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Modern Church Trends

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ONE OF THE CHURCH'S PRINCIPAL INTERESTS during the past twenty-five years has been to define more fully its task and function in the light of recent world history with its many problems and frustrations. Soon after the conclusion of the second world war, when the World Council of Churches met at Amsterdam, it became apparent that this important subject would demand the attention of Christendom for some time in the future. One of the speakers dramatically pointed to the fact that over the course of history so little attention had been devoted to the doctrine of the church that the discussion had scarcely passed its pretheological phase. Colin Williams remarks:

While the person of Christ (Christology) dominated early theological discussions, the work of Christ (atonement) received its full attention in the Middle Ages, and the spotlight of attention was turned on the Sacraments in the late Middle Age and Reformation periods. But little direct theological attention was ever given to the church itself—probably because it was taken for granted.¹

Almost immediately the doctrine of the church came to the center of the stage, and during the twenty years that followed interest not only deepened but it grew and spread into most Christian denominations. As time passed attention focused especially on the church's task and function.

But there were also other reasons for the increased interest in the mission of the church. World War II had caused the major church bodies to examine their purpose for existence. Theologians in Germany were asking why the churches had remained silent when Hitler came to power and led the world into the most devastating conflict thus far experienced by man. The institutional church began to search its heart for the reason it had not acted when Hitler killed six million Jews. This self-examination then gave rise to the question, "What should it have done in those circumstances and confronted with such facts?"

Another factor which has caused the church to examine its purpose and function was the bitter criticism which has been directed against it, particularly here in North America, during the 1960s. It will be remembered that in the 1950s the church had little to fear from its critics. At that time it met with rather general approval. Church membership increased rather rapidly in most denominations. It became fashionable to be counted among the members of an active young congregation of Christians. There was a moratorium on any serious criticism of the church. But with the late fifties and the coming of the sixties young people's attitude toward the institutiona

church seemed suddenly to change. Criticism of the church's life and practice began to mount. In Vol. 1 of *New Directions in Theology Today* William Hordern paints a vivid picture of the way in which the world was telling the church to look at its mission in life. It was at about this time that Rolf Hochhuth's play *The Deputy* was produced. "This play rocked two continents by launching a scathing criticism of Pope Pius' failure to protest Nazism's slaughter of six million Jews." At about the same time the Protestant church particularly in the south was chided by the president of this country for not accepting "its responsibility in the racial crisis." Folk songs which were enjoying great popularity at that time often pointed to the weaknesses of the church. Bonnie Dobson, a Canadian folk singer, commented that we have heard a great deal about putting Christ back into Christmas, but, she suggested, it would suit her if we would just put him back into Christianity. After reading Bishop Robinson's popular book entitled *Honest to God* in which the author pleads that the church should create a new, more relevant theology, a student is said to have remarked: "I don't ask the church to invent a new theology, I just want to see it practice the one it already has." It was also in the decade of the sixties that the Anglican church asked Canada's leading agnostic to write a book explaining what he found wrong with the church. The book which he produced, you may remember, was called *The Comfortable Pew*. According to Hordern "the core of his criticism was aimed at the church's abdication of leadership, its failure to call men to a life of Christian action in the world. As Berton sees it, the church has been so afraid of losing people by speaking on controversial issues that it has bored them to death."³ Perhaps we may find much in these criticisms which is unfair and even inaccurate, but whether they are right or wrong, legitimate or not, they do reflect what many in the world were saying about the church. And as you note most criticism was directed against what the church was doing—its function and mission.

More specifically, the world has been chiding the church for its attitude of indifference, lovelessness, and lack of concern for the poor and underprivileged, for neglecting the social problems that plague mankind. It is being said that the institutional church has never concerned itself sufficiently with the questions of social ethics, with the knotty problems of church and state, with the tensions between capitol and labor, with community and even family concerns. They assert that our sermons deal too much with a far-distant heaven and not enough with the pressures and problems of this life. They seek to deliver mankind from a hell in the after-life rather than from a hell on earth. There is complaint against Protestantism in general and against conservative churches in particular charging that we have spent too much time and expended too much effort emphasizing justification by faith to the neglect of sanctification.

The problem becomes even more critical and complex when we look more carefully at the world's attitude toward the supernatural. It has been said that we live in a world come of age, in a sophisticated, self-confident, scientifically-oriented civilization which finds it very

difficult to accept the miraculous; it considers the Bible to be a purely human book; it regards the creation of the world as myth, and looks upon the redemptive work of Christ as irrelevant in our self-sufficient modern world. Death is the end, and both heaven and hell are figments of the church's imagination.

All of this criticism has brought about a decline in the amount of influence which the church can exert on the present generation. In the words of Colin Williams:

The church in our time is no longer in a position to lord it over the world in the old medieval sense, attempting to draw the whole of the culture under its "christianizing" influence. The church has lost its capacity to command and its power to control history institutionally . . .

The church no longer can provide a stable center to culture—a controlling world view or value system to hold society together. But neither does our society look any longer for such a metaphysical or cultural or religious unity . . . There is no longer a dominant sense of need . . . for the church to provide a doctrinal "system" to give a stable framework for that world view. For that reason the flexible functional theology that is now replacing the older metaphysical forms of theology is more attuned to the mental attitude of our time.⁴

Of course, there was a day in our history when the church exerted a strong influence on the life of the community, when its religious beliefs shaped the community's views regarding what was right and wrong, when the church even had an effect on the cultural and perhaps the political opinion in the community, when the pastor was often the most educated person in the village. The parson in those small communities often became the model for the whole village; he was the model husband, father, farmer, and school teacher.⁵ But such rural communities, says Williams, have given way to an urban society; the village has been replaced by the Metropolitan center. And with this change has come the inevitable decline in influence on the part of the church.

It was against this background that theologians in the World Council of Churches undertook the task of restudying the mission of the church. They realized that the church today exists in a totally different environment than it did even fifty years earlier. And as they redefined the mission of the church, they arrived at a number of conclusions.

1. Since the church had lost its influence, its power to command, it must now assume a servant role in its relation to the world. Colin Williams describes it thus:

There is need to think of the church-world relation in much more humble and much more dynamic and secular fashion than we have been accustomed to in the past. It must be more humble in the sense that we must learn to stop thinking that the role of the church is to draw the world into the order of the church. We must cease thinking of the ultimate salvation of the world

as the process by which Christ's Lordship over the body . . . is expanded until it draws the whole world into its realm . . . Christ in His movement toward the fulfillment of his Lordship in creation uses the community of those who already know him as Lord. The church is the servant of his struggle to bring this new and free life to expression in the communities of the world.⁶

Now what specifically does this mean? It implies that the church should no longer be regarded as the center of God's activity. Instead the world has become the center. Therefore, the church must no longer imagine that its primary task is to bring people into the Christian congregation where they can hear the Gospel preached and take part in the administration of the Sacraments that thereby they might be brought to faith and strengthened by the power of the Spirit through the Gospel and be saved. Instead the church's principal task is to seek out those places in society where men and women are engaged in social, economic, and political struggles, where the underprivileged are seeking justice and equal rights; for it is there, they say, that Christ is revealing His lordship in creation, and the church should join Him in His struggles. As Richard Brien states:

The primary obedience of the Church is to find out where "the action" is, to be sensitive to the points at which God is working in history on the frontiers of social change, and there to serve him in it.⁷

According to this way of thinking, the mission of the church is primarily secular in nature. It is being suggested that if the church is to regain its influence in the lives of people, it must involve itself more deeply in the social, political, ethical, and economic ills of modern society. You will recognize immediately that this is a new and entirely different understanding of the church's primary task. It is a view which assumes that the church's most pressing mission today is to improve man's existence on earth rather than to preach the good news of salvation through Christ Jesus.

2. As the mission of the church is redefined and as more emphasis is placed on the secular, and social concerns, there is the further suggestion that the world should write the church's agenda. This is another way of saying that if the church is to succeed in accomplishing its mission, it must let the world determine what its program shall be. Now, on the surface this suggestion may appear to be both logical and wise, because the church must be relevant and speak to the world's needs if it is to be listened to, and if its efforts are to be successful. However, there is a serious flaw in this strategy. While the world may be able to articulate its social, economic, and political needs, it will always fail to recognize its greatest lack, i.e. its need for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The world will never place this item on the church's agenda, for the world is dead in trespasses and sins. Therefore, it remains for the church itself to add this major, all-important item to its list of concerns. This leads to the **third way** in which the World Council of Churches is seeking to make the work of the church more relevant and acceptable in our modern world.

3. As the task of the church is being defined today in terms of social, political, and economic involvement, there is a corresponding de-emphasis on doctrine. Doctrine is becoming less and less important in the church's mission. One of the favorite ways to describe the church today is to speak of it as event. In other words, the church today is not so much an institution in which there are doctrines taught, an institution in which the Gospel is proclaimed to sin-sick mortals, but the church is rather a movement, an event, in which the people of God become pilgrims, moving away from the home base, out into the world to serve Christ and their fellowmen by assisting in man's struggles for justice, peace, prosperity, and happiness, fighting the forces of injustice, discrimination, and prejudice.

4. As less emphasis is placed on doctrine, there is in many areas of Christendom a strong trend in the direction of ecumenism and unionism. Of course, this is one of the major objectives of the World Council of Churches. It is argued that since the church is the body of Christ, and since all believers are members of that one body, they should not only recognize each other as Christians, but they should also practice altar and pulpit fellowship with other denominations regardless of differences in doctrine.

Furthermore, they should make the task and mission of the church a common cause in which there would be full cooperation between Christians of all denominations. The logic of their reasoning goes something like this: Christ's mission in the world is one. Therefore, the mission of the church should not be denominational in nature but ecumenical. Hence, it is suggested that less emphasis be placed on so-called denominational "baggage" or doctrines. Church bodies are encouraged to take their places alongside one another and together seek to further Christ's one mission. To accomplish this all missionaries "should be thoroughly trained in and committed to the ecumenical movement in the deepest sense of the word."

5. As denominational doctrines and forms became less important, there were also other developments: a) Agreement was reached that for altar and pulpit fellowship among denominations the only requirement was that all participating churches be recognized as Christian. Thus the church was not looked upon so much as a teaching institution whose mission included the task of instructing its people in the whole counsel of God, including all of the doctrines revealed in Scriptures. Instead attention was centered almost exclusively on the Gospel. b) This in turn led to a new and different understanding of what Lutherans call the centrality of the Gospel. By centrality of the Gospel Lutherans have meant to say that justification by faith is the very heart and center of all Christian theology. Other doctrines are important because they support the Gospel, the central doctrine. However, in recent years the centrality of the Gospel has come to mean something quite different. According to some it implies that in the final analysis only the Gospel is essential to the unity of faith and therefore to church fellowship. Other doctrines such as creation, inerrancy of Scripture, third use of the law, miracles, the physical resurrection of the dead, immortality of the soul are not

divisive of fellowship, even if they are denied. Thus centrality of the Gospel has become a kind of Gospel-monism, meaning that only the Gospel is essential to the faith and the confession of the church. c) While in some areas of Christendom there has been a strong trend toward Gospel-monism, in others there is a movement in the direction of Neo-universalism. Recently evangelical theologians in Europe and America published the so-called Frankfurt Declarations in which they expressed deep concern over the new universalism which is being embraced in many areas of the organized Christian church. Neo-universalism is a teaching which appears in many forms but essentially it assumes that the sinner can attain salvation without coming into contact with the verbalized Gospel of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. It holds that faith in the promises of the Gospel is perhaps the best and the surest way by which mortal man can reach heaven, but it is not the only way. Heathen who have not heard the Christian Gospel may also be saved by taking seriously the religious beliefs with which they have come into contact. Needless to say this is contrary to the clear Scripture which states that "There is salvation in none other, neither is there any other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" except the name of Jesus. This leads now to the final way in which many theologians today are seeking to make the work of the church more relevant and acceptable in our modern world.

6. There is today a strong tendency to obscure the differences between the church and the world. Many fail to take seriously the fact that Christ has called the church out of the world, that the world without Christ lies under judgment, and that the church's principal task according to Matthew 28: 19-20 is to return to the world with the message of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus Christ in order that sinners might believe and through faith be saved.

These are only a few of the more important trends and developments that have taken place within the past twenty-five years which are challenging the Lutheran Church today.

FOOTNOTES

1. Colin Williams, *The Church*, New Directions in Theology Today, Vol. IV (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), p. 11.
2. William Hordern, *Introduction*, New Directions in Theology Today, Vol. I (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), p. 97.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
4. Colin Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-3.
7. Richard P. McBrien, *The Church in the Thought of Bishop John Robinson* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), p. 98.