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ACTION AND REACTION:

THE CHURCH

IN A CHANGING WORLD

John W. Ekstedt

THE PROBLEM

What is the church's responsibility in society? This question is being asked, not only by the church, but by society generally. A large proportion of the church's anxiety around this issue may, in fact, be a direct response to the prodding, critical queries of society about the church's role in meeting the issues and social crises of our time. Institutions of government, education, business, philanthropy, and public and private enterprise in every field are faced with the same question - a question which stands in relation to the one overriding, persistent factor of change.

" People have always recognized that they must satisfactorily deal with change in order to lead full and rewarding lives. Life and death, the changing seasons, the rise and fall of power structures, war and peace, famine and plenty, poverty and wealth have always been part of human experience. Suddenly, however, change seems to have leaped out of its "natural" dimension and become a terrifying, uncontrollable monster. Mankind appears to have lost the ability to deal with it. Our systems cannot contain it any longer and the human race fears for its very existence.

Increasingly rapid modes of communication, travel, data processing and other technical areas represent one part of the dilemma facing social institutions today. Another is the response to these changes by that vast "new generation" which

has known no other way of life. In reacting to these changes, this new generation frequently comes into conflict with institutions whose forms and patterns were established in another era and who are, themselves, struggling with the implications of massive social change. It is this confrontation which makes the issues so complex. There exists at one and the same time the generation(s) born and reared before the speed of change became so intense and problematic and the generation for whom constant social and technological change is a life-style. Thus on the one side there is the call to "return to the old values". On the other side there is the insistence that "the old values don't work anymore".

Almost all reactions to change demand a response of change. Yet we would do well to be aware that in our society these reactions and responses represent some very different perspectives. We may note, for instance, that in a dehumanized, technocratic, mechanistic society there is a strong tendency to establish concepts and practices of "participatory democracy". People demand a voice in their own affairs and some control with regard to the issues that are important to them. Thus the poor refuse to accept their poverty, minority races and groups rebel against discrimination, students demand changes in the form and content of education, and women fight for new forms of equality and recognition. In most cases, this response represents efforts to gain greater power, recognition, opportunity, and status in the prevailing social order.

There is, however, another important social movement taking place in society. This is represented by the growing number of people who are refusing to accept the standards, values, norms, or life style of society. They reject materialistic motivations, power struggles, social control and formalized, institutional forms. They establish patterns of living which are contrary to accepted practices. They do not consider the law of society something to be followed for its own sake. In the most positive sense, they see themselves standing in relation to society for the purpose of stimulating the social conscience around issue which they consider critical if human beings are to retain some sense of dignity and personness. In the most negative sense they simply withdraw and remove themselves from any concern about social interaction whatsoever.

The institutions of society find that the first reaction is the easiest with which to deal. It becomes simply a matter of acceding to demands. Though not without conflict or struggle, social institutions can be persuaded that giving in to these demands is in their best interest and that they do not have to give up anything of essential quality.

The latter reaction is another problem. This reaction reflects a rejection of what institutions have to offer. Institutions are called upon to cease or to change altogether.

The social institutions involved in all of this are, for the most part, controlled by or representative of people who function in the mainstream. They accept the values, motivations, and forms of society. They have status or have hope of obtaining status within the social order. They are people of good will who are

concerned about the problems of social change, but who have great difficulty grasping the implications of massive social and technological change. They are the ones who are being compelled to ask, in the face of all this, what is our responsibility to society?

Thus the church is asking this question. And the church is asking it as though it were a new question. In fact, it is a new question because it is a new time. The forces which confront the church have taken many new forms. The church is people not unaffected by societal circumstance. The very fact that the church has to ask the question tells us that the church is in the world and that it considers itself as having a relationship to the world which is not to be taken lightly.

As the church grapples with this problem it must begin by taking issue with itself. It must know what it is, what its forms are, and the implications are for the maintenance and continuum of its own life. The social question has two parts with which the church must continually wrestle. The first is to determine how the church maintains its own life in this complex, changing world. The second is to know how it relates that life to people outside the church and to the social problems with which everyone must deal.

THE CHURCH BY DEFINITION

To have a proper perspective in its concern for the maintenance of its own life, the church must know what it is. Essentially the church is people who have been filled with the Spirit of God so that they perceive in the person of Jesus Christ the source of their life and the entirety of their life's expression. This church has been called the "body of Christ" (Rom. 12:4, Eph. 1:22, 4:12, etc.), the "household of faith" (Gal. 6:10), and a "chosen generation" (1 Pet. 2:9). These people struggle variously with the problems of self and the world and, in so doing, represent true humanity. They live in a world suffering the consequences of man's broken relationship with God, but their life with God has been re-established through the person of Christ. Though they sin, suffer, doubt, and fail, they are not crushed. They are redeemed. They are not striving for the things of this world. Their hunger is for spiritual enrichment. They care about the world, however, and experience intense sorrow on its behalf. They do not show pride or superiority, but live with humility and meekness. They seek to show mercy and they can do this because they have experienced mercy. They are the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Matt. 5:13, 14).

The church by this definition has not form but it has function. Its function is to receive the ministry of Christ and maintain the continuum of that ministry until Christ comes again in glory to judge the world. The resource for this function in both parts is the Word and Sacraments through which the Holy Spirit works to give men life through Christ and a way of living in Christ.

The church by virtue of this definition simply is or it is not. It is not an issue to the world. The world cannot perceive or understand it. Yet her essential quality is an offense, whether the world knows it or not. For it is this qualitative difference

that leads the church into forms and expressions which are in conflict with the motivations and practices of the world.

The members of this church are not all known to each other. But when persons who profess and live this faith encounter each other, the church as the body of Christ takes on form as the church in the world. These people have an affinity for each other as they are "members of the same body" (1 Cor. 12:12ff) and they recognize the rewards and responsibilities of active fellowship. This is in keeping with their need to give expression to the faith they hold in common and their responsibility to receive and maintain the continuum of Christ's ministry. Thus an ecclesiastical institution emerges with purpose and objectives in keeping with its essential being.

The church taking on form is as different as the places within which it exists. Its faith and function, however, must remain the same. But when Christians gather together to give common expression to a personal experience with corporate implications, very human difficulties are bound to arise. This is reflected internally as the church seeks to construct ways and means of corporate expression and externally as the church is exposed to the reaction of the world.

The difficulties are seen internally in that the church has as one of its major works to deal with its own corporate humanity. It has the resource. It has the quality of life. It has the power of God. But it is not an easy or simple saying that Jesus gave to us in his words, "By this everyone will recognize that you are My disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

The difficulties are seen externally as the church perceives of itself as a social institution. A large part of our present concern about "social responsibility" is directly related to our function as a social institution. This is at least the category of the church's life to which the world is reacting. It is in this category that the church is most vulnerable as the winds of change swirl around it. It may be in this dimension that the church can lose its way and consequently obscure or directly affect its reason for being.

THE WORLD

If the church would know how to treat the social question, it must know what it means by the world as something to which it stands in relation. Understood in a societal sense, the world is the community of mankind. This includes its governments, traditions, and practices. It is perhaps in this sense that we best understand the meaning of Christ's words, "You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13a, 14a).

The world may also be understood as total environment. This is the whole of God's creation, but most specifically the earth on which we dwell. The church knows that God has given man particular responsibility concerning his environment (Gen. 1:26-29). The church also knows that the whole of creation has suffered because of mankind's sin (Rom. 8:20-22). The church, as the

company of the Redeemed, bears a very special responsibility for and relationship to the totality of God's tormented creation.

The Society In Which We Live

The basic problem of social institutions in our society and in our time has already been defined as unprecedented change. This is a problem for the church also as it considers its responsibility to society. For individuals in society and society as a whole the critical nature of our time demands response around myriad issues if we would preserve creation and save the human race. These include the issues of participatory democracy, pollution, poverty, law and justice, crime, nuclear escalation, racial conflict, unemployment and many more. It is interesting that in a publication of the Canada Emergency Measures Organization,¹ these issues were listed according to their degree of intensity and the time within which they must be resolved.

According to this listing, the issue of participatory democracy would cause "widespread almost unbearable tension" if not resolved in 1 to 5 years and "great destruction or change" if not resolved in 5 to 20 years. The issue of pollution was listed as a must for resolution within 20 years.

There appear to be three major responses to this social dilemma. One of these is withdrawal. This can mean simply ignoring the problem in the hope that it will go away or feeling that it is someone else's responsibility. Or it can take the much more serious form of mental illness, drug use, criminal activity, or fanatical hedonism.

Another response comes under the category of social action. Here governments, private enterprise, community groups, philanthropic organizations, churches, and others form around the issues in an effort to get as much involvement as possible toward solution.

A third reaction may be known as the "new humanism". This is the response to the affect on human lives as the result of massive social and technological change. Its premise is that man has become dehumanized, has lost his ability to feel and "know himself". He needs to change his values from "outer-directed" ones to "inter-directed" ones. Most of all, he needs to find inner stability so that he can cope with the flux and turmoil of today's changing world. The concept includes the idea that man cannot affect responses and sacrifices necessary to cope with the problems of social change until he has changed his values and become truly human again. In the area of this "new humanism", a variety of programs and techniques have developed. Governments, business corporations, education institutions, philanthropic organizations and others are sponsoring

1. *EMO National Digest*, Published by Canada Emergency Measures Organization, Feb.-Mar., 1970. (In 1975, the issue of inflation would undoubtedly have to be added and placed high on the list. Ed.)

experiments and projects in the fields of “humanistic education” and “humanistic psychology”. There is no doubt that this is a growing social movement.

The Response of the Church

The church’s first responsibility to society is to be, by all means, faithful to its essential nature. Its first task is to receive and extend the ministry of Christ. Without this, it has lost its reason for being. We might note, in this context, the short dialogue in Luke 10:38-40 between our Lord and Mary and Martha. Here we learn that receiving Christ and hearing His Word comes before involvement in the busy-ness of the world. Or, as one writer puts it, “being served ranks above being distracted with much serving”. The church’s first business is with and around and in the Word of God. That is its only essential resource for operation in this world. This must not be taken lightly for if the church were already doing that, in-depth and with conviction, it would be communicating a significant message to the world.

The church’s next response (and in time perspective this occurs simultaneously) is to communicate that Word to the society and the world around it. This is its “preachment”, its kerygma. The emphasis must be on the Gospel. For what man needs to know is his salvation (1 Cor. 18:25).

But this is not an easy task. The church must know how to communicate the Gospel and what its points of contact are with those who have not heard (or who at least have not listened) to the Gospel before. That point of contact may be the law. When the church preaches the Law and Order of God in order to make contact with the Gospel, it takes on a prophetic role in its relation to the world. It not only points out man’s sin and that this sin represents a broken relationship with God but it also points to the consequences of that sin, i.e. that man is destroying himself and the world around him.

To make an application of God’s Law to its own time and place, the Church must know what is happening, how man’s sin expresses itself, what movements and concerns and struggles there are with which man must contend. The point must drive home and strike people where they are. In this complex, changing world this is a difficult task and it requires that the church be truly in the world and not withdrawn to some obscure protected corner. Its people must be alive to the circumstances and events of their time. In this sense, the church must indeed make some effort to be relevant. This is a large part of the church’s social responsibility.

In order to effect this kind of response, the church must not be afraid to listen to the world. The wise men of this world can do nothing to bring about man’s salvation with their wisdom, but they can give adequate and very accurate details

on the state of the world and the condition of man. Men in the world are also asking very pointed and meaningful questions to which the church can respond.

The Life of Service

The Church in maintaining the continuum of Christ's ministry lives a life of service. The servant role of the church is taken on with meekness, humility, patience, longsuffering, and joy. It is a ministry to Christ as well as a ministry of Christ and is an appropriate response to the life of service he has given to and for us.

This life of service is first of all internal. It has to do with the ministry (diakonia) of the members of the church to each other (Eph. 4:12, Rom. 12:7). Christians care for each other and in doing so they exercise true humanity. But even in their caring, Christians should be concerned that they "do not conform to the present world scheme" (Rom. 12:1-3). The world's methods of response to human need may not be acceptable or represent the will of God. We know, for instance, that in an increasingly socialized society, responses to human need tend to be impersonal. Problems are isolated from the mainstream. Elderly people are put in "old age" homes, unwed mothers are placed in special settings, children are farmed out to "day care", the mentally ill are institutionalized. What is the church's response to these problems in its own midst? Can the church take the risk or expend the energy to set another example in its own community of faith that will simultaneously speak a message to the world?

The problems of family disintegration, depersonalized education, "the generation gap", and others, represent real challenges for the church. If the church seeks the answers by attempting to discover "what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God", it will again have exercised a responsibility to society.

This ministry (diakonia) is also specifically external. In this sense, it is a ministry of response to human need wherever we find it. The Christian loves for Christ's sake and when he encounters human need he responds for Christ's sake. This is also a function of the church. Whatever worldly resources it has are for giving away. In the sense of response in service to the world, the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) tells us much. The response is immediate, complete and without question. The church may be failing its Lord by passing by or by even asking the question, "How much shall I do or give to help?" How much shall I keep for myself? (If the church performs its prophetic role, it will also say something to the world concerning the robbers on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho.)

The church needs to be careful that it is seeking the will of God in responding to the needs of the world. Responding to world or community need is not the same thing as responding to world or community demand. In our world, as we have already noted, social crises are very complex. It requires much wisdom to know what the issues really are, not to mention the problem of determining a response. Our best response it would appear, is for the church to react to specific human

need immediately and personally. This is the example of Christ's ministry and the sense of his message to us. We do this while we are at work offering men the Gospel because we love them and whether they accept our Gospel or not we continue to serve them because we love them.

If the example of Christ on the cross is to be taken seriously, then perhaps the church should feel that it exercises great responsibility in relation to society by praying on its behalf. This kind of response is not understood by the world, but it is a powerful and unique resource available only to the church.

THE CHANGING CHURCH

The contemporary church needs to consider that its own institutional response to the pressures of change is also a "preachment" of a kind to which the world is listening. It wants to know what the institutional church is going to be willing to give up, change around, or renew in order to relate effectively to changing circumstances and events. This is an important concern since the church is also faced with the issues of participatory democracy and "new generation" which were mentioned earlier.

The church must know which of its forms and functions are amenable to change; what part of itself needs to keep pace with the movement of society; and what is changeless and without variation. The church knows this when it knows what is essential and circumstantial to its existence.

The big danger is for the church to view its forms as essential when they are only circumstantial. That luxury is becoming less and less available to us. Multiple changes of large magnitude are occurring within one generation. We can no longer wait for the course of "normal" social evolution (i.e. generation by generation change) to accomplish the uncomfortable task of uprooting old forms and establishing new ones. The church in this respect has always moved notoriously slow. It is time that the church took off the brakes, removed the blocks, and let change happen around the Word and Sacraments.

This is difficult and requires love of the kind and quality that only God can give. For people in the church, as for people in the world, fast, repetitive change creates anxiety and fear. But the Spirit of God which is the eternal and changeless life of the church is at the same time its source of change and resource for changing. This is the kind of stability for which the world is searching in the face of ceaseless change.