

Will the Christian Church Survive?

"Any significant impact of the Church upon the day whose sun is sinking into a confusing twilight, or upon the tomorrow which struggles in the womb of night, must necessarily be an impact of challenge, of opposition"

by Bernard Iddings Bell

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1

When one examines the blueprints of a post-war Paradise offered for our encouragement or enticement by the spokesmen of the contending nations, one perceives a common denominator in their various plans: a unanimous assumption that the new order is to be an affair of this world only; a taking it for granted that all that men need for security and happiness and peace is an industrial and political setup well conceived; a postulation that man, when he regards himself as an end to be served, is morally competent, of sufficient natural good-will to make his system—whatever it may be—minister to something more satisfactory than a frequently renewed fratricidal conflict.

Against this common assumption which characterizes all the popular post-war hopes—British, American, Russian, German, Japanese, Italian—the teaching of Jesus Christ stands in unqualified opposition; nor can the Christian Church compromise in respect to that opposition without ceasing to be Christian. In that simple fact is the essence of the Church's problem.

If man, as envisioned by democrats and totalitarians alike, is for himself a determining end; if he may safely do as he pleases, in such fashion as may from time to time seem to him expedient; if he is able to handle his affairs without redemption from an ingrained folly; if in his own power he can rise above self-seeking and live in a voluntary sociality; if he is able to get along quite nicely without contact with any power not of himself which makes for righteousness—then Christianity is irrelevant to life. In that case the Church is at worst an incubus which ought to be destroyed and from which innocent children should be protected, at best an ivory tower in which peculiar and incompetent people may from time to time be permitted to take refuge from reality—an institution insignificant but relatively harmless.

As a matter of fact, it is in one or other of those two ways that most people in the pre-war world came to regard the Church. In Russia, the Church was stamped out as thoroughly as the regime could manage with safety, on the ground that it was a dangerous distributor of "opium to the people." In such lands as Germany, Japan, Mexico, the Church was forbidden to bring the

current statecraft before the bar of God and, even more significant, was shut off from an effective educational access to the oncoming generation. In "liberal" countries—Sweden, England, the United States, for example—the Church was more and more regarded as a polite confraternity of occasional pious individuals, which had little or no social function except to lend a tone of respectability to a culture secularistic, man-centered, man-devised. In such countries the Church was not persecuted; it was granted every possible liberty. This was due not so much to a singular nobility as to the fact that it was felt that the Church could be relied on to "mind its own business," the said business being defined as providing a poetic delight for those who happened to crave its form of emotional release.

There was no country in the whole world, in the year before the war broke, in which the Christian Church had for years been expected or permitted to exert a controlling or even a largely critical influence on education, politics, industry, the arts, marriage and divorce. These are life's chief activities. In respect to every one of them, modern man had become used to ignore what might be the will of God for him, to substitute a desired self-expression for an attempt to do that will; and in respect to them all, he assumed his own entire competence. This same self-centeredness and self-confidence are also characteristic of the programs now variously offered for the shaping of things to come. Without a complete rediscovery of its own function, the Church is hardly likely to matter any more tomorrow than it mattered yesterday or than it matters at the moment, which is just about not at all.

2

That the Church has had small influence of late, and seems likely to have little more in the immediate future, is the Church's own fault. Christians have been too willing to come to terms with, and even to flatter, an essentially godless world. Sometimes this has been due to ecclesiastical venality; more often it has come about from inability to understand what has been happening. Carried along by inertia, churchmen have watched without comprehension while congregations have melted away, while the secularly educated younger generation increasingly has absented itself from worship and activity. To have retired fighting before the attacks of a growing secularism would have been a hard but glorious adventure, perhaps the prelude to a new and vigorous offensive; to have drifted into the position of a tolerated minority, politely begging an increasingly indifferent multitude for occasional smiles and reluctant contributions, has been to enact a role no less ignominious because ecclesiastics have not known what they were doing, no less deplorable because the populace, at least in Anglo-Saxon countries, has been too polite to tell church people the truth about themselves.

If one looks at the New Testament, the scriptural charter of the ecclesiastical enterprise, or if one examines the nineteen centuries of Christian history in an attempt to analyze the causes of alternating periods of success and failure, it seems plain enough that the Church's business is the simple and difficult bearing of witness, in terms of creed and code and cult, to the nature of God, the nature of man, the right relationship between the two, as these are revealed in the person and teaching of Jesus; the offering of Him, as solution of man's problems individual and social, to a world which does not desire Him but cannot get along without Him, a world which for its own

safety must be brought to adore and obey him, a world which cannot be brought to do that except by those who do themselves adore and obey Him. The function of the Church is, with complete conviction of the divine inevitability of what Christ reveals about life, to resist all lesser, carnal interpretations of life—resist them in love but with firmness and consistency, convinced that thus it may persuade natural man, turn him to the right-about, save him from conceit and folly and cupidity and from the destruction these engender.

Any significant impact of the Church upon the day whose sun is sinking into a confusing twilight, or upon the tomorrow which struggles in the womb of night, must necessarily be an impact of challenge, of opposition. That challenge remains constant, because of the essential continuity which exists between the immediate past and the immediate future. Their relationship is not that of supplanted and supplanter, but rather that of boy and grown-up man. The liberal age, with its trust in rational idealism, soon degenerated, because of man's conceited irrationality, into an era of class struggle and of stridently expanding empire. These now lead straight on into a period of greedy collectivism dominated by demagogues. The history of man from 1750 to 1950 will be seen by historians in the twenty-first century to have been all of a piece. The secularist structure during the two centuries has been and continues a consistent development: an un-Christian, indeed an anti-Christian folly.

Its foundations are pride, ambition, desire to dominate, lust for this world's goods. Christ plainly insisted that in these are seeds of death, not life; and the Church needs must say the same if it is to hold the respect of those who have regard for honest consistency, or if it is to rescue man from the consequences of his modern mistake. Pride, ambition, desire to dominate, lust for this world's goods—these must be torn from the human heart. That was what Christ demanded in Jewry long ago. In the centuries since, that demand has been the constant foundation of Christian morality. In every generation the saints, believing the demand to be from God, have devoted their lives to renouncing and denouncing, as basic poisons, those things upon which mankind today would feed.

The Church, these later years, has forgotten how to renounce and denounce them. Instead it has sought to soothe a sick mankind with ointment of sentimental piety plus injections of a superficially optimistic geniality. The note of prophecy has, indeed, not wholly died away; but the prophets have been expelled from the synagogue, banished to obscure Coventries, or at least persuaded "to draw it very mild." This is understandable. Prophets are upsetting souls. They interfere with the financing of missionary budgets and, in general, with the smooth running of ecclesiastical enterprises. They make difficult the erection of super-temples, and mar the nice amenities of life. It was so in the days of Amos, Isaiah, Jeremy, of those apostles who in the first days of Christianity went about turning the world upside down, of Loyola and of Luther and of Wesley and of Gore.

Nobody likes the prophets much. But whenever the prophets are silent, the Church is first made powerless and then regarded, quite properly, as parasitic. The Church in a liberal and capitalist world has preferred popularity to prophecy. It is not surprising that now the Church discovers that "from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."

If the Church is in any real sense to influence the world of tomorrow, it would seem that the Church must so reform itself that it can make a new and almost brutal proclamation of the ethics of Christ, with an authority born of belief that the way of life therein commanded comes straight from God. The ethics of Jesus, as one reads the same in the New Testament, as one finds it in the systematic formulation made by Christian moralists all down the years, is, to say the least, hardly to be twisted into consistency with the wisdom by which democrats, totalitarians, or what you will, would today build their various Utopias. One may deem it a true morality or a false morality; at least it is a different morality from that of the secularist. If men come to suspect that the secularist wisdom leads to little but insecurity, war, unhappiness, despair, they may just possibly conclude that it is the Christ who is the wise one. That happened several times in the days before we were born. But if they are to have that choice, the Church must continue to proclaim Christ's way as of divine sanction, come weal come woe. That is its justification for being.

3

The morality of Jesus is based on these convictions:—

(1) That human life is more than a brief existence between birth and death; that the things which most matter are beyond the power of the grave to destroy; that all which is, including man, exists to subserve a supramundane purpose; that earthly happiness may often well be sacrificed, and sometimes must be sacrificed, for the sake of spiritual integrity; that man's chief end is to know God and to enjoy Him forever; that nothing short of unity with God can satisfy man's searching, lonely soul; that for individuals to be sane and happy, or for society to remain secure, it is necessary that in their whole scheme of thought men and women shall place at the center more than transitory values.

(2) That patriotism is all too apt to become a snare and that racialism is a delusion; that all men, near and far, rich and poor, wise and foolish, black and yellow and brown and white and red, are brothers, made to live for one another in a mutually sacrificing sociality; that to exploit one's fellows by way of privilege is disobedience to God, fratricidal folly, cause of war, and this whether the privilege be within a nation and due to accident of birth or misuse of ownership, or between the nations and maintained for the moment by tariffs, embargoes, and suchlike tricks.

(3) That it is better to serve than to be served; that he who exalts himself will be brought low and that it is the humble who will be exalted; that servants are quite literally more pleasing to God than masters, and that the redemption of a master is made possible only as he becomes the servant of his servants; that the more abilities and talents one possesses, the greater is one's obligation to take care of the welfare of those less gifted than oneself. *Noblesse oblige*.

From the archives:

(December 1989)

On the political meaning of Christianity. By Glenn Tinder

["Foreign Policy and Christian Conscience"](#) (May 1959)

"A government can pursue its purpose in a patient and conciliatory and understanding way, respecting the interests of others and infusing its behavior with a high standard of decency and honesty and humanity, or it can show itself petty, exacting, devious, and self-righteous."

(4) That enemies are to be loved; that if they hunger they are to be fed; that we are to do good to those who hate, revile, despitefully use us. In the light of that teaching of Christ, the Church's moralists in all ages have faced the problem of war. Christians of today, too, are compelled to face that problem; they cannot avoid it; the world at large will not permit them to avoid it. Some few Christians in every generation have insisted that to obey this command involves complete pacifism, utter non-resistance; but most of the moralists have said no to that. Evil may sometimes get such control of men and nations, they have realized, that armed resistance becomes a necessity. There are times when not to participate in violence is in itself to do violence to the welfare of the brethren. But no Christian moralist worth mentioning has ever regarded war *per se* as other than monstrous, or hoped that by the use of violence anything more could be accomplished than the frustration of a temporarily powerful malicious wickedness. War in itself gives birth to no righteousness. Only such a fire of love as leads to self-effacement can advance the welfare of mankind. Such love is expensive.

(5) That it is useless or worse to refrain from doing right today for fear of what may eventuate therefrom in the future, and also that a seeking to find palliation for our present inability or cowardice in hope of a Utopia to be builded by our children is evidence of diseased minds; that a man must live each day as though it were the last day; that our responsibility is with our own conduct; that now is the prince of this world judged.

(6) That children are the most important of all people and more particularly the determinants of marriage; that it is more important that offspring should be nurtured than it is that fathers and mothers should continue "to be loved."

(7) That it is immoral to lay up riches with the hope that with them we may buy, for ourselves or for our heirs, exemption from the common lot of useful and productive labor; that an economy based on an increasing, unpaid, interest-bearing debt, in which men seek to acquire some ownership, that thereby they may gain relief from the necessity of earning bread by work, is an unnatural economy, doomed to result in social chaos. It is right for man to desire a reasonable security, especially in age; but such security cannot rightly come by increment from private investment. A Christian security must be a social security.

These ethical convictions are clear in the New Testament, recognized by reputable Christian theologians. In accordance with them, Jesus lived. It was because He proclaimed them that He was crucified. To them the saints have borne their witness. Because the Church of the late yesterdays soft-pedaled them, striking its *forte* on more comforting notes, stressing pious acts

and subtle formulas with which to decorate an essential worldliness, the wisdom of Jesus, which probes to the heart of our common problems, is a wisdom well-nigh forgotten. There are millions of Christians who simply do not know that the Christianity to which they give a vague and occasional allegiance involves obedience to such hard and searching sayings. When they hear a preacher re-echo these Christian precepts, they take offense. "Let the parsons keep their hands off economics and their voices out of politics." So say many, even most, professing Christians nowadays, quite unaware that they are rebuking, not the preacher who repeats the maxims, but Him who in the first place proclaimed them as having a changeless and divine validity (One should note, however, that Christ did not teach that the Church should seek to establish itself as a sort of rival State, and that Christian moralists are unsympathetic with theocracy. The State is rather to be regarded as directly responsible to God. As Father Kelly of Keigham once put it in terms of the English scene, "It is the duty of Lambeth to insist that Westminster obey God. It is not right for Lambeth to attempt to make Westminster obey Lambeth."); and if even Christians are unaware of what their Master teaches, one can hardly expect that the world at large should understand. It is because the Church has thus obscured the socially prophetic note that it seems to most people to have no relevancy. The masses of the folk, observing the Church as of late the Church has been willing to present itself, say, "There is nothing here to bother with. These people bear within themselves no salvation. They are as mad as all the rest of us. They are not worth listening to. They are not even worth crucifying."

4

Is the Church then obsolescent?

Certainly the conventionalized Church of the late past seems to have before it little or no future: the tolerated and patronized Church, endowed or otherwise supported—and controlled—by mildly interested adherents who are more than willing to be men and women of the world as it is; the ever so respectable Church, intent upon its own repute, keeper of well-swept conventicles, attended by properly starched congregations (mostly middle-aged or older), and afraid to call its soul its own lest someone be offended; the Church willing to accept divided lives; the Church as buttress of a social order based on values not those of its Master. That Church will die; indeed it is dying now with great rapidity. It has become to the more vital elements of society, and particularly to the young, more often than not a bore and an impertinence.

Nor does it seem likely that the Church can continue in these days to have influence if it panders to magic, to superstition; if it offers to its adherents, not a chance to lose themselves in the hard and glorious service of God, but rather a supposed facility for cajoling the Almighty into doing tricks for the worldly profit and enjoyment of the elect. There was nothing of that sort of thing in Jesus, nor are such absurdities inherent in Christian dogma, Catholic or Protestant; but there has been so much of them in "popular Christianity," both Catholic and Protestant, as to have alienated from religion much of a modern world whose people, however unwise and unhappy, are reasonably informed. Much of that new world seeks—sometimes, alas, in perverted ways—to serve an end more noble than to wangle private benefits. The Church must be at least equally magnanimous. There is certainly no future for a magic-mongering caricature of Christianity.

But it is gratuitous to insist that, within that none too venerated respectability which is what most people deem the Church, there can not and will not emerge a newly vital and prophetic Christianity, capable of so loving the world as to defy it, to exasperate it, and at cost of honest sacrifice (perhaps even martyrdom) once again to love men and women into something like a true humanity. The world has been in a bad way several times before in Christian history—times when the Church has looked as conventional, emasculated, insignificant as it seems to most observers nowadays; and over and over again it has received new vigor as the world's need grew critical.

From the archives:

["Being Saint Francis"](#) (November 1995)

Scenes from the discomfiting life of Francis of Assisi. By Valerie Martin Seven and a half centuries ago, for instance, the Church looked nearly dead, smothered by a secularized culture, ruined by a long-continued compromise. They tell the tale how he who then was Pope of Rome had a dream in the night. He saw the Church of St. John Lateran, his cathedral, swaying as before a tempest, crumbling and about to fall. So imminent was its collapse that the Holy Father wept. And then he saw a little man, in the rough dress of an Umbrian peasant, who came running, placed his single hand against the tottering wall and pushed; and the cathedral stood firm and strong. The Pope awoke. The next day there sought him out a man named Francis, from Assisi, to ask the pontifical blessing for a great adventure; and the Holy Father saw that this was the man who had appeared in his dream. "What is this great adventure?" he asked. "To restore God's Church," replied Francis. "And how do you purpose to do it?" "By obeying Jesus Christ." The desired authorization in his hands, the Poverello departed; and with his Little Brothers he did restore God's Church. Everywhere the Friars Minor went,—little fishes swimming through the net of social convention,—the Church, challenged by the simplicity of them, their poverty, their sincerity, their joy in God, cast off its self-centered complacency and glowed again with fire of Heaven; and a weary world found, for a time at least, the peace which it had lost.

So it has been again and again in the nineteen Christian centuries. In times of world emergency there has emerged a leadership sufficient to ensure an utterance of Jesus' wisdom, a necessary challenge to the dying civilization, a new outpouring of the power of God bestowed on those intent to do His will rather than merely to follow along with a self-blinded humanity. Why not again?

There is visible at the moment, to be sure, no full-flowering revival of renewed faithfulness to Christ and His wisdom comparable to the Franciscan movement; but the dull, cold spiritual winter is not without its hints of a coming spring in which will be renascence of a life long hid from sight. By no means all the Church's membership is still placidly content with relegation to insignificance. In the ears of more and more Christians there sounds, ever louder, ever more insistent, the command that the kingdom of the world must become the kingdom of God and of His Christ. There are those who begin again to believe, with more than a verbal acquiescence, that all of man belongs to God: his doings economic, industrial, political, sexual, marital,

creative, recreational. These rebellious souls, to be sure, are a small minority of Christians; but among them are persons both of high position and of influence intellectual and moral.

The papal encyclicals, for example, have shown a clear appreciation of what is involved, even though it must be acknowledged that the average Roman Catholic seems singularly unaware of them, and frequently is disconcerted when told of their contents. Catholic Social Action is vocal, with its cry of "Long live Christ the King in home, shop, factory, and nation!" even though to most Catholics religion still seems to mean something far less revolutionary.

Among Anglicans a growing group, led first by Charles Gore and later by William Temple, has seen clearly and spoken bravely. Their efforts came to a dramatic climax in the Malvern Conference of 1940. It is true that the convocations of the Church of England and the general convention of its sister Episcopal Church in America, instead of following that lead, damned it with faint praise and thereby intimated to the world at large how out of harmony is Malvern with well-established denominational attitudes toward society. It is true that some of the Malvern leaders, perhaps discouraged by this ecclesiastical cold-shouldering, hastened to explain that they are concerned only with general principles, and not with an immediate application of those principles. But it is also true that the chief proponent of Malvern, Dr. Temple, has been lifted to the archiepiscopal throne of Canterbury, in spite of the determined opposition of many frightened Tories, to the enheartenment of those who long for a truly Christian society.

Meanwhile in Protestant circles the same significant attempt to apply Christ's principles to society is at least in its effective beginnings. The Federal Council of Churches and its emerging child, the World Council of Churches, show signs of understanding the revolutionary character of the Christian morality. Its Committee on a Just and Durable Peace, for example, is effectively indicating that the root causes of war are greed, conceit of tribe and race, desire for aggrandizement. The Oxford Conference on "Community, Church, and State" meant something, even though its performance fell considerably short of the prospectus issued in advance of the meetings. To be sure, the usual Protestant parishioner is still unaware of the socially upsetting implications of this new "Ecumenical Movement" and is apt to be definitely alarmed when he discovers what its leaders seem to be up to; but at least those leaders are awake. They know that Capitalism, Communism, Fascism, all three are anti-Christ.

The really alarming weakness in the Church's present state is due to the slowness of the moral revival among the rank and file of the members. Despite protesting minorities, notwithstanding occasional leadership, the great mass of Christian people remain complacent, unaware both that the position of the Church in contemporary society is humiliating and that the cause of that humiliation is their own timid compromise with a secularism inconsistent with tenets the holding and advancement of which are the Church's chief reason for being. It is their ineffective protest which has brought the Church into its present disrepute. For the world at large their failure has been little short of tragic. For years that world has been hearing and heeding the assured and strident cries of the hawkers of pottage, while the trumpets of God have sounded faint, obscure, confused. Before the Church can regain a lost respect or again have influence in the affairs of men, Christians must first accept without complaint the penalty of their own complacency, must

acknowledge and bewail their blindness and timidity.

If to the Church does come a new vision of righteousness, a new willingness to challenge the fundamental motivations of a secularist society, will the world, as we now have it or are likely to have it in the near future, give favoring attention? Not easily. Indeed the first reaction of that world to a Church intent on obeying Jesus Christ, to a Church that will not compromise, is almost certain to be one of bitter persecution.

How can one think otherwise? It can make for the Church no easy friends if it shall say to those who would build the postwar world, be they Russians or Germans or Japanese or Britons or Americans or some strange conglomerate of them all: "Your fine new mechanized, socialized, despiritualized culture is the work of children who have lost their way. It profits nothing for mankind to master nature if the price is the loss of human souls. Your gold is tarnished; your fine garments are moth-eaten; your rumbling cities are a pandemonium; you swarm like super-midges, you who were made to live like sons of God. You have forgotten the law of your being. You must learn again what your fathers knew and what you have forgotten, if indeed you ever heard of it. You have communized your selfishness? That is not enough. Man must *escape himself* in adoration and service of God if he is to find life worth the living. You are self-condemned to seek and strive and war for heart's desire, and yet obtain it not because you ask not. The roots of peace lie deeper than your statesmen know. Freedoms of a sort you may indeed have won—four of them or forty, it matters not—at cost of blood and tears; but the one freedom that is indispensable, freedom from self, is not a thing to be achieved; it is the gift of One whom man must permit to love him. God's heart is filled with pity for your sad estate, made captive as you are by your own inventions, slave to your own naive ideas. God can save you. We bring you tidings from Him—tidings of such joy as you have never dreamed of. But first you must renounce your pride, your personal and national ambitions, your desire to dominate and to coerce, your lust for this world's goods. It is a heavy price, but you must pay it." Men do not love those who hold in light esteem the goods which they have sweated to possess. They stone the prophets and they make the saints to suffer; they crucified Jesus.

When the Church at last comes out from the valley of a deserved humiliation, it will find that it is held in small esteem, that it is poor and despised; but such an approach to a worldly world is the only one by which to persuade that world that there are better things to live for than the current wisdom has revealed. Such humiliation, embraced and not resented, is required if one is to draw mankind to God. That is the meaning of the crucifix, whereon hangs One whom Christians are at least supposed to worship. He died for truth, for God, to rise again in power. In the end men listen to Him, understand, worship Him; but to bring that about in the world of tomorrow Christians, like Christ, must again be willing to lay down their lives in defiance of the mores of the world. The future of the Church, under God, lies in no other hands than its own.

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