

ALL MUST BE INVOLVED

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on March 27, 1966 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Many astute observers of our day are suggesting that Christianity is now in the same situation that the pagan mystery religions of ancient Greece and Rome were in three or four centuries after the time of Plato. These ancient religions which had thrived for centuries suddenly "went dead." The great temples were empty, sacrifices were unsought, and the religious ceremonies were unattended. There are those who predict a similar decline in Protestant Christianity of our time.

Karl Helm has written, "The church is like a ship on whose deck festivities are still kept up and glorious music is heard, while deep below the waterline a leak has been sprung and masses of water are pouring in, so that the vessel is settling hourly lower though the pumps are manned day by day." Alfred North Whitehead, one of the most highly regarded voices on the current religious scene, in speaking of the church in general, has said, "Its institutions no longer direct the patterns of life."

The decline of 20th century Christianity is not outwardly alarming or even outwardly apparent because of: (1) Large membership rolls. In fact, the general, surface popularity of religion has never been greater. Today, for example, the percentage of the total population on church rolls is three times that of the Civil War years just a century ago. (2) Large budgets. Never before have the coffers of the church been so well filled as now. (3) Attendance records. Month after month and year after year attendance records are being met all across the land. (4) Fine buildings. Never before have the churches been so well located and so well housed. Multiplied millions of dollars have been spent in recent years to provide the finest religious structures that the world has ever known. In spite of all of these outward evidences of religious prosperity, however, those who are in a position to observe the modern church most thoroughly are deeply alarmed.

Lost Provinces

Dr. Elton Trueblood, one of the most widely read of all religious authors of our day and one of the most widely traveled speakers of our time, makes a comparison between the church today and the Roman Empire when it appeared to be riding high, but actually was losing its provinces. In his challenging book, *The Company of the Committed*, he names some of the provinces which the church has lost in recent years. Among them is "higher education" which is one of the most crucial of all areas, because it involves the leaders and thinkers of the future. Dr. Trueblood, who is in constant demand as a lecturer on American college and university campuses, suggests that possibly not more than 2% of the three and one-half million college students of today are deeply committed to Christ. This is an alarming statistic, especially when it comes from one who speaks on college and university campuses as much or more than any other religious leader of the day.

Another lost province is "youth in general" which includes those not in college, and those younger than college age. He also lists "organized labor" as another lost province, pointing out that most congregations are in the comfortable suburbs, and are made up of the well-to-do white-collar worker or professional people or management. It is interesting to observe that in most congregations there are few men of the labor battalion of the nation. This is particularly significant because organized labor millions and millions of individuals. If these provinces are truly lost to the church then the loss is grievous indeed.

Segregation

Dr. Trueblood attributes this loss of provinces to what he calls segregation. He does not mean segregation in the usual sense, applying the word to the separation of the races, but applies it to the church in an entirely different way. He blames the church's loss of influence among people generally upon the fact that it is segregated as to place (geographically), as to time (temporally), and in personnel. To put it another way, he feels that the church is separated or set apart from society in general in these three ways. First, it is isolated as to place--the church building. Secondly, it is isolated as to time--a few hours on Sunday morning. Finally, it is isolated as to personnel--the assumption that religion is the responsibility of a special professional class called clergy. Religion has become a matter of going to a certain place at a certain time to hear professionals sing, play and preach. It has become a spectator activity, with most of the people turning from the place, the time, and the professionals back to a week of secular activities.

Actually the ministry of Christ must be universal. It must involve all places. It must involve all times. It must involve all Christian people. As we look back and remember the life of our Lord, we realize that he brought God's teachings down to the daily lives of men. Unlike the priests of his day who carried on their duties at the temple where people came on certain occasions to observe them and their activities, Christ went out where the people were and lived among them, teaching them God's will for their daily lives. One of the great reasons why religion seems to be losing its hold upon the people is that it has become formal and professional and fails to deal intimately with the problems which people daily must face.

The church is not something to which people go; it is something they are in. The word church which comes from the Greek word “ecclesia” literally means “the called out.” It is a group of people who have been called out of the world by Christ to live a certain kind of life and to do certain important works, for their fellowman and to the glory of God. The church is a group of people who have pledged themselves to live a new and different kind of life and who have put their hands to certain important works which God wants done,

Dr. Trueblood has written, “Perhaps the greatest single weakness of the contemporary Christian church is that millions of supposed members are not really involved at all, and, what is worse, do not think it strange that they are not ... The churches which are succeeding best are those in which the involvement of the rank and file of the members is most nearly complete. This means a general acceptance, on the part of the total membership, of the responsibility of being official representatives of Jesus Christ in daily life. It means a fundamental denial of that kind of division of labor in which the majority have a secular, and a minority have a Christian, responsibility. There is always some need of a division of labor in life, partly because people have radically different gifts, but a division of labor is damaging and vicious when it leaves the promotion of the gospel to a few, while others merely support them in such work. The easiest way to undermine Christian responsibility in a college, for instance, is to appoint one man chaplain, if the consequent understanding is that the other professors in the supposedly secular departments, are thus set free from real responsibility for the Christian Cause on the campusTherefore the Christian ideal must always be the complete elimination of the concept of the laity in favor of the exciting concept of the universal ministry.”

No Clergy-Laity

This is exactly the emphasis of the New Testament. There is no emphasis in the inspired word of God upon clergy and laity. For example, in Acts 8:1, 4, we read, “And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church which was in Jerusalem: and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles ... They therefore that were scattered abroad went about preaching the word.” Here is an example of the whole church being scattered and the whole church being engaged in the spread of the gospel of Christ.

Later, in Acts 18:24-26, we read of two ordinary members of the church, Priscilla and Aquilla, instructing an eloquent and prominent preacher, “Now a certain Jew names Apollos, an Alexandrian by race, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus: and he was mighty in the scriptures. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spake and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, knowing only the baptism of John: and he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquilla heard him, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more accurately.”

Rather, the emphasis of the New Testament is upon the church being like a physical body, having many members, all of which are important and need to be active. This teaching is found in Romans 12:3-8 as follows, “For I say, through the grace that was given me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but so to think as to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to each man a measure of faith. For even as we have many members in one body, and all the members have not the same office: so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another. And having gifts differing according to the grace that was given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of our faith; or ministry, let us give ourselves to ministry; or he that teacheth to his teaching; or he that exhorteth, to his exhorting: he that giveth, let him do it with liberality; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness.”

A second passage with this same emphasis is found in I Cor. 12:12-20, as follows, “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of the body being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; it is not therefore not of the body. And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; it is therefore not of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? if the whole body were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members each one of them in the body, even as it pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now they are many members, but one body.”

Compartmentalization

We must not compartmentalize our religion--the church here and everything else there. Christ and Christianity and the church must permeate all our secular activities as well. The fact that Christianity must permeate everything means that every Christian must be involved. In discussing the great principles of Christianity, especially the golden rule, C. S. Lewis in his fine book, *Mere Christianity*, has said this, “ ... Christianity has not, and does not profess to have, a detailed political programme for applying ‘Do as you would be done by’ to a particular society at a particular moment. It could not have. It is meant for all men for all times and the particular programme which suited one place or time would not suit another. And, anyhow, that is not how Christianity works. When it tells you to feed the hungry it does not give you lessons in cookery. When it tells you to read the Scriptures, it does not give you lessons in Hebrew and Greek, or even in English grammar. It was never intended to replace or supercede the ordinary human arts and sciences: it is rather a director which will set them all to the right jobs, and a source of energy which will give them all new life, if only they will put themselves at its disposal ... Some Christians--those who happen to have the right talents--should be economists and statesman,

and ... Their whole efforts in politics and economics should be directed to putting 'Do as you would be done by' into action. If that happened, and if we others were really ready to take it, then we should find the Christian solution for our own social problems pretty quickly ... The application of Christian principles, say, to trade unionism or education, must come from Christian trade unionists and Christian schoolmasters: just as Christian literature comes from Christian novelists and dramatists--not from the bench of bishops getting together and trying to write plays and novels in their spare time ... There are to be no passengers or parasites."

The Lord's work, the work which he wishes his disciples to do, falls into three classifications: evangelism, edification, and benevolence. All three are reflected in one sentence which describes the activities of the Lord: "And Jesus went about all the cities and the villages, teaching (edification) in their synagogues, and preaching (evangelism) the gospel of the kingdom, and healing (benevolence) all manner of disease and all manner of sickness." (Matt. 9:35). The work of the church falls in these same three areas. God expects each Christian to be engaged in spreading the borders of the kingdom, evangelizing the world. He expects each Christian to be engaged in edification, strengthening, and nurturing young Christians until they become full-grown in the gospel. He expects each Christian to be active in the realm of benevolence, helping those in need, whether they be sick, in prison, hungry, or have some other need.

Christianity is not a spectator sport. When one has come to a certain building and spent a few hours on Sunday morning and has listened to the preaching, he has not discharged his responsibilities to his Lord. Only if he spends his days and his nights living as Christ wants him to live and working at these great tasks which Christ set for his disciples has he lived up to the name Christian. In my judgment, the heaviest problem which faces the elders of most congregations is the responsibility to help each member of the church become totally involved in the Lord's work. This is an extremely difficult thing to do and yet it is essential if the church is to be alive and vibrant. There is no limit to what the Lord's people can accomplish if all are involved in the Lord's work.

Conclusion

The greatest thing that can happen in each of our lives is to become deeply involved in the Lord's work. It will give new tone and meaning your life. To be needed by the Lord in the accomplishing of his work gives an entirely new dimension to one's existence. Life has purpose and significance as never before. Happiness and even a greater degree of health result. Others are blessed by this total kind of involvement and the Lord is glorified.

It all begins when one gives himself to the Lord in becoming a Christian. Confession of Christ as one's Savior, repentance from past sins, confession of the name of Jesus before men, and burial in the grave of water, marks the dividing line between the old man and the new. When one has obeyed these simple commandments God then adds him to his family and the new Christian begins his life of service to the Cause of Christ. He is needed and wanted. In serving his fellowman in the name of his Lord, he finds that he has also blessed himself. There is no greater privilege than to be a fellow-worker with the Lord.