

"THE REFORMATION WITHIN THE PROTESTANT CHURCH"

INTRODUCTION Some of you may recall that the January 3rd issue of NEWSWEEK carried a cover picture of Robert McAfee Brown, one of America's leading theologians, and a recent Protestant observer to Vatican II. The lead article was entitled "U. S. Protestantism: Time for a Second Reformation". Profound changes are taking place in Protestant churches, just as significant as the new life we have been reading about in the Roman Catholic Church. Certainly one of the important by-products of Vatican II has been the acceleration of the new wind blowing through the windows of the Protestant churches. What's really taking place? What are the changes? Why are they coming?

As you know, magazines and newspapers with national circulation these past six months have been printing lead articles on this subject. In July, you may recall that LOOK magazine had an article entitled, "The Battle of the Bible" given over primarily to what is taking place in Protestant churches today. And then in September THE NATIONAL OBSERVER had a front page article entitled, "Is the Local Church Out of Date". (After reading that I began to get worried for fear that I might soon be out of a job). In November THE NEW YORKER had three articles on "The New Theologian". In December FORTUNE had an article entitled "What on Earth is Happening In Protestantism?" And almost every other week TIME has a long article about these changes. And now the NEWSWEEK article of three weeks ago. What's it all about?

THE BACKGROUND It all began right after World War II at the same time profound changes were developing in space science, mathematics, automation, transportation, communication, urbanization, medicine, sociology, psychology. A corporation president recently declared, "If your company is doing business as it did five years ago, it is headed for a slump".

So the Protestant churches, since World War II, have begun to move in what is being called a new reformation, matching what has been going on in the Roman Catholic Church, and, some are saying, making more profound changes than took place in 1517 when Protestantism had its beginning. Protestantism has received much of its inspiration from a German pastor who was executed by Hitler, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We can understand the new reformation in Protestantism best if we comprehend some of the things he taught and said. This is not easy, but I'm going to take a phrase of his this morning, if I may, and hope that this will open a window into our understanding of what's happening. While he was in Hitler's prison, Bonhoeffer wrote about a "religionless Christianity". He said, "men as they are now, simply cannot be religious any more. In the future, Christians will speak of God without religion." And at his godson's baptism, he said, referring to the child, "By the time you are grown up the form of the church will have changed beyond recognition".

RELIGIONLESS CHRISTIANITY Religionless Christianity. Consider what is meant by this phrase. How contradictory it sounds. How can you have Christianity without religion? The Bible raises this issue often. Consider the passages of scripture read earlier in the service. Isaiah, for instance, saw how religious forms actually kept people away from God's presence. Hear again his words:

"What care I for your lavish sacrifices?' the Eternal asks. 'I am sick of your slaughtered rams...the blood of bullocks....this is no delight to me'" "I loathe....your gatherings at the new moon and on the sabbath....your feasts and festivals....are a weariness to me. I am tired of them!"

And he tells them his real concern:

"Your hands are full of bloodshed. Wash yourself clean. Banish your evildoing!"

In effect Isaiah was saying something like this - your religion, that is, your form of worship, has kept you from being God's chosen people, God's chosen instruments of love and justice. Their religious forms separated the people from their true worship of God. Isaiah, you see, was calling for a worship of God without religion, without the false forms, the numerous activities to which the people were so accustomed.

We find the same thing in the time of Jesus. The religious leaders of Jesus' day could not comprehend the new era Jesus was initiating. Their forms of worship forbade men to associate with evil people - tax collectors, publicans, Romans, sinners. Much emphasis was put upon fasting, upon ritual. In the scripture lesson this morning, Jesus is pictured as eating with and enjoying the fellowship of these outcasts. So, in all honesty, the religious leaders of his day asked him, "Why do you do this if you are the chosen one?" And Jesus replied, "I came not for the well, but for the ill who need a doctor". And then he gave this very interesting and penetrating illustration. "No one pours fresh wine into old wineskins. Otherwise the wine will burst the skins and both the wine and the wineskins are ruined". The religious forms had separated the Jews from the true worship of God. The new wine burst the old wineskin, and so they killed him. They could do nothing else.

THE NEW REFORMATION

How do religious forms today actually thwart the true worship of God? This is what the new reformation is all about. This is what all the talk is about. I suppose it is difficult for us to comprehend what it means to have a God without religion because we have had and have been accustomed to a form of religious worship which is meaningful to us. We need to consider the scores of people who are outside the walls of the churches and do not come in. We need to listen to what they are saying and try to understand it.

More and more Protestants are facing up to the fact that attendance at Sunday worship has been shrinking, especially in the great cities. Church membership may have increased slightly, but a recent Gallup Poll reported a decline in church attendance from 1958 to 1964. People are not attending church the way they use to. People still want to be members of churches when they need its service for special events - weddings, funerals, baptisms, but in the main the service of worship is losing its appeal.

I was discussing this with a ministerial colleague here in the city recently. He said that this had come as something of a shock to him coming to the city after a 19 year ministry in a suburban community. He said rather humorously that he thought all that was needed at his particular church location at Park Avenue and 64th Street was for him to preach some of his stirring sermons, have their great church choir sing some of their great anthems and that the hungry, lonesome, disturbed people would flock to the church and soon the empty pews would be filled. He went on to say that he soon discovered that this was not to be the case, that most of the people in that neighborhood were out of Manhattan on Sunday. So he said, "Aha...we'll fix that. They won't need to miss this wonderful experience. We'll do it for them on Wednesday night when they are here." And so they engaged a great choir, and he repeated his great sermons and away they went thinking that those who could not worship and experience the living presence of God on Sunday morning could do so on Wednesday evening. "But" he went on to say, "it didn't work". A few apparently came. 49 the first Wednesday night. Newsweek published it all over the country. A city church revolutionizing its approach. The next Wednesday it was down to 35, and the following week 30. They didn't stop; they were determined. They did it for a solid year. They finally ended up with 8 people in the chapel.

THE CITY

Now what's wrong. In the suburbs and small towns Sunday worship is still the thing to do. Pressure is on. If you move into a suburb, everybody knows where you live. The Roman Catholics pour out on a Sunday morning and so do the

Protestants. If you don't go, you may feel a little bit out of it. (One woman said to another, "I guess I'm going to have to join that damm church after all". But in the cities no one watches you. You can stay away. In Washington, D. C. there is a great concern because of the trend away from private homes into vast apartment complexes. They know in Washington, on the basis of a census, that 60% of those who live in homes attend church regularly, but only 5% of those who live in apartments do so. You can hide in an apartment house. There is little social or religious pressure.

Now there is no judgment here of city people. On the contrary, it is a great advance when people are free of this kind of pressure so they can be honest about their worship. When they can choose freely whether on a Sunday morning they stay at home or come to church, they can choose freely whether the religious forms of our day are meeting their needs. When they do not chose to come, it says something about us and not about them.

This does not mean that city people are not interested in God. They are free now, in this city of anonimity to have a religionless God - that is, they are free to live their relationships with God without the pressure of religious forms which no longer have meaning enough to get them out of bed on a Sunday morning. They might even go so far as to quote Isaiah, "I loathe your gatherings at the new moon and on the sabbath. Your feasts and festivals are a weariness to me. I am tired of them." Or they may say with Jesus, "your wineskins cannot hold the wine God has given me for this city". However, people in the city, free from pressure of religious forms of the small towns, still have a need of worship, to worship that which represents the ultimate meaning of life, but it must be real and related to serving God in the world. It must not be forced upon them as though worship were an end in itself.

FORMS THAT THWART

With this kind of general understanding of our problem, it is our obligation to discover something crucial about our forms of worship. Let us be specific as we consider some of the religious forms which thwart the worship of the Christian revelation of God as seen by the religious leaders in today's new reformation. Three forms come in for criticism.

First of all, the peace of mind movement in the Protestant churches has caused many dedicated Christians to respond like Bonhoeffer and Isaiah. They see in the peace of mind church a place where God is a great psychiatrist helping with counsel when one is in need, a sort of spiritual ambulance service to pick you up and guarantee you health, happiness, success and all sorts of good things in this life. These religious forms are for the most part man made - a kind of magical use of religion to improve oneself and to make lise pleasanter. People say, if they want that they can get it better from Dale Carnegie, for he has a short course to give you happiness and suceess.

Bonhoeffer and Isaiah are saying, your churches are more than this. The Christian faith is not to make you feel good or give you happiness, but to help you be good and to be useful. This is what Isaiah was saying long ago, "I abhorre your feasts and your festivals.....make justice your aim, learn to do good, correct oppression". Protestantism in this new reformation is saying, let God use you. Ask forgiveness. Be a part of His world today.

Another religious form which is thwarting the worship of God through Christ (says the new reformation leaders) is the insurance policy religion, guaranteeing a place in heaven promised to thousands of people who meet in stadium rival meetings. Jesus didn't come primarily to get people into heaven through emotion ridden confessions, but He came to choose people to be his servants, to live out here on earth the relationships of love with each other. The kingdom of heaven begins here in this relationships of concern for our brothers. If we begin here, there is no need to worry about what we will do in the life to come.

Thirdly, the new reformation leaders are calling the Protestant churches to re-examine their purpose. The new wine skin of Jesus Christ is apt to burst the old wineskins of the church that will purchase a beautiful organ for \$100,000 and will in turn argue long and hard over small \$25.00 donations to community needs outside its own walls. The self-serving church, the church that exists only to minister to those who gather comfortably within its walls on Sunday morning will soon find itself left behind in the new reformation that is moving within Protestantism. It's so easy for us to forget that the church exists to serve the world and not just the members. The youth of today drink the new wine of Jesus Christ and they do not turn to the church, they turn to the Peace Corps or the Civil Rights movement whose wineskins are strong enough to hold the new thrust that God has put in them.

THE SERVING CHURCH

This then represents some of the new trends, new movement within Protestantism. Whether we like it or not, there is a new day coming for the church. Protestantism is calling for a church prepared to serve a world come of age (to borrow a phrase from Bonhoeffer) - a world that is ignoring the old wineskins and a world that is weary with our feasts and festivals and ineffective forms. Protestantism is seeing itself not as designed to make every one a Protestant, or even a Christian, or to make church members out of all, or to fill up the pews of empty churches, or to make people successful, happy and get them into heaven. It sees itself as a servant of God in his world, even as Christ came to be with the outcasts.

When I came here to the city close to ten years ago, I looked around and saw the great apartment houses in this neighborhood. I thought to myself that with all the people that live in them, surely there ought to be a way to dig them out and get them into church. I thought first of all we ought to find out how many Protestants there were. Take a census. Then we could work on them. But my thinking has changed somewhat. We don't need to take a religious census of people. That's a waste of time. We need to be taking a census of the needs of people around this church, in the community, whoever they are. And once we find out what their real needs are, then we serve them - not to make them members but because God has put us here on this corner to be the instruments of his love and concern.

This is the new era. Churches are coming alive across our land with this new thrust. No church can do it by itself. We need to work in close harmony with the other churches in the community if we are to have any impact. Twenty years ago the East Harlem Protestant Parish became a unique program. They started serving the Puerto Ricans and Negroes, not to get them into the church to make them members. They introduced them to the Bible freshly and saw new life, but they also cleaned up the rats and the garbage cans. They did something about ruthless landlords. They got hot water into apartments. They fought unscrupulous politicians with the people, because this was the need of the community.

What is our role to be as we look to the next ten years. What does God want us to be? Only as we as a body of Christian people answer that question, will we be able to have any cutting, effective edge. If we don't know what our mission is, then we will dissipate our energy, waste time and money in the process and end up doing very little. I hope that in February and March our Joint Commission on Mission and Social Concern will join me in grappling with this question. What is our role. What is God asking us to do in order to be effective instruments of his love and grace at this location. Let us learn together and then be used by Him .

LET US PRAY We thank thee, O God, for our church. We love it and find in it the things that satisfy our deepest desires and our most urgent necessities. Help us, O God, to consider other ways as we move in to a new era in its life - other ways to share its message of love and compassion for the needs of all people. In the spirit of Christ we pray.

PASTORAL PRAYER: January 23, 1966

ETERNAL SPIRIT....WHO - whether we walk in green pastures...
beside the still waters...
or through the valley of the shadow of death -
canst be our guide and our helper - HEAR our thoughts as we come together
in this hour set aside for prayer and worship.

Deliver us from smallness when we worship Thee.
Swallow up our pettiness in the grandeur of thy truth and spirit.
Recenter our lives around faith instead of fear.

WE ARE AWARE OF the violence and sinfulness of life - the hardness, the cruelty, the
unkindness of others. Today, in this place, remind us again of the goodness
that exists in life - of the beauty, the warmth, the kindness that our
eyes this past week have witnessed. Remind us, too, of the love of
family and the support of friends that has sustained us in darker moments.

Expand our love and our concerns. Broaden our vision. Help us to rise
above hatefulness, vindictiveness, prejudice, provinciality. And if
any of us have brought bitterness into this place, may we find it
diminishing because of thy love shed abroad in our hearts.

WE PRAY, O GOD, for all hopeful and constructive movements now
afoot in human life. We pray

For the growing unity of the Christian Church.
For the scientist seeking truth.
For the teacher entrusted with the task of guiding
the minds of growing lives.
For the physician at his healing work.
For all holding positions of trust and responsibility in
our land.
For all servants of the common good who in truth and
dedication to Christian ideals are lifting life for
others.

AND WE LAY BEFORE THEE, O GOD, the deep, unspoken needs of those
who have come to this place out of great need. Go thou into
the hidden corners of our hearts where there exists doubt,
fear, uncertainty, frustration and grief.

ALL THIS WE ASK in the spirit of Jesus Christ.