

## "THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN TODAY'S WORLD"

### INTRODUCTION

The sermon today begins with one of the most obvious statements that anybody could possibly make, so obvious that it might well be called platitudinous. The statement is this: we are living in a time of crucial change.

There is nothing new about change. Things are always changing. The East River is not the same river that it was two minutes ago. The water has changed. Heraclitus, living five hundred years before Christ, knew this and made that colorful observation that a man could never set foot twice in the same river, for the river was never twice the same. "Everything is always changing" he said, "All is flux". When anything ceases to change, it is dead.

There have been crucial changes before in the history of the world. However, this is one of the times of most radical change. We know that exceedingly rapid change is upon us - that we must adapt ourselves to a world freighted with new knowledge, new power, an accelerated pace of convergence of man upon man such as we have never known before. I have chosen three words that dramatize this change: automation, exploration, and liberation. A word or two about each one.

### AUTOMATION

First, consider automation. Machines are doing more and more of the work of men. Our laundry, our mowing, our plowing, our dish-washing, our book-keeping - all are now being done by machines. It has even come to the point where two young men in Cambridge, Massachusetts, are running a date bureau by machine. They feed into a computer all the requirements a young man has for a date, and out comes the ideal person to be his companion. I cannot vouch for the success of this undertaking from first hand experience. I have had some experience in dealing with the Scientific Marriage Foundation program coming out of Mellott, Indiana. Some times the computers, I've discovered, do a better job at this sort of thing than humans.

Automation has relieved an enormous amount of drudgery; there's no doubt about that. But it has also reduced the craftsmanship, the love that a man has in the work he does, and his pride in work well done. It is one thing to stand at an assembly line and put in a bolt. It is another thing to make something yourself, if it is only a pair of shoes, or a fine china cup, and to see what you make from the beginning to the end and to take pride in what you make. This has disappeared to a large degree from our life.

### EXPLORATION

Second, consider exploration. In the 16th century men were exploring the earth, and what exciting days those must have been when Magellan sailed around the world, and Francis Drake went out from Plymouth, and Columbus discovered the islands of the Caribbean. Now it is quite different. There is not much about the earth that has not already been discovered. Men have been to the South Pole, the North Pole, the South Seas and every place you can imagine. Now they are beginning to explore the sea, the sky, and the outer spaces beyond the sky. And what they are finding is so fabulous we can hardly take it in.

The artists are exploring. They are searching for new forms and breaking away from the conventions and traditions of the past. Sometimes they find forms that please us and sometimes they find forms that do not please us.

And more important, I think, than any of these is that man is exploring himself. He is looking inside himself. He is trying to find out what makes him tick. Why he does what he does, what his motives are, how mixed they may be, how much the subconscious has to play upon what he does, and how great a part it has in the decisions he makes.

### LIBERATION

Third, consider liberation. Nations are asserting their desire to govern themselves. Nations that once were governed by larger nations are asserting their rights to determine their own ways of life. Some of them are not prepared to do it, some are making terrible mistakes, but it is only natural for them to want to do it - for no man will long live behind a wall, if he can possibly get over it or knock it down. More than forty new nations have sprouted up since the end of World War II - at least twenty-five since 1950. "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light" - it is not always a clear light, but with fanatical zeal they are reaching for it. In this nation, the people of one particular race are asserting their right to be treated as human beings.

### WHAT SHOULD THE CHURCH DO

So much for the general picture. You know it without my having to speak of it. It's written in the headlines of every paper we read. The question, however, that keeps coming back again and again in to my mind is, what should the church do? What should the role of the church be in this world that just won't stand still? What should I do, as a minister of the church? What should I ask you to do as members of the Christian Church. What can the church, as a corporate body, do in a time of unusually crucial change to be most helpful in stabilizing the society we live in, in preventing excessive violence, in directing people in the right way. What should the church do?

### TWO EXTREME POINTS OF VIEW

There are two answers that represent two extreme points of view. The chances are that we have both points of view represented in this congregation. This is not unusual. Most churches (if they are at all alive) are enjoying this tension between these two points of view.

The first is that the church should keep out of public affairs. The people who represent this point of view believe that the church should keep out of every issue that is not specifically religious: that as a church it should take no part in the struggle for freedom, say nothing about nuclear warfare, express no opinion about foreign policy. Their sincere opinion is that the church is here not to save the world from disaster, but to save individuals from sin.

The other is that the church should get into it, become more and more involved in the world and what is going on in the world. They believe that the church cannot save individuals unless they do something about the society they live in: that they cannot, for instance, save a man who is living in a society which is so crippled by poverty, poor schools, that he has no chance to develop the potential capacities of his mind, his talent, his imagination. These people are likely to say, forget the church building, get out of the church, get into the world, into the factories, into the streets, into the homes where the people are. Go out where the people live - go on the marches, take part in the demonstrations.

These, I think, sum up briefly the two differing points of view. Certainly our own Methodist heritage and history is closer to the second point of view than the first. We think of John Wesley this weekend, on this the anniversary of his Aldersgate experience, and of how that experience changed his life and led him out of the church to the fields, the farms, the mines where the people were. His zeal was so great that the established church of England closed its doors to him.

For myself, and probably I speak for the majority of you, neither of these two extreme points of view completely satisfies me. On the one hand, if the church keeps out of the world altogether, it loses the tension that it must have. It becomes limp like a violin string that is not tight, and when a violin string is not tight, it can make no music. ~~We are reminded that the church can afford to be wrong, but it can never afford to be irrelevant.~~ On the other hand, if the church gets too involved

in the problems of the world, it is apt to lose the dimensions of eternity with which it has been entrusted. It is in danger of becoming another social agency. Social agencies, to be sure, are needed and we have nothing but the highest regard for what they do. However, the church has a ministry to perform that is unique and somewhat different from the social agency.

#### RELEVANT WITHOUT BECOMING RELATIVE

The church must be relevant without becoming relative. By this, I mean that the church must be related to the situation in which it exists, while at the same time it must not lose its identity - its peculiar character, its unique quality that makes the church THE church in every age in every land. There is such a thing as being so flexible that you become flabby, of being all things to all people until you end up losing the distinct note for which you exist.

Mind you, there is a lot in the church that changes. In Methodism, for instance, every four years the Discipline of the church under goes change. Our hymn book is being changed. The liturgy of the church changes - not quickly, but it does change. The liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church has been radically changed this past year. The theology of the church changes; not basically, but in accent and emphasis. In one period it stresses the depravity of man, in another it stresses the goodness of man. In one period it emphasizes the immanence of God, and in another period it may stress the transcendence of God. The architecture of the church changes - all the way from the simple basilica to the great Gothic cathedrals and now to these modern churches springing up across our land. Even the laws about marriage and divorce change. And the relationships between the church and the state have changed during the centuries, all the way from almost complete identification to our own doctrine of separation.

#### WHAT DOES NOT CHANGE?

You ask then: what is there about the church that is not relative. Is there anything that does not change? What is it that make the church THE church wherever it is in every century. The thing that remains is the revelation of God in Christ. Those words mean nothing to a person who is outside the Christian community, but to those of us who are inside, they mean everything. They mean that there is something breaking through, something in life beyond the laws of mathematics, mechanics, and machines. They mean there is mind and meaning. They mean that this mind and meaning broke through into our world in a specific act of unlimited love. It was an act that revealed both comprehension and compassion, understanding and love, at the very heart of existence itself, and, at the same time, released in people the desire and power to comprehend and show compassion. To put it in its simplest terms, it means this: it means that people care, that people matter - no matter who they are, what they have done, or what they are doing. They matter; they matter more than money, more than machines, more than buildings, more than anything, except the God who made them.

As Christian people, this is our conviction, our belief. And from here, we move out to determine the role of the church in this time of crucial change.

#### ROLE OF THE CHURCH

What then should the church do? The church probably should do the difficult balancing act of keeping one foot in the world and one foot in heaven. By this I mean: the church's primary purpose is to proclaim and demonstrate the will of God as it was revealed in Jesus Christ - in terms of comprehension and compassion, understanding and love. To demonstrate the will of God, the church may very well be called upon to show in specific ways its conviction that people matter. It may have to give money to help them in their efforts to be free, to help them in their efforts to emerge from poverty; it may have to send people to lead them along the way and show them how to work their way out of slavery into freedom, and teach them how to help themselves. The church may have to lose some of its own wealth and prestige. It

may even have to lose some of its own people who do not want to be disturbed in any particular way, those who look wistfully back to the church of their childhood - the cozy, comfortable church. "Cozy, comfortable churches" as Bishop Wicke reminds us "are apt to be irrelevant churches".

REMEMBER...

There are three things to be remembered as we consider the role of the church in this world that won't stand still.

One is this. The church has been most powerful, as we look back across the ages, when it had the least power in society. It has been most influential for good and what is right when it had the least influence in the affairs of the world. It was not in the 12th century when Becket and Henry were in a mortal struggle for power, but in the early days when the church had no power at all, it had the greatest influence on the lives of people. What has this to say to us. It would be a good question to discuss.

Second. The greatest change that the church can make is to change a human life. Most of the great advances that have been made in the world have been made not by the church as a corporate body, but rather by individuals whom the church has changed - touched, cultivated, inspired. You know who it was that broke the color line in major league baseball - Jackie <sup>R</sup>obinson. But it was Branch Rickey, a devout, devoted, Christian layman, who made it possible for Jackie <sup>R</sup>obinson to do what he did. That was the church become flesh in that man.

Third - the church cannot stay out of the world, nor should it. However, it will have a more radical effect on the world when it does something in depth in the lives of people within the church who live in the world; when it reveals to men and women the comprehension and compassion that were in Jews of Nazareth in such a way as to make that understanding and love an everlasting obligation upon human lives unto their dying day.

This, then, is the role of the church in today's world. Remember - you are the church. If the world is to be saved and stabilized, it will not be done by the clergy, but rather by laymen and lay women - whose sense of commitment and dedication to permanent and changeless values is as deep and as complete as though they themselves had been ordained priest or pastor. As transient custodians of those values, you are to take them back into the world and put them to work.....to charge the atmosphere with the conviction - that people matter....

PRAYER: We live, O God, in a world that is changing rapidly. Help us to see clearly that which does not change. Give us the courage to stand up for those abiding and permanent values - to stand up for them, speak out for them, to live by them in our daily lives. We ask this in the spirit of Jesus Christ - the same, yesterday, today and forever. Amen

I'm reminded of the story of the Vermont lady walking home from church. It was a hot day and the sermon had been long. She was asked how she liked the sermon. She answered: "It's a pity that some folk forget to stop digging after they've struck water."

Some of you may feel this way - let me bring this together now by making three observations....