

THE STATE OF THE CHURCH TODAY

PART TWO

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Is the church following the Biblical mandate of the Lord Jesus Christ?

AN OBJECT OF CRITICISM

One of the most criticized institutions in the world today is the church. It has become a "whipping boy" for many of our problems. Ever since the beginning of time, man's nature has demanded a whipping boy for his errors and failures. Adam blamed Eve for tempting him with the fruit of the tree. Eve passed the blame to the serpent. Harry Truman had a sign on his desk which said, "The buck stops here." So today men are blaming the church for their own inadequacies. Don't believe all you hear! Criticisms are coming from every quarter with extreme and it seems increasing intensity. I doubt if there is any institution on the face of the earth today more criticized and emasculated than the church.

Is the church above criticism? No, indeed! Some criticisms are valid and some are not. Questions such as, "What's Happening to the Church?," "Has the Church Failed?," "Is Religion on the Decline?" are subjects for an increasing number of articles written by self-styled experts on the state of the church. It is amazing how little many of the "experts" know about the intrinsic nature and operation of the church. Yet they write as if they are authorities on the subject.

The members of today's churches should face the issues of criticism squarely with no attempt to avoid the realities they affirm. The tendency to fight back and to criticize those who criticize does not provide answers. It is true that some criticisms are designed to be destructive and yet even these demand careful consideration because out of them may come indications of spiritual needs which are not being

satisfied by today's church. Also, there are many constructive criticisms, all of which are well worth our careful consideration. Criticism is not necessarily bad. In fact, it may be extremely profitable and stimulating in improving the program of the church for tomorrow.

SPIRITUAL WEAKNESS

Those who are familiar with and informed about the church of this day should be the first to admit that the church is weak spiritually. The leaven of apostasy has swept through the church like a brush fire. The infiltration has been insidious and effective. The great church which came into existence on the day of Pentecost as so graphically narrated in Acts 2, was really intended to be a channel of spiritual instruction, edification and blessing to the world. That edification was to come directly from the Word of God. But now, after about 2,000 years of operation, it appears that the church which is supposed to be proclaiming the Word of God and which has its roots historically in the New Testament, is in need of the Word of God itself. Many churches have rejected the Person of Jesus Christ and His deity and have abandoned the gospel message. Humanistic philosophy instead has become the message of the church. Often the church seems like a boat which is hopelessly lost at sea, drifting without rudder in a great mass of apostasy. Instead of ministering to the spiritual needs of others, the church needs help. She is taking an active role in the revolts and protests of the day and getting her orders from men instead of from God. Some church publishing houses are publishing obscene publications. Men of the cloth are preaching and publishing sermons on subjects like "The Advantages of Adultery." Some pastors are relating to the world with long hair, beards, and some churches are now complete with psychedelic church music which is so close to "rock" it is difficult to tell the difference.

UNFRIENDLY LITERATURE

Secular magazines and the press today are printing articles which rebuke the church under such titles as "The Surprising Beliefs of our Future Ministers," or "An Obituary for God." The name of Louis Cassels is familiar to all of us. At the present time he is Senior Editor of the United Press International in Washington, D. C. I have read his comments on the church with great interest. Some of his criticisms have been worthwhile. Others have been slanted not only toward the far left in theology, but also in politics. The church could get along very well without "friends" like Mr. Cassels. Some magazines are focusing on those who are called "Christian Atheists," giving them credit for waking up the churches to the stark reality that the basic premise of Christianity --the existence of a personal God who created the world and sustains it with His love--is now subject to attack. This situation has gone so

far as to be absolutely absurd and ridiculous. Even some Protestant liberals are concerned about it. Dr. R. J. MacCracken of the Riverside Church in New York City not long ago stated, "Christianity no longer is at the hub of things, exerting any great influence on civilization. Ours is a civilization drifting away from Christianity." Yet this very same man is part of an apostate movement which is responsible in part for the spiritual lifelessness and powerlessness of Christianity in this day.

HERESY

Heresy is a word which we often avoid because of its very strong implications. We want to be tactful, kind and loving. Therefore, we find it untactful to use such a strong designation for untruth and unbelief. Bert E. McCormick, Minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Newcastle, Pennsylvania, wrote: "The creeds and doctrines of Christianity are based more on the thinking of Paul than on that of Jesus. And, although the Pope may claim infallibility, Paul did not. At times Paul sounds like a crusty old theologian straight from a monastery. However, although he experienced a fantastic conversion, although he was the 'brains' of the early church, and although he wrote in his epistles a colossal foundation for Christian believing, he remains subject to error. Therefore, as long as Christianity is defined primarily in terms of belief, the Christian, as a follower of Jesus Christ and not of Paul, has every right to question present day creeds and doctrines."

Jesus answered this clearly in John 16:13, "Nevertheless, when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth; for he shall not speak of himself, but whatever he shall hear, that shall he speak; and he will show you things to come." In this statement, Jesus clearly referred to the New Testament revelation which was to come and which involved Paul's epistles as well as all of the other New Testament books. It was His Spirit, the Spirit of truth, who would provide this eternal revelation. What Paul wrote were the words and the thoughts of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Paul was not subject to error in revelation. As he wrote Scripture he was infallible in the record God wanted revealed.

In the same article, another quotation gives an indication of the direction in which many clergymen are headed today. "There is virtually no evidence that Jesus ever advocated formalized believing. Hence, this voice in the wilderness cries: 'For the Christian, heresy is not a legitimate word; there is no such creature as a 'right-thinking' one; the primary definition of Christianity should not be in terms of belief.

In answer, Christianity is a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. In John 20:31, we find with specific reference to John's Gospel, "But these

are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you might have life through his name." The whole burden of the Gospel of John is that men might be led to believe in Jesus Christ. This at once becomes the absolute and complete basis for any other movement of Christian doctrine. Frequently in the Gospel of John Jesus requested that the Pharisees and the people should believe in Him. "Believe" and "faith" are the two New Testament wonderful words of life and are translated from the same word in the Greek, pisteuō, which together with the prepositions, epi, en, and eis, make the whole process of believing an intensified and emphatic one. To believe and promote principle or doctrine which are not in line with the Word of God is heresy. Yes, this is a word which should be a part of the vocabulary of the Christian today as he points out departures from the faith.

SUNDAY SCHOOL LITERATURE

Vast portions of Sunday School and church literature are nothing more than contrived propaganda being used by liberal theologians and even by those who are associated with Communist fronts to lead our youth into subversive activities. It should not be necessary for Sunday School teachers to search their material for the gospel. Many devoted people who desire to give children and young people the Word of God have talked with me about this serious lack in their own denominations. Can we find Sunday School material which will bring to youth the message of truth? Thank God it is available, but this is not always known to teachers who desire to use it.

SEMINARIES

Many of the seminaries in our land today have become nothing more than intellectual and philosophic institutions. The student of theology who sits in seminary classes and daily listens to professors who degrade moral and spiritual standards and who try to recruit him for group social action, substituting modern psychological, philosophical and sociological theories for proven spiritual truths, gradually surrenders his individualism and becomes a collectivist. If he ever wakes up and finds what a trick Satan played on him, it may be years later as an ordained minister when he finds he must discover better answers to man's problems than he was taught in seminary. Then he may turn to the Bible. But even the teaching of the English Bible is a secondary consideration in many of these schools. The study of Hebrew and Greek with a desire to know the basic meanings of the words used in Bible manuscripts is almost a thing of the past. Seminary professors often are avowed unbelievers, and even worse, represent the Marxist philosophy. Departments of religion in state-operated and private schools and universities are largely devoid of true Bible teaching. Where does the

true church get its trained preachers?

YOUNG PEOPLE'S ATTITUDES

Evangelical young people are also critical of the church. In a recent article by Dr. Richard McNeely on "The Church and Contemporary Society," he summarized some material from the October, 1969 issue of His magazine which contains criticisms of the churches evangelical young people have attended. For purposes of easier understanding, he has grouped these under three headings. I quote:

First, there were a number of things which related to the Mission of the Church: Lack of involvement, merely another social program, irrelevant, does not symbolize the priorities and values of Jesus Christ, questionable goals, does not want to accept the non-conformist or the one who is different, and it seemingly is more interested in the maintenance of the institution.

Second, those related to the Image of the Church: An artificiality in dealing with one another, a failure to receive one another without scruples about peripheral matters, a bureaucratic institution, too organized to allow the Spirit freedom, prayer is too general, a failure to deal with current problems, the offering of pat answers for the perplexing problems facing society, a mass of pew-sitters.

Then there are some feelings voiced against the Preaching of the Church: It is anti-intellectual (not aware of the current philosophies, art, music, drama, motion pictures, or literature), waters down hard truths to make them more acceptable and practical, is not scratching where the itch is, steers its subject matter to areas where people do not feel any need to change.

As many of us know the church today, it is immediately clear that some of these criticisms leveled by young people at the visible churches are valid. Some are not valid and not well taken. But we must not dismiss these criticisms as opinions of those who are immature. A careful consideration of what young people think of the church and its approach to the problems of society today will certainly be sobering and stimulating to all of us.

THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

Again, the ministry of today's church has become largely social rather than spiritual. Often the social gospel has taken the place of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. This social gospel is a general designation given to that school of thought which almost exclusively concerns material and temporal affairs. The basic theory is that in order to redeem man, the society in which he lives must first be changed to the point of redemption. In our area another name has been used for this operation, "the Kingdom of God." This seems to cover a vast amount of activity in the name of God and of the church. From the viewpoint of the world, much of this seems to be fine, humane and for the permanent improvement of society. No matter what you call it, this so-called gospel is not the gospel which Paul preached. Paul's gospel basically concerns man's personal, eternal relationship to God while the social gospel deals with the relationship of men to each other in a society. It is by accepting the Gospel of the New Testament that men are born again and brought into personal contact with God through Jesus Christ. The social gospel has as its aim the salvation of society in a sociological sense. There is no doubt that today the church is largely concerned with the social gospel. Dr. J. Lester McGee, Pastor of the Centenary United Methodist Church in St. Louis, Missouri, preached a sermon on the subject, "I Cry in Contrition for the Clergy." He said, and I quote:

Methodist ministers by the hundreds, many of them in high echelons and prestigious pulpits, began denying the value of the church's major mission across the years and throwing out the traditional Methodist evangelicalism. The pulpit moved far left of center. Draft evasion was excused. Demonstrations, sit-downs, sit-ins, police heckling, street brawling, and countless other dissident and disruptive practices were condoned, if not openly advocated.

We started equating the Christian mission with involvement in social issues under the devious delusion of reconciling the human race and rehabilitating society, with little or no concern for personal redemption and reconciliation with God in Christ.

So saving went out. Social activism came in. Liberals were riding high. I remember one of my superiors telling me the time had come to throw away all of my old sermons and get with it. If I didn't, I did not belong to the new Methodist Church. The heyday was here--a new church for a new world.

Dr. McGee describes the situation which exists in many churches today. Instead of preaching the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ with all of the clear, associated Biblical involvements, pastors are protesting with the crowd or involving themselves in some social enterprise which could not be justified in Scripture.

This adherence to the social gospel by so many ministers today has made them susceptible to both socialism and communism. They have moved into an area of human philosophy where the subtleties of communism are merged with what are supposed to be improvements in society. Liberal clergymen who are followers of these humanistic philosophies have opened the way for infiltration of communist agents into our seminaries and our church organizations. This is a clever and devilish trap.

One communist, in testifying to a House committee in Washington, D. C., said that their purpose was "to make the seminary the neck of a funnel through which thousands of potential clergymen would issue forth." It is understood that such clergymen would be completely indoctrinated in the communist ideology.

The social gospel approach puts the church in a position where it is primarily concerned with programming for the improvement of society. Its agencies are concerned mainly with sociology and civic organizations, etc. This programming has nothing directly to do with the preaching of the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A "CONVENIENT" FAITH

Again, many believers today are practicing what we might call a convenient faith in Jesus Christ. I am not popular when I call upon Christians to consider very carefully and analyze critically their personal faith in Jesus Christ in relation to their practical responsibilities to Him. It seems they would rather just belong to a church, practice minimal attendance and make an occasional gift to God's cause. They want a faith which does not interfere with their chosen way of life. I have heard it often, "Let's not get too involved." They will help plan the social events of the church while completely avoiding any participation in personal evangelism. Places of official responsibility in the church are avoided. Many believers today are this carnal. They are adapted to the movements and the satisfactions of the flesh rather than adapted to the movement and pleasure of the Holy Spirit of God. They act as if the Lord came to do their will and bow to their wishes. Paul Scherer reminds us that we cannot have the God we want, "A God who never moves the furniture around or upsets anything. He does not come with His feather duster to see that what we are already is in apple pie

order." How true! Our service for Christ will undoubtedly upset our plans. Such professing Christians make the church weak spiritually.

Within the so-called church today there are many splinter groups of varied types. We may take a large circle and call it the visible church and then look hard and critically at it. You have the two large groups of Roman Catholics and Protestants. Then there are many denominations, enough to fill a 300-page book. Among these theologically there are the liberals, the neo-orthodox, the new evangelicals, the evangelicals, the Pentecostals, fundamentalists, and so forth. Extending from resources in local churches are such organizations as Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth for Christ, the Child Evangelism Fellowship, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, and others, which are evangelizing the various segments of our society. In addition some kind of a so-called teenage religious revival is sweeping the country. All over America many youngsters have dropped out of all kinds of churches, Protestant and Roman Catholic. They are following underground, self-ordained religious leaders, studying Far Eastern philosophies, wearing all sorts of attire to brand themselves. They call themselves by many different names, "Jesus Fellows," "Jesus Freaks" (because they have "freaked-out" on Jesus), "the Love Cult," "Jesus Lovers," etc. One thing they have in common--Jesus is their hero! What does this mean? What do they mean when they say they have "taken Christ?" Your guess is as good as mine. One thing is certain. In the cases known to me and many friends, "taking Jesus" makes little difference in their lives. Often they study with the Bible in one hand and with LSD or a marijuana cigarette in the other hand. Their brand of Christianity does not lead them to soap and water, nor to secure a job and stop being leeches on society. In some cases, they live communally, men and women together, in the same house--under the umbrella of Christianity. I have no doubt the holy Christ does not approve of what goes on there. In their rebellion they have produced their own counter-culture and counter-religion. Just along the West Coast there are now more than 100 communes of those who say they believe the Bible. They call their meeting places "Jesus Houses," or "Christian Houses," "Port of Call," or "Tree of Life." Even though they are practically 100% long-haired and unsanitary, they reject the appellation, "hippie." Most of these are from middle or upper class families and have had some knowledge of the Bible previously.

It is significant that the "religion" adopted by many of these groups is directed toward passivity rather than toward activity. For this reason, they do not grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ. They are too lazy and undisciplined. Therefore, by the personal testimony of their own leaders, many who have made professions soon move on and are not seen again. True Christianity is characterized by intense activity and edification. Christ said to Paul, "But rise, and stand upon thy feet;

for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose; to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in which I will appear unto thee" (Acts 26:16). Peter says about the Christian life, "And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue," (II Peter 1:5). Speudō means "hasten," "get it done." Urgency and importance are expressed. Today we would say, "Get with it!" So the Jesus revolution does not exactly produce what Jesus desires. Yet all of these groups either profess to be churches or they are presuming to take the place God gave to the New Testament Church.

Almost without exception these groups have the Libertine attitude toward the Christian life. In early times the Libertines were those who became freed men from slavery. Then this word was used to describe Christians who had decided that since they were saved by grace this entitled them to the privilege of doing what they felt was right since God's grace would cover all. They present a vivid portrayal of modern anti-nomianism. They call me a legalist, which I am not. These people tell us they are "happy in Jesus" and yet they can drink, smoke, become dope addicts and carelessly throw the flesh around.

Among other things they have adapted Christian doctrines and principles to their own convenience. They select what appeals to them and ignore the rest. They forget that Bible principles are not subject to change. Some sections of Aldous Huxley's book, Ends and Means, are interesting. He underlines the fact that man's psychology shows clearly that one of his basic characteristics is to find reasons for what he wants to do or for not doing what he does not want to do. More and more professing Christians are like this today. They find reasons, often under grace they think, for making their own standards which do not interfere with their freedom. To them grace is license. Jude describes people who turn the grace of God into lasciviousness by practicing moral anarchy (Jude 4). A person who professes to be a Christian has adopted a set of Bible principles which constitute the blueprint by which he charts his course in this life. When he ignores this fact he displeases God and is not on a New Testament basis. Paul hit this attitude sharply in II Corinthians 6:17 where he writes, "Wherefore, come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." This is an imperative to each child of God no matter where he worships God or how. If he claims to be a Christian, he should be separated from the world system of sin and unrighteousness. It is not necessary at this point to define further what we mean by separation, except to say that the positive approach to this problem is found in Romans 12:1, where the same apostle pleads with believers that they present their bodies actively to the Lord to be used according to His will. Paul does

not condone the use of grace as it is being practiced today in some evangelical (so-called), religious groups. In Romans 6:1 and 2, he says, "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid."

The Bible is still our standard for holiness and purity and clean living in this world.

It should be emphasized that there are a few organizations outside the local church which are doing about as well with this segment of our society as possible. The so-called "Light and Power Company," co-founded by Hal Lindsey, reaches youth on campuses especially. An effort is made to edify those who are saved. In San Fernando "Action Life" is at work. Young people are won to Christ and then sent out to witness. We are told by these groups and some others that they are not anti-church. But they say, "The movement today is outside the church building on the streets, beaches and highways." Mr. Lindsey says, "Young people like informality; we're trying to get back to a church that is based on first century principles." I wonder what he means by this. I think my church is based on first century principles. Is this an indirect way of slapping the church which is doing a job for God based on the New Testament? When these leaders start talking about the church they should make their meaning crystal clear. If the church had to depend on such groups to evangelize the world, even though they point to some kids going to Denmark and sharing the gospel with 10,000 people in two weeks, the job would never get done. The fact is that many of these kids, even after they are saved, make themselves so undesirable to the culture they have left and to which they themselves often do not return, that their testimony to the rank and file is nullified. Compare their missionary efforts with what the New Testament organized church has done through the centuries.

However, it becomes very clear that local churches which are endeavoring to pattern themselves according to the New Testament revelation are being seriously misrepresented by this section of the visible church.

DECREASING PERSONAL EVANGELISM

Again, there is a serious and tragically decreasing emphasis on personal evangelism. It would be logical that churches which preach and practice a social gospel would not do personal witnessing for Christ. After all, what do they have to witness about? About all they can do is encourage people to join their protest marches. But even in churches where the Word of God is taught and preached faithfully by a godly under-shepherd, systematic planning in soul-winning is often a thing of the past. One pastor said to me sometime ago, and I quote him, "You

will never catch me out in the community visiting house to house." His was a small church and destined to stay that way. The words of our Lord Jesus in Acts 1:8 make this matter abundantly clear: "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. It is safe to say that in this day no church can possibly grow on the right Biblical basis without a witnessing ministry. Also it is true that no church can possibly be a spiritual church without such a ministry.

Indeed, the critics of the church, those who understand it and who see and comprehend its attitudes and responses, have some strong, basic, justified criticisms.

It is clear that this could go on and on. Yes, the church needs constructive criticism. It needs to face certain issues in its attitudes and ministry and to analyze these things in the light of the Word of God. There is no doubt that in its present spiritual state, the church at large will be ineffective in the evangelization of the world.

(TO BE CONCLUDED)