

PROPHECY
AND
RENEWAL

— Clifford Hill —

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by

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Presidential Address

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Anyone called to this office cannot escape the heavy burden of responsibility that is endemic to it and it is with a very real feeling of personal inadequacy that I begin this year. I do not know what the future months hold in store but I embark upon them with a deep sense of humility and of compulsion.

The initial burden of this address has weighed heavily upon me ever since last year when the mind of the Assembly was made known. In preparation I have been re-reading the history of early Congregationalism and I have caught a fresh glimpse of the vision of the Separatists, a new understanding of their faith and a new respect for their courage and integrity in the face of fierce opposition and severe hardship.

My study of our Congregational heritage has done something extremely important for me personally. Not only has it confirmed the rightness of my decision to remain a Congregationalist but it has convinced me that we have something of enormous significance to give to our world today. We have a message to communicate both to Christians and to the secular world that is desperately needed. We have not remained Congregationalists because we are wedded to the past. The Federation is not a reactionary movement or I for one would have nothing to do with it. I do not think that even my bitterest enemies would accuse me of being a conservative reactionary. We have remained Congregationalists because we have something of great value to contribute to Christian mission in the modern world.

Among our Congregational founding fathers I find two outstanding priorities.

1. The first is their Christ-centredness.
2. The second is their concern for the value of the individual.

These are the twin pillars of early Congregationalism and I believe they are still relevant and valid as a basis for mission in our modern world. Christians have a mission to free men from the forces of a technological and bureaucratic society that seeks to enslave them and to diminish the value of the individual. But if it is to be a mission and not just another pathetic man-made movement of reformation then it must be Christ-centred or it will be doomed to failure. Let us just review briefly the size of the task facing Christians today.

The fact that we live in an age of violence hardly needs illustration or proof. Our newspapers are full of the evidence of man's cruelty and sinful pursuit of his own self-centred aims with utter disregard for others. We have reached a fascinating and critical point in the history of mankind where a number of major social processes have reached a point of confluence. The processes of industrialisation and urbanisation that were set in motion by the Industrial Revolution have triggered off a number of subsidiary processes that have had a revolutionising effect in our society. These processes, such as standardisation, privatisation, rationalisation and bureaucratisation have fused with the on-going process of secularisation which, according to Harvey Cox, has been with us since the time of Moses. They have produced an age of disbelief, an age that challenges every assumption

that is prepared to pull down every structure and value of former ages in the name of progress. It is an age in which the processes of change and decay are so rapid that they have caught up with and surpassed the processes of production and creativity. This means that we are wearing things out and using up resources faster than they can be produced. The wheels of industry and transport are using up the world's energy faster than the rate of production.

What is probably of even greater significance is that these resources of energy are not unlimited and the rate at which we are consuming them and squandering them is so great that the day will come when there are no resources left. But we are in an age when men don't care for any of these things. They are bent on pursuing their own ends regardless - bigger profits, a larger slice of the cake, more leisure time, or simply tearing down the existing structures in the hope that whatever new emerges may be better than the old. But men have no absolute standards and no real vision of society founded upon the solid values of justice, truth and integrity that can ensure the creation of a worthy new society.

I have been lecturing in sociology to undergraduates of London University for seven years and I can assure you that Solzhenitsyn is not wrong when he warns Western society that there are revolutionary forces at work that are determined to undermine the whole structure of our society. Now I believe most fervently in the need for radical social change to produce a just society. But I do not believe for one moment that those who are determined to ferment a revolution have the

vision, or the integrity, or the ability to produce the kind of society that will be a radically improved alternative to our present Western world. Most modern political humanistic revolutions have the effect, in the words of Bernard Shaw, of turning over the muck heap in the farmyard, which simply brings a different lot of maggots to the top.

The question we are faced with is - do Christians have any real answers to the problems facing our world today? I believe we do, but equally I believe there need to be some revolutionary changes amongst Christians. For a start we need to be creatively involved in the processes of social change in our society and not withdrawn from them. For far too long Christians have tended to withdraw from where the battle is hottest and leave the transformation of our society in the hands of men whose vision is limited due to the lack of a spiritual dimension in their thinking.

Hence there has been far too great a tendency among Christians to decry every movement for change in our society but to offer no alternatives themselves. A negative critical detachment from society will never produce the new world of the Christian vision. But in order to be creatively involved in society Christians need to understand that society - this means studying the social forces that are at work. We need Christian social scientists to enable the development of a strategy of Christian mission that is geared to meet the needs of our modern world.

Now while, on the one hand, I am pleading for Christians to be more fully involved in society, at the same time I believe there is a need for a new "Separatist Movement". This really means the re-discovery of the spiritual basis of Christian mission. What I mean is this, that Christians who have attempted to become fully involved in society have tended to become caught up in the secular processes and to reflect the secular values. They have tended to lose the spiritual dynamic that originally impelled them to become involved in society. They have lost their spiritual *raison d'être* and are thus no longer able to act as leaven in the lump. This can be seen, not only in the lives of countless individual Christians, but also in the Christian churches themselves.

It is surely undeniable that worldly standards have crept into our church government and structures and policies and undermined our mission to an almost incredible degree. It is because twentieth century Congregationalists have so far departed from their spiritual foundations - their Christ-centredness - that we have had to experience the tragic fragmentation of the Congregational Church in the past few years.

I have a real concern for former Congregationalists now in the United Reformed Church who are suffering under the growing authoritarianism and centralisation of that Church. The beliefs about the church and the principles that were once sacred to them have one by one been whittled away. Gone is the church meeting with its principle of the Christ

centredness and responsibility of the local congregation to none other than the Lordship of Christ. Gone is the right of the local church to decide who shall preside at the Lord's table and gone also is the right of the local church to choose its own minister. Only last month one of my friends, a former Congregational minister now in the U.R.C., told me that he had received a unanimous invitation from a church to preach with a view to becoming its pastor following a very happy first weekend amongst them. But the district committee have now intervened and forbidden the local church to issue a "call" to him.

This was a clause in the proposed constitution that received a great deal of debate in our assemblies before the merger and we were assured that it was simply put there as a safeguard but that it was a power the district committee would never use. This is a case where structures become more important than individuals or individual churches. It is an example of ecclesiastical bureaucratisation. It is yet further evidence of the world coming into the church instead of the church going out into the world.

The amazing thing is that we live in a day when most churches are moving towards greater lay participation and a greater emphasis on the freedom and worth of the individual. This can be seen in the revolutionary changes that have taken place in the modern Roman Catholic church and to a lesser degree in the Church of England. It can be seen in the new structures recently introduced in the Methodist Church. Methodism has completely changed the structure of the local

church and introduced a church meeting where the office are elected, and members are set aside for a whole range special duties and responsibilities. I find myself completely at home in a united Congregational/ Methodist Church in which the day-to-day practice of the church is little different to our own traditions. It seems sad to think that the one Church that is going in the opposite direction to the general movement amongst Christians which stresses the value of each individual and asserts the need for all Christians to be actively involved in mission is the Church with which I myself have been associated from childhood. I do, however, find comfort in the fact that so many others amongst us share these convictions that the Federation has been able to come into being. The historic witness of Congregationalism - of Christ-centredness and of the value of each individual - is able to be maintained and to be communicated to others.

Having said all this it is now necessary to stress the need for a revitalising of our Christian witness and mission in the modern world. I believe that if we are to renew society we need to recover the basic prophetic role of Christians. Renewal begins at the household of faith - within the Church itself. We Christians need to set our own house in order. Before we can effectively play a significant role in the renewal of society we need to be certain ourselves of the vision and the dynamic that alone will produce a new society. We ourselves need to be transformed by Christ. In the words of St Paul, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the

renewal of your mind", or in J.B. Phillips' translation, "Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within". Only Christ can carry out this process of renewal or recreation. Again, to quote Paul, "If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has passed away behold the new has come".

We Congregationalists need to initiate a new Separatist Movement. A new Separatist Movement would be withdrawn from the world only in the sense of refusing to conform to secular standards and to accept secular values as a valid basis for life. It would not be withdrawn in the sense of non-involvement in society. Christians need to be fully involved in order to inject Christian values and standards and vision into a world which desperately lacks all these qualities that are the essential foundations for renewed society. Christians thus would be in the world but not of it. But Christians cannot creatively participate in a new society unless they have the certainty and conviction that they have something of real worth to communicate to the world around them.

The basis of certainty for the Christian lies in the Word of the Lord. This was the authority of the prophets. They spoke the Word of God to man. They acted as mediators. They relayed the vision that God was wishing to communicate to man through them. This is the prophetic task.

A basic weakness in Christian mission today is that we lack the Word of the Lord. There is a sentence in Amos 8: 11 that really speaks to our present condition. It says, "Behold the days are coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread nor a thirst for water but of hearing the Word of the Lord".

Our modern Western society is well fed and watered indeed but people are starved of the Word of the Lord. People are searching and hungry for reality, for ultimate meaning and purpose in life, for spiritual values that can transform our world from a materialistic, self-indulgent, crazy merry-go-round, hell-bent on self-destruction.

The tragedy of our age is that all too often when people turn to the Church they come away hungry and unfed. Again a word of scripture is apt here, this time from Ezekiel 34. "Woe shepherds who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered ... my shepherds have not searched for my sheep but the shepherds have fed themselves and have not fed my sheep".

Preachers have lacked authority because we have not been open to the Word of the Lord and to the Holy Spirit. We have suffered from an overdose of biblical liberalism that has sapped the strength and vitality out of our preaching. Now I don't mean to deny the tremendous insights and value of biblical scholarship from which I personally have benefitted immensely. But where biblical criticism becomes a barrier to a personal experience of the living God it is no longer a search for the truth but a barren negativistic scholastic exercise.

I, too, have been brought up in what is known as the "liberal tradition" and I am by no means ungrateful for the insights that tradition has given me. But I want to bear testimony to the new personal experience of the Lord Jesus that came into my own life some six years ago and has transformed my ministry. It has given me a new spiritual power and authority that formerly I lacked, and a new peace and joy and spontaneity in worship, and power and direction in mission that I have never before experienced. I have turned to the scriptures to search them with a new eagerness and expectation, not with a blind literalistic mechanical approach. One cannot unlearn things that have been learned. In any case this would be highly undesirable. But I can bear testimony that I find new meaning, purpose, power and a new relevance in the scriptures as God's word for His world.

In my own ministry in the East End of London we are putting into practice as part of a modern strategy of urban mission what I consider to be the basic prophetic method. It is well illustrated in the ministry of Amos.

There are three elements.

1. The first is a personal experience of God.
2. The second is a competent study of the mission field.
3. The third is action to meet the needs of the people.

If you study the ministry of Amos you will find that he was first of all deeply conscious of the presence of God. He had that personal experience of God that alone is the basis of valid ministry. Secondly, when he went to Jerusalem where he felt called, he didn't begin speaking straight away - he listened. He studied the city and listened to people and identified their needs. He was filled with anger and indignation at the injustice and sinfulness that he saw around him. He listened to the poor widow who had received no justice from the corrupt judge who had given judgement in favour of the rich man who bribed him. He listened to the poor man who had been unable to pay the enormous interest charges demanded by the rich landlord who had given him a loan to buy bread. He heard how the poor man's children had been sold into slavery when he had been unable to redeem his bond. Then when Amos had studied the city and understood its needs the Word of the Lord came - he prophesied, "Thus says the Lord".

There is a fourth dimension of mission that I believe is essential and which we see in Amos. He didn't simply identify the needs of the people, he himself identified with them. He felt the sin of the city as a real burden upon him. He cared sufficiently to spend his life in the city that he found so uncongenial and whose very surroundings he found so abhorrent to his country upbringing. He cared sufficiently to stay where he believed he was called.

The prophets were not simply men of words. They were men of action who brought the Word of the Lord to bear upon the social and spiritual situation of their day. They were men who felt the burden of the needs around them. They were men who cared. Read again the story of Nehemiah, the man who had a comfortable position in the king's household - secure, well paid and surrounded by all the material good things of life. Then one day he heard of the plight of Jerusalem and when he heard these things Nehemiah wept.

He wept because he cared and because he cared he risked his life to speak to the king and obtained permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild her ruined walls and her broken and destroyed buildings. He cared sufficiently to risk his own life to spend his energies in renewing the city he loved.

Read again the story of Jesus approaching the Jerusalem he loved for the last time in his earthly life. As he reached the hilltop overlooking the city, Jesus stood and wept. He wept because he cared. He cared enough to give his life for the city and her people -

the city that rejected him, that shouted 'crucify', that nailed him to a cross.

I wonder if we Christians care sufficiently for the sins of our society that we feel them as a burden. Do we really care enough to spend and be spent? This is the starting point of mission. It is the beginning of renewal.

