - to go into all the world with its message. It is the servant of the world. It is to lift the level of the life of the world - its economic, political and social life. And you - the members of the church - are in the center of the world. Every day you do business there. Every day you make contacts there. Every day you exert influence there. It is there, in the

front line of the battle, that you are called to be active Christians. Do you see why Luther, laboring for the reformation of the church in the 16th century, laid such stress on the priesthood of all believers. And do you see why in Roman Catholicism today it is being urged that the church must not be identified solely with the clergy, but that the laity must be enlisted in the ministry of the church? *

In protestantism, we stress the place of the laymen, but what we mainly stress is his part in the running of the church - the organizing of it, the functioning of it on the inside. The Christian layman has a part to play there, but his chief role is as an active Christian agent and advocate after church on Sunday and when he goes about his business on Monday and throughout the weekday. As an active Christian agent and advocate, he should have (1) an understanding of what Christian belief is, to be able to read the Bible intelligently and not be tongue tied or red-faced if he is challenged by an atheist or secularist. And (2) he should have an understanding of what is going on in the world and of what Christian responsibility in public life demands and involves. And he should apply his mind to the Christian implications and demands of his daily occupation. It is a tall order; it is a demanding order. But this is what modern Christianity is all about. How do you measure up?

This then is the task to which we are summoned. This is the task to which, if we profess and call ourselves Christian, we dedicate ourselves to on this Reformation Day. But let us remember as we do: we are not entirely on our own. We are fellow laborers with God. We have the promise of his presence, and his power. Hear then the marching orders once again:

"Let us leave behind the elementary teaching about Christ and go forward to adult understanding. Let us not lay over and over again the foundations of truth. No, if God allows, let us go on....."

LET US PRAY We are thankful, O God, for the church which across the centuries has continued the ministry of Jesus Christ. Help us, as we seek new forms and ways to communicate the Gospel in the secular city in which we live and work. May the church never become complacent; may its doors always be open to all men; may it never lack the courage to follow new paths and break new ground. In the spirit of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen

* The world will not be saved by the clergy. It will be saved by laymen whose sense of commitment, strength of conviction and dedication to the task is as complete as though they had been ordained priest or minister.