

# Witnessing to Life in the Midst of Death—A Reluctant Critique on the Life of the Church

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I have been asked to reflect upon the theme, Jesus Christ—the life of the world, particularly against the background of our present day Indian situation. It appears that the theme under discussion is more a confession of faith and a declaration of hope than the proclamation of a doctrine.

Faith as the following of Jesus has the world as its sphere of responsibility. It follows, then, that our faith is not a mythical thing. Faith is where one directly relates oneself to reality. Faith and our reflection upon that faith must each relate themselves to the reality of the world.

The centre of the proclamation of Jesus was the affirmation of life. He made it explicit as follows: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). The purpose of human existence is life. Whatever does not contribute to bringing life is characterized as death. Life is intrinsic in the created order and needs only to become actualized in its fullness for each individual. However, the seeking after life is never solely an individual matter, neither is it only a Christian concern. It is the concern of the whole community.

God intends fullness of life for the human community to be a present goal, not the end point of history. The eschatological elements of the salvation history theme may look as if the fullness lies only in the future. Consequently churches have often responded to human suffering in the present by pointing the suffering to God’s future. Waiting and hoping have been advocated as primary virtues to marginal peoples by comfortable church people who have not had to do much of either. Stress on the coming kingdom has led us to devalue the present world as of little ultimate consequence.

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But the biblical hope does not betray the earth, and the biblical future cannot be understood as simply other-worldly. The biblical promise of the future applies above all to the afflicted and the oppressed, to the troubled and the burdened. For the future the Bible speaks of is the future of the human community—of the people of God and the city of God. The New Jerusalem is related to earthly cities. It moves those who hope for it in the direction of a more equitable society. God's will is that His creatures experience abundant life in the here and now.

The Church in India has been called out to proclaim the good news of abundant life to a nation where forces of death are operating. In a society where injustice, oppression, hunger and such forces of death prevail, proclamation of abundant life requires a radical commitment in the service of justice and the total liberation of humanity in the name of Jesus. It is illegitimate to speak of spiritual emancipation from the bondage of sin without speaking at the same time of material emancipation from the demonic political and economic forces which enslave the oppressed peoples of our country. Keeping the spiritual and the material realities together is what the Exodus of Israel from Egypt was about. Therefore, if the Church in India is to be honest to its calling, it should risk its money and prestige and all the resources at its command, and move into a biblical ministry of justice and wholeness to the poor and oppressed, that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

The Indian Church, which has large social service schemes and charitable projects, may feel self-satisfied that it is adequately discharging its obligation of concern. But the meaning of the Church as the people of God is much more intimately tied to the welfare of the hungry, the poor, the needy and the oppressed. What is demanded is no less than a renewed understanding of the Church's biblical and theological resources so that we might be in the vanguard of the movement to reorder values and priorities in a suffering world. As we respond to the crisis, we must also challenge the biblical and theological assumptions which have allowed the Church to participate uncritically in structures that contribute to the root causes of the forces of death at work. Only then will the Church be free to join the attack on those underlying causes as it ministers to the immediate victims of hunger, malnutrition, suffering and bondage.

This insight into the need to tackle the underlying causes of the forces of death rather than temporary relief is not altogether new. Commenting on the failure of the Church in the area of social justice, almost three decades ago, a distinguished Indian Christian said:

While Christians have done much in the way of social service, they have not, on the whole, seriously considered the larger questions of social, economic and political order which face the entire nation. They have trained men to be honest, considerate and just in personal relationships, but they have not usually thought through the consequences of this for political life. Out of love and obedience to Christ they have helped greatly to heal the bodies of men and to check the spread of disease, but they have not examined seriously the resulting economic problem of over-population with which countries like India and Japan are faced today. They have taught tenant farmers to take better care of the soil and to produce more food, but they have not encouraged these same farmers to challenge the feudal landholding system which deprives them of so much that they produce. As a result, those who are concerned with social justice look to movements other than Christianity for the insights and principles which the church has failed to declare.<sup>1</sup>

Listen again to the words of a Catholic observer:

It is no longer good enough to open dispensaries, hospitals, orphanages and schools, colleges and universities to attract pagans to the church. While you are caring for their bodies and cultivating their minds, social forces are working against you. The preaching of the Gospel must be accompanied by the proclamation of social justice.<sup>2</sup>

The Church would rightly say that today the running of dispensaries, orphanages, schools and other institutions is not meant to attract pagans to the churches, but to offer the clearest and surest way to participation in God's love. But the nagging question remains as to whether they enable the poor to acquire power to bring about

<sup>1</sup> Rajah B. Manikam, ed., *Christianity and the Asian Revolution* Madras: Diocesan Press, 1955, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

change in the very system which has caused or perpetuated the forces of death in society. Or, to use a biblical image, we should look not only at the immediate deed of "giving a cup of cold water," but also at the consequence of that deed: is the water going to strengthen the one who received it, or is it in fact going to drown that person by reinforcing the structures which made him or her thirsty in the first place? I shall not be misunderstood. I am not saying that "giving a cup of cold water" is a meaningless business. As Archbishop Helder Camara put it, "These (referring to those who need temporary relief) are my wounded soldiers. What can you do with a wounded soldier in the battlefield? He can no longer fight. You take him and put him on your shoulder and care for him *while the battle continues.*"

But many do not understand this distinction, and those who understand it perceive that a systematic change in the direction of empowerment of the poor will ultimately erode their privileged position.

The situation is still more serious in the Indian context. I have the feeling that the Indian Church has even begun to hallow the concept of charity! We have people literally dying in the streets, infants being discarded like garbage, and lepers shunned even by their own families. "Here," the Church seems to be saying, "we are meeting Christ face to face in the poor. He was there, the hungry Christ, the naked Christ, the homeless Christ—the touch of Him in this distressing disguise gives us joy and peace and strength."

It certainly may give us joy and peace and strength. But that definitely is not in accordance with Jesus' promise of giving abundant life. Helping people to die with a smile on their faces, giving them a "beautiful death" (in the sense of helping people who lived like animals to die like angels — loved and wanted) is not enough; we have to help them *to live* with a smile on their faces. The Church's attitude is that it is called to help the individual, to love each person, not to deal with institutions or with the empowerment of the poor. This can be said only by the defenders of the status quo—those who essentially like things the way they are.

There is absolutely no element of prophetic criticism to be found in this attitude. According to the Church, the government, society, and the status quo are given, and we should in no way try to change

anything. The German Church of Karl Marx's time also held more or less the same view. It taught that "order" was given by God, and therefore any attempt to interfere with it was a sin and against God. The twentieth century Church cannot subscribe to this view. It is not enough to deal with the human wreckage, we should address the wreckage-makers, and there is sound biblical basis for that. Amos' anguish at the treatment of the poor, Isaiah's denunciation of a nation sick "from the sole of the foot even to the head," John the Baptist's pungent words to "you brood of vipers" — all these are not taken into consideration by the Church.

Jesus' anger, indignation and His sense of the urgency of the need to eradicate the causes of horrifying social injustice are quite evident throughout His ministry. He called the Pharisees hypocrites and "whitewashed tombs" because they were more concerned with ritual purity and ceremony than they were with justice and mercy. He made an outcaste Samaritan woman the hero of one of His best stories. As a matter of fact, concern about society's unequal treatment of people is interwoven all through His life and teachings.

The Church would argue that, were the Church to enter the political sphere, to become a social reformer instead of a purely compassionate counsellor, it would lose credibility in Indian society. Society prefers that its saints remain humble and not fool around with the structures of injustice. And those in authority would say that raising embarrassing questions is not what saints are supposed to do.

If the Church is unable to make the Word come alive in flesh and blood, the future of the Church is quite bleak. God entered into the cultural, social and political milieu of man and He related Himself to man in that context. It was no accident that Jesus' death was by execution for a political crime. We declare Him to be innocent and He was. But in another sense he was a revolutionary who undermined the prevailing political and social stability of His time. The caste system was broken, cultural and religious customs were made subservient to higher values, and injustices supported by the very religious institutionalism of the day were attacked. Jesus told those who were heavy burdened to come to Him and He would help them carry their load. But he also severely chastised those who made the load so heavy. If the Church is to follow His cue, then it too must

not only bind up and help carry the "broken," but also be the kind of salt and leaven and light which work to change a world that breaks so many people. There must be a willingness to become truly flesh and blood, to participate truly in the lives of our people.

The climax of Christ's teaching on life is found in His high-priestly prayer (John 17). The kernel of this prayer is that the life which is shared in love between the Father and the Son should unite all humanity—"that they may all be one" (v. 21). Here we have to discern the ways in which the promise of life is being manifested.

The unity envisioned in the high-priestly prayer of Jesus is not to be reduced to mere unity of the divided churches, however important that might be. What is implied in this prayer is the unity of the entire human family.

From a theological point of view, our ecumenical endeavours should try to link two things: (1) the effort to recover unity in our renewed understanding of faith; (2) the participation in the struggle of people the world over for realization of their hopes and aspirations about the future.

Unfortunately these concerns are consistently driven apart in these days. The essence of ecumenical thinking today should be to see these two concerns as one.

The relationship between the search for unity in faith and engagement in the human struggle is not altogether a new idea. The very nature and calling of the Church is that it is to be present in society in such a way that it should chasten idolatrous hopes and strengthen the true ones. If we confess that Jesus Christ is the ultimate ground of all human hope, then it follows that one man's hope shall not be another man's despair. The search for unity, which does not take into account the hopes of the people for full participation in the human family, would indeed be a retreat from the vision of Jesus as it was envisaged in the high-priestly prayer.

Our society tends to hold up for adulation those who are beautifully tender in their personal dealings, but who are also safe, relatively harmless and present no danger to the status quo. At the same time, society tends to disparage the more abrasive types, the prophets

of our time, who are attempting large changes. Unless the Church is ready to take risks and lead a prophetic lifestyle, it cannot create conditions in which the life God shares with us can grow and flourish. Look at the early Israelite prophets. They boldly spoke against all kinds of injustices found in society; they raised inconvenient questions against those who were in authority, those who held power. It is worth recalling in this context what Martin Luther King Jr. said: "Whoever accepts evil without protest, in reality is working together with it." Not to challenge the forces of death is to condone them. And to condone them is to become a part of the problem. Had the Indian Church boldly exercised a prophetic ministry to society and government, it would have done a great service. We should affirm our faith in and obedience to God in this hour by showing more active concern for political and social currents moving in the land.