

THE GOSPEL CONFRONTS THE WORLD

(A) THE WORLD'S NEED : "BUYING UP THE OPPORTUNITY."

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"WE live in a strange and dangerous world, a world so dangerous that Mr. Chamberlain warned us recently to watch our very words lest their echoes, as in the Swiss Alps, awaken an avalanche which might plunge down the mountain to leap upon the peaceful villages and towns beneath. Once again we must live dangerously. An old world is disintegrating and we do not know whether this means a definite end or a liberation of the elements of the world, enabling them to aggregate afresh and crystallize into a new and better world."

I quote that passage from Dr. Adolf Keller's telling little book, *Five Minutes to Twelve*, because it gives the urgent background to that prevailing perplexity which is the dominant mood of our time. But I have another reason for quoting it. I believe it contains a sentence whose message is the challenge of our opportunity. "Once again," says Dr. Keller, "we must live dangerously."

Living Dangerously.

As we consider the need of our world, God's provision for that need and His design to use us as His agents in making that provision available, may we make our own the prayer :

"O Thou who art heroic love, keep alive in our hearts that adventurous spirit, which makes men scorn the way of safety, so that Thy will be done. For so only, O Lord, shall we be worthy of those courageous souls who in every age have ventured all in obedience to Thy call, and for whom the trumpets have sounded on the other side ; through Jesus Christ our Lord."

"Christianity is essentially centrally a heroism." You and I must take that thought and from a pious word translate it into creative action.

May I remind you briefly of Professor Kraemer's masterly analysis of the present situation as he gives it to us in *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, so that we may see what it is we have to face and to challenge.

The Sickness of the World.

"A radical uncertainty about the meaning of life"—that is his diagnosis of the sickness of our world. The cause of the sickness is

familiar. For a short time man's unparalleled scientific progress seemed to make man the measure of all things. Progress appeared to be a moving staircase which nothing could prevent going up and up for ever. "This establishment of man involved the disestablishment of God." Religion was banished from the centre of life. All values became relative to the good of man albeit there was no absolute standard by which that good could be defined. Then came the Twentieth Century and this man-centred system began to show all the signs of collapse from internal stress and strain. The crisis of the sickness is the whirling confusion in which we find ourselves.

The Sickness of the Church.

The question springs at once to mind "Why does not man turn back to God and to the wise counsel of religion?" I believe that it is vital for us to understand the reason. It is what Dr. Kraemer calls, "The Crisis of the Church." He would remind us that the Church also is sick. There has been an atrophy of man's religious instinct. Supreme amongst the factors which have atrophied this religious instinct is the notion utterly erroneous but all too frequently supported, even by the great religious institutions themselves, that "religion essentially deals with the uncharted region of human experience." As a result with each new widening of man's horizon God was banished further into the background.

"So gradually religion has slipped out of the life of untold masses, and God and His reality, being usually identified with religion, has constantly been driven further back from the field of life, either evaporating to the vanishing point, or being kept in reserve for man's still unanswered questions, or forming his last resort in times of extreme need and impotence."

The relevance of God to the actual problems of life has appeared obscure. The Church which purports to be concerned with God has shared this irrelevance. Hence in the hour of utter perplexity men are not seriously turning to the Church. If anything they are turning away from it. Do not let the occasional conversion of this or that young intellectual blind us to the fact that there is in our day as yet no real turning to God and most certainly no turning to the Church. I deliberately want to plunge you in gloom for I believe that it is only when we humbly accept our position in the valley of Achor that we shall find our eyes able to see the door of hope. But if we focus our gaze on will-o'-the-wisps we shall not see yonder a shining light where is the gate through which we are to go.

No, let us be realist and admit the fact that men and women are not turning to God and to His Church. But because man is incurably idealistic and spiritual, men and women are turning to pseudo-religions to which they feel able to give their loyalty. Men are prisoners of hope; that is how they are made. That for instance, is the secret of the appeal of Marxist materialism. Dr. van Dusen brings out this significant fact about Communism that it really is a Gospel. For Communism,

he says, " although it professes atheism, affirms that history is in the grip of forces which are inexorably advancing society to higher and higher levels in the direction of an ideal goal. In other words atheistic communism is the only vigorous evangel of optimistic determinism claiming the convinced adherence of great numbers of the western world to-day. Here is the suggestion of its power over the religiously minded. What an illustration of the condition of paradox which infects the current situation ! And of the apostasy of religious leadership to the modern age ! "

Religion has acquiesced in the general notion that it was essentially concerned with " the uncharted region of human experience." It has made way for irreligion which insists that the everyday affairs of men are of the very stuff of reality.

My fathers and brethren, we stand under judgment. For it cannot be denied that we, as Evangelicals, have made our contribution to the apostasy of religion. We have all too frequently given the impression that we believed that the soul was the personality. In our deep and earnest anxiety for the salvation of man's soul we have tended to forget his mind and particularly his body. We have over-simplified salvation by suggesting that salvation consists in a transaction between God and a man's soul. That is pietism. And pietism is not Evangelical Christianity. Evangelical Christianity is nourished on the objective word of God and not on the subjective adventures of the soul. Personal experience is vital but it has to be tested by God's word, and by God's word made Flesh. I quote from Dr. Temple's most recent commentary: *Readings in St. John's Gospel*. "The Word became flesh. The Word did not merely indwell a human being. Absolute identity is asserted. The Word is Jesus ; Jesus is the Word. And it is said that the Word became flesh because ' flesh ' is that part of human nature commonly associated with frailty and evil."

The Way of Healing.

God came to redeem the whole man and not just man's soul. Yes, and God works to redeem man's environment. For the whole cosmos is the object of God's redeeming activity. God's activity embraces the whole, the known and the unknown. And the proper sphere of religion is that part of human experience which *has been charted*. The heart of religion is not a mystery but a mystery which has been revealed. The proper object of Christian worship is not a " *mysterium tremendum* " to be approached through a priesthood which stands and veils the mystery, and affords to the worshipper only a carefully guarded glimpse. The veil that covers the mystery has we believe, been rent. At Calvary the heart of reality was revealed.

" O Saul, it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee ; a Man
like to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by, forever :
a Hand like this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life
to thee ! See the Christ stand ! "

Now translate all that from poetry into prose. The Communist, and even the Fascist dismiss as sheer romanticism a religious outlook which enables "a very rich man and a very poor man to feel the sense of brotherhood between them, and to be exalted by it, without it ever crossing the mind of either that there is something odd in a brotherhood that has no relation to the provision for the same practical needs of each." So Mr. John Macmurray describes the unreality of our religious fellowships. "Love," he continues, "is, indeed, the sense of community. . . . But a communion which consists in the idea and the sentiment of being members of one body, however strongly thought and felt, still remains illusory and 'mystical,' so long as it does not express itself in the provision by all for the material needs of each. That, we are inclined to feel, is economics not religion. The feeling is the measure of our idealism. Religion either includes and dominates economics or it is empty of all substance, without real significance."

But "the word became flesh." That with all its implications is part of redemption.

It is Mr. Paton who tells of a recent preacher before the undergraduates of Oxford University who suggested that "St. Paul, or one of his fellowship, would say not as we do, 'I wonder what the world is coming to,' but 'I know what has come to the world.' Christ Jesus has come, the Saviour, full of grace and truth."

Translating Ideals into Action.

To the world's perplexity we must bring a dynamic conviction of the "here and now" relevancy of the Gospel. Man's extremity is our opportunity. We believe in the living God active in history, active in that very realm of human experience which *has been carefully charted*. That activity is an activity of salvation but it is also an activity of judgment. The Bible demands that we take man and his sin as seriously as we take God and His grace. For we are sinners and our way of life is sinful. Let us be truly radical in facing that fact. I quote Dr. van Dusen again :

"True Christianity is incurably, indomitably radical—radical in its relentless exposure of the inadequacies, the brutalities, the stupidities of the prevailing order ; radical in its restless and unappeasable dissatisfaction with things as they are ; radical in its unwearying struggle for change—drastic, fundamental, ultimately revolutionary change."

The radicalism, he continues, is partly due to the fact that religion has seen the ideal and knows it to be practicable. Partly also is it due to religion's more profound insight into contemporary existence. It sees things as they really are. Sin really is rebellion against God, and not a stumble on the upward climb. But more than all this the radicalism of religion is the radicalism of action.

Yet it is not enough to look back and to claim as we fairly can, that religion has performed the function of parentage for almost every great enterprise for human improvement in the Christian centuries. It is not enough to say that religion has been the father of the prophets.

☛ We cannot live on our past. The world in its perplexity needs not only the challenge of a dynamic conviction. It demands the convincing demonstration of dynamic action.

I believe it is true that Communism started when Marx said, "Let us turn from ideas to reality, let us look not at people's theories but at their actions." The Churches were condemned by the test our Lord had recommended, "by their fruits ye shall know them." In humble penitence let us accept our condemnation and by God's grace demonstrate the fruits of the spirit. But ideas are pale ghosts until they are embodied in a person. The Incarnation remains God's method of redemptive activity. The Gospel cannot confront the world and meet the world's need unless you and I confront the world and as the channels of grace meet its need.

We want this Conference to issue in something practical. We are prepared to live dangerously. May I then focus your attention on just one issue which will provide all the adventure we want and to which adventure I believe we Evangelicals have a special destiny.

God's International.

We are members of a world order in which men everywhere are suddenly finding themselves to be intimate neighbours with people whose habits and manners are foreign and uncongenial. Thanks to the wireless and the aeroplane those remote people who were so picturesque as seen through the telescopic lens of our imagination, are now on our doorsteps. Is it any wonder that men are turning to rabid nationalisms and racialisms in order to draw the distinctions that can separate them from unwelcome neighbours? The world has become a neighbourhood but we are all bad neighbours.

In this world there is a society, one of whose fundamental tenets is that there is "in Christ Jesus" neither Gentile nor Jew, but that all are one in Him. Over against the nationalism of our day we throw the challenge of the true internationalism. But do we believe it? Do we really believe in the "New Israel" in which spiritual unity transcends all racial barriers? I believe we have here the greatest single issue facing the Church of our time. Do we really believe in Christ's one Holy Catholic Church in which there is no distinction of race or class, and membership of which transcends every other loyalty? Let us consider some practical applications which will test our belief.

If I do believe this, then an African Christian on the Zambesi, a Chinese Christian on the Yangtze is closer to me, more intimately related to me, more immediately my fellow than the charming, erudite, polished pagan who lives next door.

If I do believe this, then the perspective of all my thought must be a very wide one. I will consider Christian strategy as embracing the world. I shall therefore abandon all ideas that Western Christianity must of necessity dominate the development of the Church of the future.

If I really believe this, then I shall not make the mistake of thinking that Christianity is bound up with Western culture or Western

Imperialism. A certain Church paper some weeks ago contained this naive paragraph in its Editorial on the subject, "Christian liberty and War." The paragraph referred to a speech by an eminent Free Churchman who had been warning the Assembly of the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches at Bradford that if war came, the Government might try to dictate to the Church. To that he would reply, "Only Christ can lay down the law for His Church." The editor makes this comment, "That is true enough but it does not take account of the sacrifices of Christian liberty which a Government might fairly ask when (and now mark these words) *the very existence of Christianity, let alone democracy, was at stake.*"

According to this writer, and let us frankly admit he represents the thinking of most Christians in this country, Christianity is bound up with the *status quo* and the British Empire. But that is an illusion. I prefer to follow Saint Augustine, who, in the hour of an Empire's downfall and with the enemy on the frontiers of his own native land, could realize that he was the member of a community not limited to any race, the citizen of a City not made with hands.

Again, if I really believe in the Christian Church I cannot be content with any recall to religion which recalls men to a limited religion cribb'd, cabin'd, and confin'd by its denominational heritage and its national outlook. We've got to beckon men on, not call them back. And there's a world of difference between the two attitudes.

Our Opportunity.

But I believe our day of opportunity is far more significant than we dream. Mr. Geoffrey Allen in his book, *The Courage to be Real*, has an interesting comment that is relevant to our subject. He says :

"When I was crossing Canada on my way to China, I was told of a deeply interesting statement of Professor Whitehead's. I am told that he said to someone in conversation, that Christianity had made one great adjustment in its history, when it went out into the Greek world, and absorbed the tradition of Greek philosophy into itself; that he then added that there was one further adjustment of the same magnitude which still lay ahead. There was the further step when the stream of Western Christian tradition flowed on and joined the stream of Eastern tradition. From this there then would come a second birth of new life into the world."

Mr. Geoffrey Allen adds :

"Is it possible that the world is waiting for the dawn of a new renaissance, a new enlightenment; that that new birth will come as barriers are broken, and the tradition of the West meets with that of the East? From the cross-breeding of two cultures we may expect a new season of fertility, comparable in magnitude with that which came from the meeting of Greek and Hebrew thought. Such a meeting of culture has already happened in the material field of trade and commerce. If it is happening there, it is clearly urgent that it should happen too in the spiritual field of our religious heritage. As yet in that field it has only happened in timid primitive form. As there comes a mutual understanding and flowing together of the two traditions, we may expect a new form of life and thought and worship, whose future splendour is as yet wholly unknown."

The Cost of Purchase.

Have we got the courage to see that vision? It will mean living dangerously for us Evangelicals. We have no right whatever to assume for instance that the forms of worship of the Churches of the East will of necessity bear any close relationship to the forms worked out in the West. Again, for all our belief in the importance of our own convictions, we must have the saving sense of humour which recognizes that the peculiar relation between the Church and the State, the source of so much of our Western sectarianism, has no place in Eastern experience. To suggest that under the influence of the prestige of Western Christianity the East should be shackled with the result of Elizabeth's immortal compromise, or impeded by legacies left by the vagaries and chronic instability of the Stuart dynasty, is simply grotesque.

Unless then we are to claim that the Anglican alone speaks the language of Heaven, we must recognize that Anglicanism will at most be a contributing factor, and should not be the dominating factor in the religion of Africa and the East. That is part of the adjustment to reality which is demanded of us.

Our Prayer Book again, enshrines certain truths which are of fundamental importance. But it is the truths that matter supremely and not the shrine. As the report of the Tambaram Conference expresses it, "To-day, African, Chinese, Indian, Japanese and other indigenous expressions of the Christian religion are taking shape. There may, indeed, be forms which do not truly represent the Gospel. Nevertheless, it is not in principle wrong or illegitimate that there should be, as interpretations of the one Gospel, many forms of Christianity."

This Report of the Tambaram Conference is great reading. It is also significant reading. There we see the younger Churches insisting on their freedom to develop and to work out their own vision of God. But brethren, is it not something to be supremely glad about that we see in the Report that the great truths of Evangelical religion are, as a matter of fact, the truths by which the younger Churches are living to-day? The emphasis which runs through that Report is that the foundations of the Christian life that these younger Churches are reaffirming as their own are the twin foundations of "a personal experience of God in Christ," and "a continuous nourishing of life upon the Bible."

Can an Evangelical be anything but profoundly glad that as a result of a century and a half of Protestant missions that is the dominant note which appears in the witness of the younger Churches?

Our fathers laid a sure foundation. The Church which is growing up overseas is a Church in which at point after point we can recognize the true fundamentals of the Evangelical approach to God. That has been our great contribution to the One Church. That contribution must be maintained and increased.

Now comes the challenge to our day and generation. Can we see beyond the narrow bounds of our English Christianity and the immediate situation in England and see the great Church—God's international

—and in the light of that vision recognize the imperative need of losing all pre-occupation with our own survival in this country? It is those who lose their lives that find them. It has been the glory of Evangelicalism that it has recklessly flung its best into the service of God in the foreign field. The great triumphs of the Cross in Africa, India and China, which we record to-day, are the direct fruit of the tradition that an Evangelical conversion led automatically to the man or woman so converted giving immediate and primary consideration to service overseas. I believe that Evangelicalism in this country will perish and will deserve to perish when that tradition from being a living experience becomes a mere record of history. For we are set in trust with a Gospel which knows no limits of frontier and whose horizon is always further on.

We are living in a day when God is wondrously opening doors of opportunity but those doors are for the most part overseas. In the divine economy that is where the opportunity lies at the moment. That is where our best and our ablest are wanted. And by every effort in our power we should see that they be encouraged to go, and ourselves also be ready for any demands that God may make on us.

I said at the beginning of this paper that it was meant to be a challenge to live dangerously. Let me finish by giving you one of the urgent findings of the Tambaram Conference. Those assembled there plead with us assembled here :

“That urgent attention be given to the use of available resources of personality and finance in areas in which the leading of God and the responsibility of the Church are indicated by *widespread responsiveness to the Gospel*. That large numbers of people should ask in vain for Christian fellowship, instruction and leadership in their quest for God, *while those who are qualified to help them are occupied elsewhere in efforts to awaken interest in the Gospel*, should lead us to the most searching examination of what is the will of God.”

God grant that a narrow preoccupation with ecclesiastical statesmanship will not blind us Evangelicals to the glory of our heritage, our exceeding precious trust and the opportunity which God is asking us to buy even at the cost of sacrifice.

I Was In Prison is the title of a series of letters from German Pastors (Christian Student Movement Press, 1s. net). It contains extracts from letters by German pastors in prison to their families or friends. Many thousands of the German edition were circulated before the booklet was confiscated by the police. The fact of its confiscation is sufficient to show that the German Government dare not face the statements of faith, constancy, courage, devotion and perseverance in their maintenance of the truth which these letters display. They will be read by many whose sympathies will go out to those who are thus joining the historical roll of the sufferers for the Faith.