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Truth in a Changing World

By LEROY C. RINCKER *

WHEN I survey the beauties of Concordia Seminary and attempt to evaluate its current contributions to the Church, I am impressed with evidences of great changes that have marked the progress of this school during the past thirty years. Its larger enrollment and increasing facilities, its graduate school and mission department, its revised curriculum and wider program, all are evidences of an awareness of opportunities to enter the many doors that are opening to our Church today. We are genuinely and humbly grateful, however, that these changes never affected the loyalty of Concordia to God and His blessed Word. There are evidences that not every church body has fared so well. In an old eastern town there are two large churches built so close to each other that a man can almost span the distance between them. When the first church was built, the members believed in the Trinity and accepted the Bible as God's Word. Sometime later a group of dissenters denied the Trinity and built the second church. This was tragedy enough, but today both churches have forsaken the truth and denied the Trinity. They stand as earnest warnings to all churches to guard their precious heritage against any desire for change that is born of pride and rebellion against God. If there have been significant changes in schools and churches which were dedicated to the unchanging God, who is the same, yesterday, today, and forever, in churches sworn to undying alle-

* Professor Rincker, president of Concordia College, Milwaukee, Wis., delivered this address at the graduation exercises of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, June 6, 1952. At this time Professor Rincker, together with four other clergymen, received the degree of Doctor of Divinity, *honoris causa*.

giance to His abiding Word, then it is not at all startling to observe vast changes, crises, and revolutions in all the institutions of society and in the relations of men and nations to each other throughout the world. We must agree with the observation of Ovid:

There's nothing constant in the universe,
All ebb and flow, and every shape
That's born bears in its womb the seeds of change.

Much of the change we witness is good and constitutes progress, the lifting of our sights, and the widening of our horizons. This is the type of change that has been effected here at Concordia Seminary. The world, too, has made many changes that are beneficial to men. Improvements in transportation and agriculture, in medicine and diet, have brought more of the good things of life into the homes of more people than ever before. But it needs no sage to tell us, nor is it the exaggerated and gloomy analysis of the pessimist, that the multitudinous changes in the world about us are predominantly bad and are hurrying us on to ominous crises or a tragic day of reckoning.

On the larger scene of the world we see ancient and far-flung empires crumbling and disintegrating; new powers, ambitions, greedy and fierce, are fastening their tentacles with diabolical cleverness on sleepy, soft, and sybarite peoples. Almighty God, who shook the nations of the earth with devastating political convulsions to prepare for the coming of His Christ, is shaking the earth once more and thundering His call to repentance. As these eruptions break forth all around us, the peace we so devoutly hope for is threatened anew; new fears grip the hearts of men; new anti-Christ's attack the Church of God. "Change and decay in all around I see."

Nor are the changes in our own dear country less revolutionary and alarming. Washington with his farewell warnings is laughed out of countenance. A new foreign policy has entangled us in the affairs of most nations of the earth; we have built up an economic empire that straddles the earth like a new colossus. By pouring billions into the bottomless coffers of unfriendly nations we hope to buy their allegiance. The nation that once boasted: "Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute," quietly ransoms its citizens from piratical powers. Corruption has left the scenes of

picayune ward pickings and invaded the highest and most honored offices of the land, whose shady dealers brazenly face television cameras, but cravenly refuse to testify lest they incriminate themselves. We have tried to offset the failures in these vital areas of our national life with a program of colossalism. "Not being able to make our values beautiful, we make them huge." But the tallest skyscrapers of the world and the greatest dam, as well as the huge cyclotron and the devastating hydrogen bomb, will not allay the fears of our countrymen who stand in awe of these changes.

A cross section of the present obviously represents vast changes if compared with a picture of twenty-five years ago or even of yesterday. More ominous, however, is the fact that even the future is not what it used to be. It, too, has changed considerably during the past years. In former times men found comfort in the vague promises and uncertainties of the future. Time, they felt, would heal all wounds. Brighter prospects, recovery from social and economic ills, all were "just around the corner." Political graft and corruption might have to be endured for a while, but then would come "a new broom," to sweep all things clean again. But today the future seems to be stacked against us. Man may boast that his achievements in the fields of science and in the realm of thought have done much to bring about this change.

In the first place man has succeeded in conquering space and in annihilating distance. By the multitude of his inventions he has made the world into one big whispering gallery and has removed the barriers that formerly kept the nations in their own back yard. Oceans and mountains no longer divide us. We can no longer withdraw from the disputes and quarrels of the nations and live self-sufficiently in our own bailiwick. We must therefore learn to live at peace with each other, or we shall be fighting to the death.

However, living peaceably with his neighbor has never been characteristic of man even in the days when space and distance were real and vast. What will he do today when he must live close to people whose political and social philosophy mean death and destruction to everything he holds dear? For Americans it means that Communism has become so strong, and its dominion over the minds and souls of men is spreading with such speed,

that there can be no uncertainty in anyone's mind about an eventual clash that will bring every one of us into the valley of decision. It is already sheer stupidity merely to hope in vain for a brighter day, hopefully hugging the future only to find it a delusive phantom.

Finally, I might suggest that the future has become a terrifying certainty because man now has discovered the power by means of which he can destroy himself and his entire civilization. The days of easy and smug security are definitely gone. The clouds on the horizon are lowering, and they threaten to remain.

As sincere and humble Christian believers we know that these downward changes that have characterized most of the modern era and are crowding the scene in recent years are the results of sin. The vast majority of men are trying to live without God; they ignore His loving appeals to repent; they brazenly violate His holy Law and laugh at His threats of retribution. The Prophet Hosea might have been writing about our day when he described his own: "There is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God, in the land. By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery they break out, and blood toucheth blood."

When we can trace the causes of these disintegrating and degrading changes in our culture to overt violations of God's Moral Law, it is relatively easy for the Christian and the man of God to set up his defenses and to level his attacks. But the reason for many of the ills that have been multiplying in recent years and crowding in upon our own lives often lies in a less obvious source of corruption. It may often begin in the respectable atmosphere of the schoolroom or in the learned discourse of the philosopher. It is intimately linked up with the system of truth accepted by the majority of those in strategic positions.

Now, truth is an attribute of God. In spite of Pilate and his ilk there *is* a body of absolute truth. This truth is of God; it *is* God. Jesus said: "I am the Truth"; and in His high-priestly prayer He assures us that we may know and experience this Truth in the volume of His revelation. He also comforts us with the blessed promise that we may fully comprehend this truth if we permit His Spirit, whom He will send into our hearts, to lead us into

all truth. You and I by the grace of God have come into possession of this full and absolute truth. Our eyes have seen the King, and we know Him to be the blessed Trinity, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. From this fountainhead of truth we have learned the will of God, His holy Law, as well as the reality and significance of sin and of God's grace in Jesus Christ, our Savior.

This truth, as we know it and believe it, is not accepted by the majority of men today. Many statesmen, teachers, philosophers, and even churchmen give lip service to it while they adulterate it with wishful thinking and twist every phrase of God's revelation to suit their own pet perversions. Most men deny the existence of a body of absolute truth and blandly relegate every claim that there is a reality beyond the reach of man's senses to the field of superstition and fruitless speculation. Truth for them is the knowledge they gain empirically by their own experiments and research, by weighing, measuring, and testing. They have accepted natural science as a more reliable body of truth than religion, theology, and even philosophy.

The mind that begins with this premise, that nothing really exists beyond the grasp of the senses, materializes everything. Man becomes a mere chance concatenation of genes, a complex of electrons and protons, an animal organism. Men who build a culture on this concept naturally rule out everything spiritual and substitute material values. Wealth becomes for them the highest good, the common denominator, the incentive to work and sacrifice, and the means of achieving everything that is useful and pleasant. It ultimately becomes the criterion of good and bad, right and wrong.

While Christian theology emphasizes the unchangeableness of God and declares Him to be the same, yesterday, today, and forever, the system of materialistic, sensate truth allows no exception to the rule of change. All things are temporal and relative. If there are no eternal values, then only the present moment is real and desirable. What this does to a sense of responsibility, to moral restraint, and every relationship of man to man is easily imagined. And if all values are relative, everything is vitiated. Who will then dare distinguish between truth and error, the moral and the immoral? If things are going to smash in many parts

of the world and are threatening to break up in America, this bastard system of truth may be a very real cause.

There are those who try to harmonize this perversion of truth with the absolute truth of God. Not yet ready to give up religion altogether, they consciously or unconsciously imitate the thought processes they have been following in the sciences and in the social sciences. Under this compulsion religion, too, must become primarily utilitarian in an earthly sense. It is natural that it then degenerates into a kind of social gospel, a mixture of ethical, religious, and nationalistic vagueness, calculated to help man get the most out of the all-important present moment.

In the schools of the world and of our country this same system of sensate truth avoids the areas of real knowledge and wisdom that seek to understand the nature of God and His will, as well as the nature of true reality and lasting values, and fosters "useful" knowledge and crafts that prepare men and women to get the largest possible share of the goods of the world.

This, then, is the rather gloomy picture of the changing and changeable world into which you are being sent by your heavenly Father. True, you are called to little islands of faith where men still accept the absolute truth of God and attempt to live according to His abiding standards. But you have a second obligation. You must put forth every effort you can spare to rescue as many as possible among those still groping in the darkness of error or sinking in the sands of sin.

You may well ask: Is there any hope? Does any time remain? Are we not hastening to the end of all things? Or is there a possibility that this is but the end of an era and that a new culture and a new civilization may yet be built on the ruins of materialism? God has not given us an answer to these questions, and the best thinking of men is divided. You know that Oswald Spengler is a prophet of doom and speaks of the contemporary crisis as the death agony of Western culture and society. At the other extreme is the penetrating and systematic analysis of Pitirim Sorokin. He holds that we are in a most difficult period of transition and that such transitions have always produced tragic explosions — brutality, wholesale destruction, gangsterism, war, and revolution. He, too, is greatly alarmed by the extent of the present crisis, for it involves

the whole of our culture: Its fine arts, science, philosophy, religion, social and economic relations, and our ways of thought and life. Yet he believes it to be the end of an epoch and holds out the hope of a better day if those who would spearhead the move will only come in the name of the Lord.

It really makes little difference whether it be the one or the other. Our duty, as men of God and His ambassadors, is exactly the same in either case. We must work while it is day, for the night cometh when no man can work. For vast numbers the night will come every day we live. For them the time of grace will have ended. The Lord commends them to your love and compassion and to your holy zeal. He has called you to the conquest "for such a time as this," and He has equipped you with the armor of His truth and the weapons of His might. Stand fast in this truth and might, and you will be able to tear down the tall defenses of error and to storm the citadels of pride. Your unchanging God will be fighting on your side with the weapons of His omnipotence. He who gave victory to the arms of Moses, who rescued Jeremiah from the hatred of his countrymen, who enabled Paul to endure more for Christ than all the disciples, who blessed the work of Luther in spite of Pope and Emperor, this God is your God forever and ever; He will be your Guide even unto death.

As long as time remains, you may be sure that your ministry of the Word of Truth will be successful. God has promised to bless it and to perform His miracles through you. Who knows what great blessings the Lord may yet provide for our nation and the world if all of us boldly chide the sins and abuses that are so common and at the same time proclaim from the housetops the free grace in Jesus Christ! While sin is a reproach to any people, righteousness has often exalted a nation and will do so again. The people that do know their God shall be strong and do exploits.

In the narrower field of your parish ministry, however, you will find an opportunity to render service that is truly divine and will bear fruits abundantly. Those who accept the absolute and sublime Truth of God and wait upon the Lord may be troubled on every side, yet not distressed; they may be perplexed, but not in despair; for they know God and live in the forgiveness of sin. In the arms

of their omnipotent Redeemer they have the power to conquer fear. Though life becomes cheap in this world and they be forsaken by men, they will know that God has not forsaken them. He has purchased them with the blood of His holy Son and now prizes His possession so highly that He speaks of His redeemed as the jewels of His crown. And should that great day of God's wrath come soon and overwhelm the world with terror, those who know and believe the Truth need not hide in caves and holes in the rocks, but may confidently lift up their heads with joy to meet their Savior and know that their own redemption draweth nigh. To be permitted to serve men with these divine assurances is the greatest privilege on earth. There can be no frustration in your work, for you are partners and coworkers with God.