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## EDITORIAL

### *The Church in the City*

LITTLE can be said about the present estate of the churches in the city which does not sound as if the churches are ridiculous. Some churches, for example, have physically quit the city—closed down, sold out, and moved to the suburbs, only to find out that the problem of the mission of the church to the city still plagues them. For suburbs are satellites of the city and commuters spend much, if not most, of their time in the city. Perhaps the churches which have remained physically in the city have eluded the church's mission to the city more effectively—by virtually full-time preoccupation in ecclesiastical housekeeping, in massive indifference to the excitement and conflict of the city, or by plain malingering.

Some churches have fled the city, but the churches that have remained, for the most part, have been hiding out.

Consequently, of course, the city pays little attention to the churches, save for some patently absurd or innocuous event in which the churches manage to call attention to themselves. Recently, a clergyman convened a press conference in New York to announce the discontinuance of pew rentals. If *that* is all that the churches have to report to the city, it is probably shrewder to suppress the news. But that is just the sort of thing by which the churches are normally, albeit not yet exclusively, identified in the city.

The notorious fact about the churches and the city at the present time is that the churches do not *know* the city. And yet the rudiment of the mission to the city is the immersion of the churches in

the common life of the city and the dispersion of Christians within the turmoil and travail of the city's existence. The rudiment of mission is knowledge of the city because the truth and grace of the Incarnation encompass in God's care all that is the city. Mission for the church, and hence for the churches and for Christians, in the city means a radical intimacy with every corner and every echelon of the city's actual life in order to represent and honor God's concern for each fragment of the city.

## I

The city as it is nowadays emerges from the maturing of the industrial revolution. In North America and Western Europe, and more lately in the countries of the East and just beginning in Latin America and Africa, feudalism is overthrown by industrialization, and industrialization is followed by urbanization. The city represents the realization of the forces and purposes unleashed in the industrial revolution. And the city is the fulfillment—if indeed there is to be such—of the promises of that revolution.

Those promises were that in the industrialization of production men would be set free from their bondage in work. No longer would a man be enslaved either to the land or to the landlord. No longer would a man toil only to maintain his own poverty and indebtedness. Now a man might even share significantly in what his labor produced. And if emancipated in his work, he would also become politically free—with time and opportunity and the wherewithal for education for himself and for his children. That, in turn and in time, would mean homage to heredity, and class would be made obsolete. Then leisure and the arts would be for all, and men might even participate in their own government. The only limits upon a man, according to the ideology of the industrial revolution, were those indigenous to his own mentality, volition, health, competitive spirit, and luck.

Nowhere, lest it be by some mockery the Soviet Union, have these promises been taken more solemnly, more literally, more religiously, and, ironically, more for granted, than in the United States. Here they have been the propaganda line of the industrial and commercial powers, the core of the curriculum in public education, the moral theology of most American Protestants, and the pledges of every political campaign.

But look at the contemporary city to see what has happened to these promises. Among the poor in the city, many are still in bondage to the land and to the landlords. Unemployment is persistent, unemployability because of lack of urban occupational skills is common and increasing, and many of those who are employed can only find seasonal, marginal, menial jobs. Income is low and erratic, yet credit is easy for necessities—groceries or furniture or clothes—though at premium prices for frequently inferior qualities, and so the people are encumbered by debts against uncertain future earnings.

The speculators in slum real estate are generally absentee landlords, inaccessible to tenants except for the collection of the rents and profits on their holdings, and sharp manipulation of slum property reaps as high as a 25% to 30% return for the investor. Meanwhile the economics of both public and private urban redevelopment have placed new housing beyond the means of the poor, apart from other sanctions like *de facto* segregation in housing in the city. Consequently, the poor of the city are immobile, bound to the places where they live, with little practical expectancy of moving out of the slums. What mobility exists, is mainly the movement from one slum to another slum.

While the poor are confined to their ghettos, more and more space is being diverted in the city to luxury housing. In part the exodus of the middle classes contributes to this, but it is also an accommodation to the interest of the utilities and builders and to the insurance companies and banks and some unions and universities and others that invest heavily in real estate. For principalities such as these it is more advantageous to redevelop the city for the rich than to rehabilitate it for the poor. Anyway, the chasm between the rich and the poor grows wider and wider, and the hostility between the rich and the poor, associated as it usually is with racism of one sort or another, becomes more intense and embittered.

But the poor are not the only city folk who are in subjection to the principalities which rule the city. The industrialization of production caused the inception of a new kind of work in which the product is, as it is cleverly called, services, rather than goods. The largest single element of the city's working, as distinguished from residential, population is an assortment of managers and middlemen, underwriters, factors, bureaucrats, brokers, bailors, lenders, promoters, consultants, attendants, and the like. Perhaps these are more be-

holden, more manipulated, more expendable, more confined and conformed, more like serfs than the poor.

In short, the modern American city which has emerged from industrialization and urbanization, especially the City of New York, for it is, after all, the prototype city, is not a place in which men have found freedom and society. This is no city of salvation. This is not where the promises of industrialization have been authenticated. On the contrary, this is a city in which the elemental spirit of feudalism still survives in spite of—perchance because of—technological and sociological and psychological change. The city is more a reversion to feudalism than an emancipation from feudalism.

The medieval demons are not dead: indeed demons are the ministers of death. Nor were they exorcised in the building of the city. They still exist in the city. The city is their present realm. The city is their plunder.

## II

Now if, as is suggested here, the promises of the industrial revolution have not been vindicated in the city, or if they are exposed in the city as illusory, and if the people of the city have not been emancipated by the industrialization of production—and all that has followed from that—but are enslaved to the principalities and powers that rule the city, much as their predecessors were in feudal society, then all this must be taken into account in the conception of and deployment of the mission of the church to the city. The church has first to know what sort of place the city is, and not underweigh or suppress or blush or flinch at whatever *is*. But *that* puts the churches—and particularly the churches of American Protestantism—in an anomalous and tender predicament.

Not only are these churches ill-disposed to undertake the mission to the city—else why would so many have sought to abandon the city? Not only are these churches unprepared to minister to the city—because of diffidence toward and ignorance about the city. Not only are these churches reluctant to love the city, lest they risk their reputations and possessions. These churches are immobilized from serving the city because they are still fascinated with the ideology of the industrial revolution. Maybe the promises of the industrial era are fraudulent, but Protestants still believe them, recite them, eulogize them, enshrine them, and chant them instead of the Psalms.

While the Church of Rome has been and still in some places is the handmaiden of the ruling powers of feudalism, the churches of American Protestantism became and, to an awful extent, still are captivated by and captive of the ideological forces of industrialization. Protestants in America theologized the ideas of the industrial revolution. They preached a radical and ascendant humanism in which some innate capacity of the individual to conquer, subdue, and rule the environment embellished the promise of industrialism that men would be free enough from work to have time for politics, education, and the arts. They thought that the revolution in the productive process and in the output of production rationalized a novel, if un-Biblical, doctrine of work in which the dominion of men over the rest of creation was restored or imminently restorable and men would find not only adequate compensation, but personal satisfaction and moral justification in their daily work. They thought that the powers and principalities, so evident and notorious in feudalism, were deposed and destroyed in industrialization, and so they just forgot about them, and thereby, incidentally, served them well.

This is not a century or more ago, this is the case today. Protestantism, and not just rural or suburban Protestantism but Protestantism in the city, remains by and large a make-believe haven where the individual is exalted: he is the center, he is the subject of the ministry, he controls his own destiny, it is for him that the world exists, he can even think himself out of sickness or wish himself into success. But in this enchanting sanctuary there is hardly a whisper about the praise of the Lord our God, or the remembrance of the poor, or loving an enemy, or giving away your life and in that way finding it, or the passion of Christ, or the power of the Resurrection, or the discernment of God's presence in the world, or the jubilation and surprise of the Eucharist, or the earnest expectancy of the Last Day.

American Protestantism doesn't really want the Gospel. So American Protestantism has what it wants instead: at one extremity it has the uses of religion appropriated for the aggrandizement of the principalities and powers of commerce, industry, and patriotism and the material, psychological, verbal, and carnal appeasement of men privy to these powers.

In another aberration, American Protestantism has sought to dignify human sin as that which is responsible for the fallenness of not only men, but the rest of creation. So if men's work is harsh and

burdensome, or if the principalities are relentless and oppressive, it is the fault of men and the consequence of their sin. Are politics corrupt? Is there juvenile delinquency? Is there scandal in the great corporations as well as in the unions? Does the nation's prestige decline? It is all because of the lusts of men. This is the stock merchandise of Protestant evangelism. The trouble with it is that to extol the power of sin is still a way of proving the dominion of men in the world.

In between such extremities resides another form of the same heresy: a social gospel which, though more cautious now than a generation or two ago, and though more orthodox in its vocabulary, still expects that fortunate concurrence of circumstances in which men master history and build themselves a city of salvation. This is the variety of Protestantism that cannot comprehend why the gospel narrative does not end in the merely political triumph of Palm Sunday and so cannot countenance the crucifixion and considers the resurrection from the dead an embarrassing hyperbole.

The churches have pretty much abandoned the city either physically or psychologically because they have become theologically incapacitated. The churches do not know the city because they are estopped by a religion, which bears only some outer resemblance to the Gospel, from becoming immersed in the common life of the city. So the witness of the churches in the city is peripheral, pietistic, self-serving, corny, and profane.

### III

It seems likely that if the Churches were somehow rid of their be-  
guilement with the promises of the industrial revolution, and if  
therefore the church saw the city as it is, they would be seized with  
hysteria. Conversion is not always sudden or dramatic, but it is al-  
ways traumatic.

The plea here is not just for the recovery in the churches of a re-  
sponsible biblical theology of work and for the restoration in the  
churches of a theological understanding of the principalities and  
powers, though God knows both are needed if the churches are to re-  
turn to and minister to the city. The plea here is for much more  
than that, it is for the renewal of the sacramental integrity of the  
churches. Mission to the city requires not just a renunciation of a  
fictional theology which now entraps the churches, but the confes-  
sion by and within the churches, and among the people of the

churches, that in and of themselves they are helpless to cope with the city or any bit of the city's existence.

But helpless is not a synonym for hopeless. Quite the contrary, the Christian hope becomes manifest in the very event in which a people or a man confesses utter helplessness, for that confession is the first and free and most reckless acknowledgment of God's life and presence in the world.

Then the churches can again discern and rely upon God's presence in the world and anywhere in the world—even in the city. Then the celebrations at the altar of God's awful and fearsome, splendid and victorious, presence in the world will be validated in mission to the city. And then the city will hear that it is God who builds the City of Salvation.

WILLIAM STRINGFELLOW

### *Toward New Involvements*

**H**ERACLITUS wisely said that a man cannot step twice into the same stream. However stable the appearances, change is everywhere at work; the stream flows on and new water is continuously replacing the old. The proverb of Heraclitus applies also to all the involvements in the world in which the church reflects God's radical involvement in the affairs of men. To be genuinely involved is to be open to the unpredictable and, for the most part, unprecedented challenges of the present. In this issue of *THEOLOGY TODAY* we consider some current opportunities for the church to be newly involved in problems of Christian faith and life.

In the lead editorial, "The Church in the City," William Stringfellow contends that the churches are not only physically abandoning the challenge of involvement in the contemporary city; they do not even know what sort of place the city is. Meaningful missionary work in the city presupposes "a radical intimacy with every corner and every echelon of the city's actual life."

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