The Responsibility of the Church in Our New Age

By J. Gresham Machen

THE question of the Church's responsibility in the new age involves two other questions: (1) What is the new age?; (2) What is the Church?

The former question is being answered in a number of different ways; differences of opinion prevail, in particular, with regard to the exact degree of newness to which the new age may justifiably lay claim. There are those who think that the new age is so very new that nothing that approved itself to past ages can conceivably be valid now. There are others, however, who think that human nature remains essentially the same and that two and two still make four. With this latter point of view I am on the whole inclined to agree. In particular, I hold that facts have a most unprogressive habit of staying put, and that if a thing really happened in the first century of our era, the acquisition of new knowledge and the improvement of scientific method can never make it into a thing that did not happen.

Such convictions do not blind me to the fact that we have witnessed astonishing changes in our day. Indeed, the changes have become so rapid as to cause many people to lose not only their breath but also, I fear, their head. They have led many people to think not only that nothing that is old ought by any possibility to remain in the new age, but also that whatever the new age favors is always really new.

Both these conclusions are erroneous. There are old things which ought to remain in the new age; and many of the things, both good and bad, which the new age regards as new are really as old as the hills.

Old Things Worth Retaining

In the former category are to be put, for example, the literary and artistic achievements of past generations. Those are things which the new age ought to retain, at least until the new age can produce something to put in their place, and that it has so far signally failed to do. I am well aware that when I say to the new age that Homer is still worth reading, or that the Cathedral of Amiens is superior to any of the achievements of the *art nouveau,* I am making assertions which it would be difficult for me to prove. There is no disputing about tastes. Yet, after all, until the artistic impulse is eradicated more thoroughly from human life than has so far been done even by the best efforts of the metallic civilization of our day, we cannot get rid of the categories of good and bad or high and low in the field of art. But when we pay attention to those categories, it becomes evident at once that we are living today in a drab and decadent age, and that a really new impulse will probably come, as it has come so many times before, only through a rediscovery of the glories of the past.

Something very similar needs to be said in the realm of political and social science. There, too, something is being lost—something very precious, though very intangible and very difficult of defense before those who have not the love of it in their hearts. I refer to civil and religious liberty, for

which our fathers were willing to sacrifice so much.

The word "liberty" has a very archaic sound today; it is often put in quotation marks by those who are obliged to use the ridiculous word at all. Yet, despised though liberty is, there are still those who love it; and unless their love of it can be eradicated from their unprogressive souls, they will never be able to agree, in their estimate of the modern age, with those who do not love it.

To those lovers of civil and religious liberty I confess that I belong; in fact, civil and religious liberty seems to me to be more valuable than any other earthly thing—than any other thing short of that truer and profounder liberty which only God can give.

THE LOSS OF LIBERTY

What estimate of the present age can possibly be complete that does not take account of what is so marked a feature of it—namely, the loss of those civil liberties for which men formerly were willing to sacrifice all that they possessed? In some countries, such as Russia and Italy, the attack upon liberty has been blatant and extreme; but exactly the same forces which appear there in more consistent form appear also in practically all the countries of the earth. Everywhere we have the substitution of economic considerations for great principles in the conduct of the state; everywhere a centralized state, working as the state necessarily must work, by the use of force, is taking possession of the most intimate fields of individual and family life.

These tendencies have proceeded more rapidly in America than in most other countries of the world; for if they have not progressed so far here as elsewhere, that is only because in America they had a greater handicap to overcome. Thirty years ago we hated bureaucracy and pitied those countries in Europe that were under bureaucratic control; today we are rapidly becoming one of the most bureaucratic countries of the world. Setbacks to this movement, such as the defeat, for the present at least, of the misnamed "child-labor amendment," the repeal of the Lusk laws in New York placing private teachers under state supervision and control, the invalidation of the Nebraska language law making literary education even in private schools a crime, the prevention so far of the establishment of a Federal department of education—these setbacks to the attack on liberty are, I am afraid, but temporary unless the present temper of the people changes.

The international situation, moreover, is hardly such as to give encouragement to lovers of liberty, especially in view of the recent proposal of Premier Herriot that a policy of conscription, inimical as it is to liberty as well as to peace, shall be made general and permanent. Everywhere in the world we have centralization of power, the ticketing and cataloguing of the individual by irresponsible and doctrinaire bureaus, and, worst of all, in many places we have monopolistic control of education by the state.

But is all that new? In principle it is not. Something very much like it was advocated in Plato's *Republic* over two thousand years ago. The battle between collectivism and liberty is an age-long battle; and even the materialistic paternalism of the modern state is by no means altogether new. The technique of tyranny has, indeed, been enormously improved; a state-controlled compulsory education has proved far more effective in crushing out liberty than the older and cruder weapons of fire and sword, and modern experts have proved to be more

efficient than the dilettante tyrants of the past. But such differences are differences of degree and not of kind, and essentially the battle for freedom is the same as it always has been.

SOCIETY AND THE SOUL

If that battle is lost, if collectivism finally triumphs, if we come to live in a world where recreation as well as labor is prescribed for us by experts appointed by the state, if the sweetness and the sorrows of family relationships are alike eliminated and liberty becomes a thing of the past, we ought to place the blame for this sad dénouement—for this sad result of all the pathetic strivings of the human race—exactly where it belongs. And it does not belong to the external conditions of modern life. I know that there are those who say that it does belong there; I know that there are those who tell us that individualism is impossible in an industrial age. But I do not believe them for one moment. Unquestionably, industrialism, with the accompanying achievements of modern science in both the physical and the social realm, does constitute a great temptation to destroy freedom; but temptation is not compulsion, and of real compulsion there is none.

No, my friends, there is no real reason for mankind to surrender to the machine. If liberty is crushed out, if standardization has its perfect work, if the worst of all tyrannies, the tyranny of the expert, becomes universal, if the finer aspirations of humanity give way to drab efficiency, do not blame the external conditions in the world today. If human life becomes mechanized, do not blame the machine. Put the blame exactly where it belongs—upon the soul of man.

Is it not in general within that realm of the soul of man that the evils of society have their origin today? We have developed a vast and rather wonderful machinery—the machinery of our modern life. For some reason, it has recently ceased to function. The experts are busily cranking the engine, as I used to do with my Ford car in the heroic days when a Ford was still a Ford. They are wondering why the engine does not start. They are giving learned explanations of its failure to do so; they are adducing the most intricate principles of dynamics. It is all very instructive, no doubt. But the real explanation is much simpler. It is simply that the driver of the car has forgotten to turn on the switch. The real trouble with the engine of modern society is that it is not producing a spark. The real trouble lies in that unseen realm which is found within the soul of man.

That realm cannot be neglected even in a time of immediate physical distress like the present. I do not know in detail how this physical distress is to be relieved. I would to God that I did. But one thing I do know; it will never be relieved if, in our eagerness to relieve it, we neglect the unseen things. It is not practical to be merely practical men; man cannot successfully be treated as a machine; even the physical welfare of humanity cannot be attained if we make that the supreme object of our pursuit; even in a day when so many material problems are pressing for our attention, we cannot neglect the evils of the soul.

THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH

But if that be so, if the real trouble with the world lies in the soul of man, we may perhaps turn for help to an agency which is generally thought to have the soul of man as its special province. I mean the Christian Church. That brings us to our second question: What is the Church?

About nineteen hundred years ago,

there came forth from Palestine a remarkable movement. At first it was obscure; but within a generation it was firmly planted in the great cities of the Roman Empire, and within three centuries it had conquered the Empire itself. It has since then gone forth to the ends of the earth. That movement is called the Christian Church.

What was it like in the all-important initial period, when the impulse which gave rise to it was fresh and pure? With regard to the answer to that question, there may be a certain amount of agreement among all serious historians, whether they are themselves Christians or not. Certain characteristics of the Christian Church at the beginning stand out clear in the eyes both of friends and of foes.

Doctrinal—

It may clearly be observed, for example, that the Christian Church at the beginning was radically doctrinal. Doctrine was not the mere expression of Christian life, as it is in the pragmatist skepticism of the present day, but—just the other way around—the doctrine, logically though not temporally, came first and the life afterward. The life was founded upon the message, and not the message upon the life.

That becomes clear everywhere in the primary documents. It appears, for example, in the First Epistle to the Thessalonians, which is admitted by all serious historians, Christian and non-Christian, to have been really written by a man of the first Christian generation—the man whose name it bears. The Apostle Paul there gives us a summary of his missionary preaching in Thessalonica—that missionary preaching which in Thessalonica and in Philippi and elsewhere did, it must be admitted, turn the world upside down. What was that missionary preaching like? Well, it contained a whole system of theology. "Ye turned to God," says Paul, "from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivereth us from the wrath to come." Christian doctrine, according to Paul, was not something that came after salvation, as an expression of Christian experience, but it was something necessary to salvation. The Christian life, according to Paul, was founded upon a message.

The same thing appears when we turn from Paul to the very first church in Jerusalem. That too was radically doctrinal. In the First Epistle to the Corinthians—again one of the universally accepted Epistles—Paul gives us a summary of what he had received from the primitive Jerusalem Church. What was it that he had received; what was it that the primitive Jerusalem Church delivered over unto him? Was it a mere exhortation; was it the mere presentation of a program of life; did the first Christians in Jerusalem say merely: "Jesus has lived a noble life of self-sacrifice; we have been inspired by Him to live that life, and we call upon you our hearers to share it with us"? Not at all. Here is what those first Christians said: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; He was buried; He has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." That is not an exhortation, but a rehearsal of facts; it is couched not in the imperative but in the indicative mood; it is not a program, but a doctrine.

I know that modern men have appealed sometimes at this point from the primitive Christian Church to Jesus Himself. The primitive Church, it is admitted, was doctrinal; but Jesus of Nazareth, it is said, proclaimed a

simple gospel of divine Fatherhood and human brotherhood, and believed in the essential goodness of man. Such an appeal from the primitive Church to Jesus used to be expressed in the cry of the so-called "Liberal" Church, "Back to Christ!" But that cry is somewhat antiquated today. It has become increasingly clear to the historians that the only Jesus whom we find attested for us in our sources of information is the supernatural Redeemer presented in the four Gospels as well as in the Epistles of Paul. If there was, back of this supernatural figure, a real, non-doctrinal, purely human prophet of Nazareth, his portrait must probably lie forever hidden from us. Such, indeed, is exactly the skeptical conclusion which is being reached by some of those who stand in the van of what is called progress in New Testament criticism today.

There are others, however—and to them the present writer belongs—who think that the supernatural Jesus presented in all of our sources of information was the real Jesus who walked and talked in Palestine, and that it is not necessary for us to have recourse to the truly extraordinary hypothesis that the intimate friends of Jesus, who were the leaders of the primitive Church, completely misunderstood their Master's person and work.

Be that as it may, there is, at any rate, not a trace of any non-doctrinal preaching that possessed one bit of power in those early days of the Christian Church. It is perfectly clear that that strangely powerful movement which emerged from the obscurity of Palestine in the first century of our era was doctrinal from the very beginning and to the very core. It was totally unlike the ethical preaching of the Stoic and Cynic philosophers. Unlike those philosophers, it had a very clear-cut message; and at the center of that message was the doctrine that set forth the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Intolerant—

That brings us to our second point. The primitive Church, we have just seen, was radically doctrinal. In the second place, it was radically intolerant. In being radically intolerant, as in being radically doctrinal, it placed itself squarely in opposition to the spirit of that age. That was an age of syncretism and tolerance in religion; it was an age of what J. S. Phillimore has called "the courtly polygamies of the soul." But with that tolerance, with those courtly polygamies of the soul, the primitive Christian Church would have nothing to do. It demanded a completely exclusive devotion. A man could not be a worshiper of the God of the Christians and at the same time be a worshiper of other gods; he could not accept the salvation offered by Christ and at the same time admit that for other people there might be some other way of salvation; he could not agree to refrain from proselytizing among men of other faiths, but came forward, no matter what it might cost, with a universal appeal. That is what I mean by saying that the primitive Christian Church was radically intolerant.

Ethical—

In the third place, the primitive Church was radically ethical. Religion in those days, save among the Jews, was by no means closely connected with goodness. But with such a non-ethical religion the primitive Christian Church would have nothing whatever to do. God, according to the primitive Christians, is holy; and in His presence no unclean thing can stand. Jesus Christ presented a life of perfect goodness upon earth; and only they can belong to Him who hunger

and thirst after righteousness. Christians were, indeed, by no means perfect; they stood before God only in the merit of Christ their Saviour, not in their own merit; but they had been saved for holiness, and even in this life that holiness must begin to appear. A salvation which permitted a man to continue in sin was, according to the primitive Church, no matter what profession of faith it might make, nothing but a sham.

CONFLICTS IN THE CHURCH

These characteristics of primitive Christianity have never been completely lost in the long history of the Christian Church. They have, however, always had to be defended against foes within as well as without the Church. The conflicts began in apostolic days; and there is in the New Testament not a bit of comfort for the feeble notion that controversy in the Church is to be avoided, that a man can make his preaching positive without making it negative, that he can ever proclaim truth without attacking error. Another conflict arose in the second century, against Gnosticism, and still another when Augustine defended against Pelagius the Christian view of sin.

At the close of the Middle Ages, it looked as though at last the battle were lost—as though at last the Church had become merged with the world. When Luther went to Rome, a blatant paganism was there in control. But the Bible was rediscovered; the ninety-five theses were nailed up; Calvin's *Institutes* was written; there was a counter-reformation in the Church of Rome; and the essential character of the Christian Church was preserved. The Reformation, like primitive Christianity, was radically doctrinal, radically intolerant, and radically ethical. It preserved these characteristics in the face of opposition. It would not go a step with Erasmus, for example, in his indifferentism and his tolerance; it was founded squarely on the Bible, and it proclaimed, as providing the only way of salvation, the message that the Bible contains.

At the present time, the Christian Church stands in the midst of another conflict. Like the previous conflicts, it is a conflict not between two forms of the Christian religion but between the Christian religion on the one hand and an alien religion on the other. Yet —again like the previous conflicts—it is carried on within the Church. The non-Christian forces have made use of Christian terminology and have sought to dominate the organization of the Church.

This modern attack upon the Christian religion has assumed many different forms, but everywhere it is essentially the same. Sometimes it is frankly naturalistic, denying the historicity of the basic miracles, such as the resurrection of Jesus Christ. At other times it assails the necessity rather than the truth of the Christian message; but, strictly speaking, to assail the necessity of the message is to assail its truth, since the universal necessity of the message is at the center of the message itself. Often the attack uses the shibboleths of a complete pragmatist skepticism. Christianity, it declares, is a life and not a doctrine; and doctrine is the expression, in the thought-forms of each generation, of Christian experience. One doctrine may express Christian experience in this generation; a contradictory doctrine may express it equally well in a generation to come. That means, of course, not merely that this or that truth is being attacked, but that truth itself is being attacked. The very possibility of our attaining to truth, as

distinguished from mere usefulness, is denied.

CHURCH ORGANIZATIONS DEPART FROM THE FAITH

This pragmatist skepticism, this optimistic religion of a self-sufficient humanity, has been substituted today, to a very considerable extent, in most of the Protestant communions, for the redemptive religion hitherto known as Christianity—that redemptive religion with its doctrines of the awful transcendence of God, the hopelessness of a mankind lost in sin, and the mysterious grace of God in the mighty redemptive acts of the coming and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many of the rank and file of the churches, many of the individual congregations, are genuinely Christian; but the central organizations of the churches have in many cases gradually discontinued their propagation of the Christian religion and have become agencies for the propagation of a vague type of religion to which Christianity from its very beginning was diametrically opposed.

So, in speaking about the responsibility of the Church in the new age, I want it to be distinctly understood that I am not speaking about the responsibility of the existing Protestant church organizations (unless they can be reformed), but about the responsibility of a true Christian Church. The present ecclesiastical organizations may have their uses in the world. There may be a need for such societies of general welfare as some of them have become; there may be a need for the political activities in which they are increasingly engaged: but such functions are certainly not at all the distinctive function of a real Christian Church.

Even in the sphere of such worldly functions, I am inclined to think that there are agencies more worthy of your attention than these Protestant church organizations, or than, for example, such an organization as the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. The trouble is that the gentlemen in control of these organizations are, though with the best and most honorable intentions in the world, in a hopelessly false position. The churches are for the most part creedal; it is on the basis of their creeds that they have in the past appealed, and that to some extent they still appeal, for support; yet the central organizations of the churches have quietly pushed the creeds into the background and have devoted themselves to other activities and a different propaganda. Perhaps in doing so they have accomplished good here and there in a worldly sort of way. But, in general, the false position in which they stand has militated against their highest usefulness. Equivocation, the double use of traditional terminology, subscription to solemn creedal statements in a sense different from the sense originally intended in those statements—these things give a man a poor platform upon which to stand, no matter what it is that he proposes, upon that platform, to do.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A TRUE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

But if the existing Protestant church organizations, with some notable exceptions, must be radically reformed before they can be regarded as truly Christian, what, as distinguished from these organizations, is the function of a true Christian Church?

Doctrinal—

In the first place, a true Christian Church, now as always, will be radically doctrinal. It will never use the shibboleths of a pragmatist skepti-

cism. It will never say that doctrine is the expression of experience; it will never confuse the useful with the true, but will place truth at the basis of all its striving and all its life. Into the welter of changing human opinion, into the modern despair with regard to any knowledge of the meaning of life, it will come with a clear and imperious message. That message it will find in the Bible, which it will hold to contain not a record of man's religious experience but a record of a revelation from God.

Intolerant—

In the second place, a true Christian Church will be radically intolerant. At that point, however, a word of explanation is in place. The intolerance of the Church, in the sense in which I am speaking of it, does not involve any interference with liberty; on the contrary, it means the preservation of liberty. One of the most important elements in civil and religious liberty is the right of voluntary association—the right of citizens to band themselves together for any lawful purpose whatever, whether that purpose does or does not commend itself to the generality of their fellow men. Now, a church is a voluntary association. No one is compelled to be a member of it; no one is compelled to be one of its accredited representatives. It is, therefore, no interference with liberty for a church to insist that those who do choose to be its accredited representatives shall not use the vantage ground of such a position to attack that for which the church exists.

It would, indeed, be an interference with liberty for a church, through the ballot box or otherwise, to use the power of the state to compel men to assent to the church's creed or conform to the church's program. To that kind of intolerance I am opposed with all my might and main. I am also opposed to church union for somewhat similar reasons, as well as for other reasons still more important. I am opposed to the depressing dream of one monopolistic church organization, placing the whole Protestant world under one set of committees and boards. If that dream were ever realized, it would be an intolerable tyranny. Certainly it would mean the death of any true Christian unity. I trust that the efforts of the church-unionists may be defeated, like the efforts of the opponents of liberty in other fields.

But when I say that a true Christian Church is radically intolerant, I mean simply that the Church must maintain the high exclusiveness and universality of its message. It presents the gospel of Jesus Christ not merely as one way of salvation, but as the only way. It cannot make common cause with other faiths. It cannot agree not to proselytize. Its appeal is universal, and admits of no exceptions. All are lost in sin; none may be saved except by the way set forth in the gospel. Therein lies the offense of the Christian religion, but therein lies also its glory and its power. A Christianity tolerant of other religions is just no Christianity at all.

Ethical—

In the third place, a true Christian Church will be radically ethical. It will not be ethical in the sense that it will cherish any hope in an appeal to the human will; it will not be ethical in the sense that it will regard itself as perfect, even when its members have been redeemed by the grace of God. But it will be ethical in the sense that it will cherish the hope of true goodness in the other world, and that even here and now it will exhibit the begin-

nings of a new life which is the gift of God.

That new life will express itself in love. Love will overflow, without questions, without calculation, to all men whether they be Christians or not; but it will be far too intense a passion ever to be satisfied with a mere philanthropy. It will offer men simple benefits; it will never pass coldly by on the other side when a man is in bodily need. But it will never be content to satisfy men's bodily needs; it will never seek to make men content with creature comforts or with the coldness of a vague natural religion. Rather will it seek to bring all men everywhere, without exception, high and low, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, compatriot and alien, into the full warmth and joy of the household of faith.

WHAT THE CHURCH SHOULD AVOID

There are certain things which you cannot expect from such a true Christian Church. In the first place, you cannot expect from it any coöperation with non-Christian religion or with a non-Christian program of ethical culture. There are those who tell us that the Bible ought to be put into the public schools, and that the public schools should seek to build character by showing the children that honesty is the best policy and that good Americans do not lie nor steal. With such programs a true Christian Church will have nothing to do. The Bible, it will hold, is made to say the direct opposite of what it means if any hope is held out to mankind from its ethical portions apart from its great redemptive center and core; and character building on the basis of human experience may be character destruction; it is the very antithesis of that view of sin which is at the foundation of all Christian convictions and all Christian life.

There is no such thing, a true Christian Church will insist, as a universally valid fund of religious principles upon which particular religions, including the Christian religion, may build; "religion" in that vague sense is not only inadequate but false; and a morality based upon human experience instead of upon the law of God is no true morality. Against such programs of religious education and character building, a true Christian Church will seek from the state liberty for all parents everywhere to bring up their children in accordance with the dictates of their conscience, will bring up its own children in accordance with the Word of God, and will try to persuade all other parents, becoming Christians, to bring up their children in that same Christian way.

In the second place, you cannot expect from a true Christian Church any official pronouncements upon the political or social questions of the day, and you cannot expect coöperation with the state in anything involving the use of force. Important are the functions of the police, and members of the Church, either individually or in such special associations as they may choose to form, should aid the police in every lawful way in the exercise of those functions. But the function of the Church in its corporate capacity is of an entirely different kind. Its weapons against evil are spiritual, not carnal; and by becoming a political lobby, through the advocacy of political measures whether good or bad, the Church is turning aside from its proper mission, which is to bring to bear upon human hearts the solemn and imperious, yet also sweet and gracious, appeal of the gospel of Christ.

WHAT THE CHURCH SHOULD DO

Such things you cannot expect from a true Christian Church. But there are other things which you may expect.

If you are dissatisfied with a relative goodness, which is no goodness at all; if you are conscious of your sin and if you hunger and thirst after righteousness; if you are dissatisfied with the world and are seeking the living God, then turn to the Church of Jesus Christ. That Church is not always easy to distinguish today. It does not always present itself to you in powerful organizations; it is often hidden away here and there, in individual congregations resisting the central ecclesiastical mechanism; it is found in groups, large or small, of those who have been redeemed from sin and are citizens of a heavenly kingdom. But wherever it is found, you must turn to that true Church of Jesus Christ for a message from God. The message will not be enforced by human authority or by the pomp of numbers. Yet some of you may hear it. If you do hear it and heed it, you will possess riches greater than the riches of all the world.

Do you think that if you heed the message you will be less successful students of political and social science; do you think that by becoming citizens of another world you will become less fitted to solve this world's problems; do you think that acceptance of the Christian message will hinder political or social advance? No, my friends. I will present to you a strange paradox but an assured truth—this world's problems can never be solved by those who make this world the object of their desires. This world cannot ultimately be bettered if you think that this world is all. To move the world you must have a place to stand.

THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE

This, then, is the answer that I give to the question before us. The responsibility of the Church in the new age is the same as its responsibility in every age. It is to testify that this world is lost in sin; that the span of human life—nay, all the length of human history—is an infinitesimal island in the awful depths of eternity; that there is a mysterious, holy, living God, Creator of all, Upholder of all, infinitely beyond all; that He has revealed Himself to us in His Word and offered us communion with Himself through Jesus Christ the Lord; that there is no other salvation, for individuals or for nations, save this, but that this salvation is full and free, and that whosoever possesses it has for himself and for all others to whom he may be the instrument of bringing it a treasure compared with which all the kingdoms of the earth—nay, all the wonders of the starry heavens—are as the dust of the street.

An unpopular message it is—an impractical message, we are told. But it is the message of the Christian Church. Neglect it, and you will have destruction; heed it, and you will have life.

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