
The responsibility of THE CHURCH in our new age

J. Gresham Machen

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

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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

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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

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The Church in our new age

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individual and family life.

These tendencies have proceeded more rapidly in America than in most other countries in 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 is 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

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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 denouement — 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 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 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,

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 elsewhere did, it must be admitted, turn the world upside down. What was the 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, ac-

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cording 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 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

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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.

To be continued next month.

A Christian in the world

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and law. Radical government experiments were unable to deal with social problems. The influence of the captains of industry was almost irresistible, causing exploitation and failing to solve the social question. The church was also in a state of confusion with various rationalistic views of the Bible being freely preached.

Groen's question is *very* practical: What caused all these problems? Was it merely riots in the streets, defects in the character of the people, and bad leaders? Or was it caused by something deeper? Groen remarks, "The history of Europe, for more than half a century, is the inevitable result of the errors which have made themselves master of the dominant point of view."

The argument then turns to the Cause behind the causes of the disorders: the almost overwhelming secularization process that had been sweeping through the world since the eighteenth century. The statesman asserts that *The Revolution* is this "reversal of though patterns and attitudes which is apparent in all of Christendom."

Today Groen's concept of *The Revolution* can be more clearly defined as the secularization process. This basically religious trend is rooted in a rejection of the gospel and has often led to a series of miseries in public life. Thus "events are the boundaries and forms in which the constant outworking of the spirit of the age manifests itself." Moreover, "The Revolution ideas are the application of unbelief in the area of state-law." Just think of the damage done to millions of citizens in the name of political enlightenment!

The great dividing line in all of life, including politics, is between those who base their view, in faith, on the gospel of Jesus Christ and those who do not. Thus Groen worked for a Christian, democratic pluralism in government. He opposed the notion of the absolutely normative character of reason, for example, in the humanistic understanding of liberty, equality, the "social contract," and centralized government by decree.

As can be imagined, Groen found himself at odds with the prevailing ideas and policies of the governing

circles in The Hague. The Anti-Revolutionary statesman knew he was in a minority position, yet he did not give up his systematic dissent. He believed that the religious clash between secularization in its many forms and the Christian faith touched the heart of the gospel. He saw the danger of any man-centered stance, whether revolutionary or democratic neutralist. Modernism in theology and Liberalism and Conservatism in politics were all objects of his criticism because they all claimed that the Christian faith was only relevant for the private aspects of life.

The Christian's task

Groen then turned his attention to the obligations of the Christian. It is as sinners, he begins, that we seek to be saved. The truth—the good news—is the atoning sacrifice of our Savior, the gift of free grace that saves those who believe. Groen stood by the scandal of the cross. Heart-felt belief in this truth requires the Christian to keep his obligations where he is, as seen in the light of Scripture.

Christians, Groen declared, are to be "preachers of the Gospel that brings healing to every aspect of life." We are to witness to the truth of God as contrasted with the wisdom of this age. Gospel truth is the leaven, but we must apply it to our lives in the world. "Our slowness [to act] finds no deceptive pretext in the all-sufficiency of God's Word." We must fight with the weapons of spiritual light. As a true patriot, Groen then called for constitutional and social reform.

Commenting on the importance of the Christian's task, Groen declares, "The Revolution in relation to world history is opposite in meaning to what the Reformation is for Christendom. Just as the Reformation brought Europe out of superstition, so has the Revolution thrown the cultured world into the abyss of unbelief. Like the Reformation, the Revolution has implications for every aspect of practical and scholarly life. Formerly the principle was subjection to God, but now the revolt against God is the most basic principle. Thus there is a single holy struggle in the church, in the state, in scholarship. The one great question concerns the unconditional subjection to God's law. More than ever before, this viewpoint toward the Revolution is needed in order to understand our age."