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Volume One Number Two

November 1952

The Church—Can it Meet the Social Challenge Today?

CHANDRAN DEVANESEN

Our faith in Christ does not depend upon our being able to answer the question in the affirmative. And even if we answer it in the negative, as I am tempted to do, it should not destroy our trust in God's sovereignty over history. The church is in the world and cannot be exempted from the necessity for change. In fact, some churches are already part of the rubble of history. Churches are not outside the cycle of growth, decay and regeneration but their chequered histories cannot alter the central and unique event of all history, the Incarnation, which they try to make explicit in every age, however sinfully and imperfectly. The church can never be the perfect embodiment of the Incarnation, 'full of truth and grace'. It can only testify to the supreme perfection of the Incarnation. Therefore, the moral goodness of the church is not a seeking after perfection for the sake of perfection but the attempt to enable men to see more clearly how the Incarnation is the saving power of God at work in history. If the church is unable to meet the social challenge today it does not mean that God is powerless to save; it obviously means that those who reject God are also those who go to church. God is worshipped but not obeyed; and our inability to meet the social challenges of today shows that God is not mocked.

Repentance must come first; without it no answer can be found to this question. The forgiveness of sins comes before the communion of saints. Penitence and the search for community always go together. But penitence itself is in danger of expressing itself in too conventional ways. Next to hypocrisy, the most deadly vice among Christians is the fear of appearing unconventional. Though non-conformity often degenerates into sectarianism, it is vital to the constant renewal of the church. In India, where group sentiment is strong and all-pervasive, the refusal to conform calls for real courage. There is also a strong temptation to stifle individuality in the interests of group harmony. India has always tolerated the man who follows the pattern of his own group. The man who follows no pattern is either destroyed or worshipped. Therefore, the tendency towards social compromise will be stronger than any urge to challenge the social conscience. The church in India must repent of its social compromises with caste, lingualism and communalism. Real impenitence may take the form of confessing minor personal sins. It is outrageous to think that Christ's sufferings on the Cross were necessary to save us from such petty stupidities. We are just pious enough to strain the gnat and swallow

the camel. We are nice, decent people who practise caste, demand dowries, exhibit racial and colour prejudices, pay for huge armaments and destructive weapons and sing 'He hath put down the mighty from their seats and hath exalted the humble and meek' without turning a hair.

The impenitence of Christians is in sad contrast to the enthusiasm of secular men for change and reform. To condemn liberal optimism on theological grounds is not to redeem ourselves from lethargy and inertia. Man is depraved but not utterly hopeless. Secular despair is not so bottomless as to make men give up the search for remedies. Man is a fallen creature with an urge to get up. We have made for ourselves a picture of man's depravity which makes us averse to the struggle for upholding his dignity. We use a doctrine of sin to excuse our own sins! The attitude of the average Christian to politics shows that constant stress on the depravity of man can lead to a weakened social conscience which cares little or nothing for the dignity of man. This is what Florence Allshorn meant when she said, 'I do feel that Protestantism works too much on a sub-conscious feeling of suspicion—possibly because it is so concerned, sincerely concerned, with sin—that it loses the vision of the lovely thing a human soul really is, a thing trembling with hope because *somewhere*—stified to death almost but somewhere—it has a knowledge that it could become a son of God'. But our modern theology is so proud of having discovered Humpty Dumpty.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.

Man is fallen ; man cannot put himself together again. The church understands man's moral dilemma ; it sees the problem of evil in its true perspective. And yet there is something distressing about this savagely clear point of view. We seem to derive a gloomy satisfaction from seeing Humpty Dumpty's remains littering the ground. Do we not want to see Humpty Dumpty put together again ?

The revival of interest in history in Christian circles is not necessarily a mere reaction to the historic materialism of Marxism. It may also be a reaction to the Continental theological outlook, typified by Luther, with its dualist attitude to the possibility of establishing a Christian culture. To be told that the Kingdom of God is not realizable within history must necessarily dampen any enthusiasm for social change or at best make one rather lukewarm in one's attitude to social problems. In India, a land of all too numerous problems, such a theology is in danger of being indistinguishable from *karma* or *kismet*. Theologies of predestination and total depravity ought to be banned in India! While the doctrine of sin is a fundamental dialectical necessity to a doctrine of *tat tvam asi* we need a vigorous theology that energizes the spirit of men and makes history more meaningful. Gnosticism ought to find a prominent place in the curricula of our theological institutions! And as an antidote to Barth we ought to read more of Augustine and Abelard, F. D. Maurice and T. S. Eliot. In claiming that F. D. Maurice is a more significant theologian for India than Barth we are not decrying the greatness of Barth. It is only a recognition of the fact that the church in India is in a historical setting and a stage of development which is different from the background of the West.

If we are concerned less with man's sin and more with his dignity, his soul made in the image of God, we might be in a better position to meet the social challenge today. We would fight more strongly against ugly things like economic inequality, racialism and caste. We would be less afraid to own that the personal ethic can solve but little in our massive technical civilization. The levers of justice have become gigantic in proportion to a mass society; equal rights and equal opportunities for all obviously require the courageous manipulation of economic handles. Why do we flinch from the truth that the spiritual malaise of our time is deep-rooted in the class struggle? Why do we not accept that this is the bitter price of our civilization?

We are not only impenitent but we are also selfish—and selfish in a hypocritical fashion. We, who proclaim that outside the church there is no salvation, often conveniently forget the involvement of the church in the very ills which challenge the social conscience. The modern heroes of the church like the Reverend Michael Scott are completely outnumbered by the Reverend Doctor Malans. The glitter of the ecumenical movement is soiled by the churches into which dogs, Asiatics, and Negroes are still not allowed. Is it always naive to protest that the financial arrangements of the church reveal more than just its class alignment? Or take our obsession with salary scales on the mission field. The most soul-destroying experience that any man could go through is to sit on a church committee responsible for revising salary scales. And yet the Communist Party in India can attract youngmen of real ability and mental calibre to serve it for a mere pittance. The Church Militant is still sitting in committee 'to devise ways and means' while the Communist Party marches down the street with red banners fluttering.

At a time when our desperate plight should lead us to look for more radical methods for proclaiming Christ we are content to find shelter behind the institutionalized nature of the church. It has largely ceased to be a fellowship, a way of life. The church seems to have become a mere organization that has to be supported and kept alive. Keeping the machine functioning efficiently demands most of our time and energies. We have no time to pray, no time to put *being* before *doing*. We lose sight of real spiritual values and the living God becomes the *deus ex machina*. In some ways the political cry of *Vox populi vox dei* is better than this mechanical conception. The modern forces of evil have developed the *blitzkrieg* while we are bogged down in our trenches or busy fighting shadows. We are like some sprawling medieval army with a vast accretion of camp followers and too long a baggage train while all around us is the Enemy; he travels light; his tactics are those of the guerilla and the commando. We hold councils of action which the camp followers never hear about. We say sublime things to each other hoping the Enemy will benefit by eavesdropping. We quarrel endlessly about how to become more united. We go about handing out leaflets to our own rank and file while the Enemy blasts the air with his propaganda. Aldous Huxley was right. The Gumbriel instinct for inventing pneumatic trousers in which to sit in our pews is still very strong!

Can we break through the vicious circle of our own terrible selfishness so that the church could bring salvation to men perishing in an evil world? I doubt whether we can. 'Except a grain of wheat fall to the earth and die . . . ' The old shell of the church must die if its spring is to

be liberated. The church may have to be smashed in order that it may be reset properly like a fractured bone. Only some tremendous convulsion can free the church from its involvement in wrong property relations, class prejudice, racialism and all the other cancerous growths within it. Purged by suffering, it may be reborn as the true Body of Christ, offering the sacrament of abundant life to all men. We may yet have to witness the terror and the majesty of the mills of God grinding exceeding slowly and grinding exceeding small. This point of view should not be interpreted as a resigned acceptance of Marxist historic determinism. Our God is the God of history and historic determinism may not work out the way men think it will work out. To both the Marxist and the Christian it may yet prove the visible sign of God's sovereignty.



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