

## 18. *The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel*

If the preceding chapters have succeeded in their purpose, the reader will be ready to acknowledge that the gospel cannot be accommodated as one element in a society which has pluralism as its reigning ideology. The Church cannot accept as its role simply the winning of individuals to a kind of Christian discipleship which concerns only the private and domestic aspects of life. To be faithful to a message which concerns the kingdom of God, his rule over all things and all peoples, the Church has to claim the high ground of public truth. Every human society is governed by assumptions, normally taken for granted without question, about what is real, what is important, what is worth aiming for. There is no such thing as an ideological vacuum. Public truth, as it is taught in schools and universities, as it is assumed in the public debate about political and economic goals, is either in conformity with the truth as it is given in Jesus Christ, or it is not. Where it is not, the Church is bound to challenge it. When we speak of a time when public truth as it was understood and accepted in Europe was shaped by Christianity, we do not—of course—mean that every person's behavior was in accordance with Christ's teaching. In that sense there has never been and there can never be a Christian society. But Europe was a Christian society in the sense that its public truth was shaped by the biblical story with its center in the incarnation of the Word in Jesus.

What can it mean in practice to "claim the high ground" for Christianity? Certainly it cannot mean going back to the past. The claim that I am making has often been and is now confused and corrupted by

being represented as a conservative move, a move to restore the past. That is impossible and undesirable. We are—as always—in a new situation. The Church of the first three centuries was essentially a martyr church, bearing witness against the public doctrine of the time. It could have accepted, but did not accept, the protection offered by Roman law to the private exercise of religion as a way of personal salvation. Though a small minority, it challenged the public doctrine of the time as false—and paid the price. When the old classical worldview lost its confidence and disintegrated, it was perhaps inevitable that the ruling power should turn to the Church as the integrating power for a new social order. That had enormous consequences for good over the succeeding millennium. It created the Christian civilization of Europe. But it also led the Church into the fatal temptation to use the secular power to enforce conformity to Christian teaching. It is easy to condemn this with hindsight, but one has to ask: How can any society hold together against the forces of disruption without some commonly accepted beliefs about the truth, and—therefore—without some sanctions against deviations which threaten to destroy society? These are agonizingly difficult questions and there are no simple answers valid for all circumstances. What is clear, however, is that the cohesion of European Christendom was shattered by internal dispute erupting into bloody warfare, and that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Europe turned to another vision of public truth, a vision inspired by the achievements of the new science and eventually embodied in the idea of a secular state. No one, surely, can fail to acknowledge with gratitude the achievements of this period of human history. But no one can be blind to the evidence that the liberal, secular democratic state is in grave trouble. The attacks on it from powerful new religious fanaticisms are possible only because its own internal weaknesses have become so clear: the disintegration of family life, the growth of mindless violence, the vandalism which finds satisfaction in destroying whatever is comely and useful, the growing destruction of the environment by limitless consumption fueled by ceaseless propaganda, the threat of nuclear war, and—as the deepest root of it all—the loss of any sense of a meaningful future. Weakened from within, secular democratic societies are at a loss to respond to religious fanaticism without denying their own principles. What could it mean for the Church to make once again the claim which it made in its earliest centuries, the claim to provide the public truth by which society can be given coherence and direction?

Certainly it cannot mean a return to the use of coercion to impose

belief. That is, in any case, impossible. Assent to the claim of Christ has to be given in freedom. But it is never given in a vacuum. The one to whom the call of Jesus comes already lives in a world full of assumptions about what is true. How is this world of assumptions formed? Obviously through all the means of education and communication existing in society. Who controls these means? The question of power is inescapable. Whatever their pretensions, schools teach children to believe something and not something else. There is no "secular" neutrality. Christians cannot evade the responsibility which a democratic society gives to every citizen to seek access to the levers of power. But the issue has never confronted the Church in this way before; we are in a radically new situation and cannot dream either of a Constantinian authority or of a pre-Constantinian innocence.

What is to be done? How is it possible that the one who was nailed helpless to a cross should be seen by society as the ultimate source of power? Here is the piercing paradox at the heart of any attempt to talk about "claiming the high ground." No text of the Old Testament is more frequently quoted in the New than the terrible words of Yahweh to Isaiah: "Go and say to this people: 'Hear and hear but do not understand; see and see but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people fat and their ears heavy and shut their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (Isa. 6:9-10). It is quoted in all the Gospels, in Acts, by St. Paul. Yet Paul is tireless in his effort to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, and is confident that God's purpose cannot fail. He is sure that in the end the fullness of the Gentiles will come in and all Israel will be saved (Rom. 11:25-26). How do we reconcile these elements in the New Testament teaching? It is only when we hold them both together that we begin to grasp the "impossible possibility" of salvation. This ought to deliver us from being impressed by the various proposals which are frequently made to the effect that if we will adopt the proper techniques for evangelism, we can be assured of success. It ought to inoculate us against the Pelagianism which tends to infect missionary thinking, the Pelagianism which supposes that the conversion of the world will be our achievement. It ought to direct our minds away from our programs to the awesome reality of God whose sovereignty is manifest in what the world calls failure, and whose "folly" is wiser than the wisdom of the world (1 Cor. 1:25). It ought to help us to understand why, at the end of his long discussion of these matters, St. Paul can only exclaim: "O the depth of the riches

and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11:33). The conversion of the nations is, and can only be, the supernatural work of God. What, then, is our role?

In a necessary reaction against the idea of a Church which acts as God's viceroy on earth, a triumphalist Church, we have in recent years emphasized the servant role of the Church. We are here rightly seeking to follow the example of Jesus, who defined his role as that of servant (for example, Mark 10:45). But this servant role can be misunderstood. Jesus did not allow himself to be simply at the disposal of others. The temptations at the outset of his ministry were temptations to do what people wanted the Messiah to do. While he responded instantly to the touch of human need, he yet retained the sovereignty in his own hands. He chose the times, place, and manner of his acts. Even at the end he was in control. "No one," he said, "takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:18). The most sustained discussion of this issue is given in the Johannine account of the feeding of the multitude and its sequel (John 6).

The story begins with an act of pure compassion. A great crowd has gathered around Jesus, not because they believe his teaching but because they have seen his healing (vv. 1-2). They are hungry. Jesus sees that they are hungry and—without any request from the crowd—he provides enough and more than enough to satisfy them (vv. 3-13). The result is a surge of popular enthusiasm to make Jesus their leader. A real "people's movement" is about to be born (v. 14)! The response of Jesus is to distance himself completely from this movement. He will have nothing to do with it (v. 15). The disciples, perplexed, set off for home. The crowds are determined to find him, and eventually succeed (vv. 16-25). Jesus tells them the real reason for their pursuit. They have been fed, but now they are hungry again. They should seek the food that gives not temporary but enduring life. When they (naturally) ask what work they must do to get this eminently desirable food, they are told that what is required is not a work, but faith. They are to believe the one whom God has sent (vv. 26-29). After further perplexed questioning the crowd is finally told that the food in question is Jesus himself (vv. 30-40). In response to the "murmuring" (which forms the background to the story of the giving of manna in the desert) Jesus quietly replies that no one can come to him unless the Father draws him (vv. 41-44). In the ensuing debate the lines harden and the hearers refuse to hear more. Even many of Jesus' disciples leave him. Jesus is left

with "the twelve" and warns them that even in this group of his closest friends there is treachery (vv. 45-71).

If we take this as a picture of what is involved in the offering of the gospel to the world, we have something very different from the picture of a successful exercise in public relations. Jesus is both totally compassionate and yet totally uncompromising about what is involved in coming to the fullness of life. There can be no compromise with false ideas about what it is that makes for fullness of life. To give bread to the hungry is an action of divine compassion and as such a sign of that which alone can satisfy the infinite desires and needs of the human spirit. If the sign is confused with that which it signifies, the gift of life is forfeited. In serving human need, Jesus remains master. The servant who washes the feet of his disciples is their master and lord, and it is in serving that he exercises his lordship (John 13:13-14).

What does this say about the way in which the Church is authorized to represent the kingdom of God in the life of society? It excludes, certainly, the idea that it will be by exercising the kind of power which "the rulers of the Gentiles" exercise (Luke 22:25-26). But it excludes also the idea that the Church simply "responds to the aspirations of the people." And it excludes ideas which have been too prevalent in "evangelical" circles, ideas which portray the Church in the style of a commercial firm using modern techniques of promotion to attract members. How is it possible for the Church truly to represent the reign of God in the world in the way Jesus did? How can there be this combination of tender compassion and awesome sovereignty? How can any human society be both the servant of all people in all their needs, and yet at the same time responsible only to God in his awesome and holy sovereignty? How can the Church be fully open to the needs of the world and yet have its eyes fixed always on God? I think there is only one way.

One of the very few missionary leaders of this century who recognized at an early date that the greatest contemporary challenge to the missionary movement is presented by "modern" Western society was J. H. Oldham. No one did more to shape the ecumenical movement in its early days and to direct the attention of the churches to the need to challenge the assumptions of contemporary society. It was said of him by close colleagues that, when he spoke of "the Church," "it was never quite clear whether he was talking about the ordinary, parson-led congregation, or about something more exciting but less visible" (letter to the author from J. Eric Fenn, January 1937). Oldham did not expect very

much from the "ordinary, parson-led congregation," and one can scarcely blame him. Much of the vitality which was imparted to the early organs of ecumenical action was due to the fact that professional ecclesiastics were balanced by a goodly sprinkling of highly competent laypersons from business, government, and the professions. And yet I confess that I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. I am, of course, not denying the importance of the many activities by which we seek to challenge public life with the gospel—evangelistic campaigns, distribution of Bibles and Christian literature, conferences, and even books such as this one. But I am saying that these are all secondary, and that they have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community.

Jesus, as I said earlier, did not write a book but formed a community. This community has at its heart the remembering and rehearsing of his words and deeds, and the sacraments given by him through which it is enabled both to engraft new members into its life and to renew this life again and again through sharing in his risen life through the body broken and the lifeblood poured out. It exists in him and for him. He is the center of its life. Its character is given to it, when it is true to its nature, not by the characters of its members but by his character. Insofar as it is true to its calling, it becomes the place where men and women and children find that the gospel gives them the framework of understanding, the "lenses" through which they are able to understand and cope with the world. Insofar as it is true to its calling, this community will have, I think, the following six characteristics:

1. It will be a community of praise. That is, perhaps, its most distinctive character. Praise is an activity which is almost totally absent from "modern" society. Here two distinct points can be made.

a. The dominant notes in the development of the specifically "modern" view of things has been (as we have noted earlier) the note of scepticism, of doubt. The "hermeneutic of suspicion" is only the most recent manifestation of the belief that one could be saved from error by the systematic exercise of doubt. It has followed that when any person, in-

Jesus \*

Praise

stitution, or tradition has been held up as an object worthy of reverence, it has immediately attracted the attention of those who undertook to demonstrate that there was another side to the picture, that the golden image has feet of clay. I suppose that this is one manifestation of that "disenchantment" which Weber regarded as a key element in the development of "modern" society. Reverence, the attitude which looks up in admiration and love to one who is greater and better than oneself, is generally regarded as something unworthy of those who have "come of age" and who claim that equality is essential to human dignity. With such presuppositions, of course, the very idea of God is ruled out. The Christian congregation, by contrast, is a place where people find their true freedom, their true dignity, and their true equality in reverence to One who is worthy of all the praise that we can offer.

b. Then, too, the Church's praise includes thanksgiving. The Christian congregation meets as a community that acknowledges that it lives by the amazing grace of a boundless kindness. Contemporary society speaks much about "human rights." It is uncomfortable with "charity" as something which falls short of "justice," and connects the giving of thanks with an unacceptable subservience. In Christian worship the language of rights is out of place except when it serves to remind us of the rights of others. For ourselves we confess that we cannot speak of rights, for we have been given everything and forgiven everything and promised everything, so that (as Luther said) we lack nothing except faith to believe it. In Christian worship we acknowledge that if we had received justice instead of charity we would be on our way to perdition. A Christian congregation is thus a body of people with gratitude to spare, a gratitude that can spill over into care for the neighbor. And it is of the essence of the matter that this concern for the neighbor is the overflow of a great gift of grace and not, primarily, the expression of commitment to a moral crusade. There is a big difference between these two.

—2. Second, it will be a community of truth. This may seem an obvious point, but it needs to be stressed. As I have tried to show in these chapters, it is essential to recognize that all human thinking takes place within a "plausibility structure" which determines what beliefs are reasonable and what are not. The reigning plausibility structure can only be effectively challenged by people who are fully integrated inhabitants of another. Every person living in a "modern" society is subject to an almost continuous bombardment of ideas, images, slogans, and stories which presuppose a plausibility structure radically different from that which is controlled by the Christian understanding of human nature

and destiny. The power of contemporary media to shape thought and imagination is very great. Even the most alert critical powers are easily overwhelmed. A Christian congregation is a community in which, through the constant remembering and rehearsing of the true story of human nature and destiny, an attitude of healthy scepticism can be sustained, a scepticism which enables one to take part in the life of society without being bemused and deluded by its own beliefs about itself. And, if the congregation is to function effectively as a community of truth, its manner of speaking the truth must not be aligned to the techniques of modern propaganda, but must have the modesty, the sobriety, and the realism which are proper to a disciple of Jesus.

3. Third, it will be a community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighborhood. It will be the church for the specific place where it lives, not the church for those who wish to be members of it—or, rather, it will be for them insofar as they are willing to be for the wider community. It is, I think, very significant that in the consistent usage of the New Testament, the word *ekklesia* is qualified in only two ways; it is "the Church of God," or "of Christ," and it is the church of a place. A Christian congregation is defined by this twofold relation: it is God's embassy in a specific place. Either of these vital relationships may be neglected. The congregation may be so identified with the place that it ceases to be the vehicle of God's judgment and mercy for that place and becomes simply the focus of the self-image of the people of that place. Or it may be so concerned about the relation of its members to God that it turns its back on the neighborhood and is perceived as irrelevant to its concerns. With the development of powerful denominational structures, nationwide agencies for evangelism or social action, it can happen that these things are no longer seen as the direct responsibility of the local congregation except insofar as they are called upon to support them financially. But if the local congregation is not perceived in its own neighborhood as the place from which good news overflows in good action, the programs for social and political action launched by the national agencies are apt to lose their integral relation to the good news and come to be seen as part of a moral crusade rather than part of the gospel. The local congregation is the place where the proper relation is most easily and naturally kept.

4. Fourth, it will be a community where men and women are prepared for and sustained in the exercise of the priesthood in the world. The Church is described in the New Testament as a royal priesthood, called to "offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God" and to "declare

*Neighborhood*

the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). The office of a priest is to stand before God on behalf of people and to stand before people on behalf of God. Jesus is himself the one High Priest who alone can fulfill and has fulfilled this office. The Church is sent into the world to continue that which he came to do, in the power of the same Spirit, reconciling people to God (John 20:19-23). This priesthood has to be exercised in the life of the world. It is in the ordinary secular business of the world that the sacrifices of love and obedience are to be offered to God. It is in the context of secular affairs that the mighty power released into the world through the work of Christ is to be manifested. The Church gathers every Sunday, the day of resurrection and of Pentecost, to renew its participation in Christ's priesthood. But the exercise of this priesthood is not within the walls of the Church but in the daily business of the world. It is only in this way that the public life of the world, its accepted habits and assumptions, can be challenged by the gospel and brought under the searching light of the truth as it has been revealed in Jesus. It may indeed be the duty of the Church through its appointed representatives—bishops and synods and assemblies—to speak a word from time to time to the nation and the world. But such pronouncements carry weight only when they are validated by the way in which Christians are actually behaving and using their influence in public life. It is, of course, also true that individual Christians will be weakened in their efforts to live out the gospel in secular engagements if what they are doing does not have the support of the Church as a whole. There is a reciprocal relationship between official pronouncements and individual commitment. It has to be said, I think, that in recent years there has been a widely perceived disjunction between official pronouncements and individual commitment, and it is important to stress the fact that the former without the latter are ineffective.

Two implications of this need to be stated:

a. The congregation has to be a place where its members are trained, supported, and nourished in the exercise of their parts of the priestly ministry in the world. The preaching and teaching of the local church has to be such that it enables members to think out the problems that face them in their secular work in the light of their Christian faith. This is very difficult. It is divisive. One pastor, trained in the kind of theology which is traditional, is not equipped to fulfill this function. There is need for "frontier-groups," groups of Christians working in the same sectors of public life, meeting to thrash out the controversial is-

sues of their business or profession in the light of their faith. But there is also need to consider how far the present traditions of ministerial training really prepare ministers for this task. The report of the Archbishop's Committee on Urban Priority Areas contained devastating comments on the inappropriateness of current ministerial training as perceived by those working in these areas (*Faith in the City* 6:56, p. 119). I realize how extremely difficult it is to find the way forward in this matter, but it seems clear that ministerial training as currently conceived is still far too much training for the pastoral care of the existing congregation, and far too little oriented toward the missionary calling to claim the whole of public life for Christ and his kingdom.

b. A second implication is this: a Christian congregation must recognize that God gives different gifts to different members of the body, and calls them to different kinds of service. St. Paul's letters contain many eloquent expositions of this fact. Yet there is a persistent tendency to deny this and to look for a uniform style of Christian discipleship. People look for a church which is all geared to explicit evangelism, or to radical social action; a church where all speak in tongues and dance in the aisles, or a church where all is decorous and staid. This is, of course, exactly the danger against which Paul warns in the long description of the body in 1 Corinthians 12. The ear should not demand that the whole body be ears, nor the eye that all should be eyes. A bagful of eyes is not a body. Only when a congregation can accept and rejoice in the diversity of gifts, and when members can rejoice in gifts which others have been given, can the whole body function as Christ's royal priesthood in the world.

5. Fifth, it will be a community of mutual responsibility. If the Church is to be effective in advocating and achieving a new social order in the nation, it must itself be a new social order. The deepest root of the contemporary malaise of Western culture is an individualism which denies the fundamental reality of our human nature as given by God—namely that we grow into true humanity only in relationships of faithfulness and responsibility toward one another. The local congregation is called to be, and by the grace of God often is, such a community of mutual responsibility. When it is such, it stands in the wider community of the neighborhood and the nation not primarily as the promoter of programs for social change (although it will be that) but primarily as itself the foretaste of a different social order. Its members will be advocates for human liberation by being themselves liberated. Its actions for justice and peace will be, and will be seen to be, the overflow of a life

in Christ, where God's justice and God's peace are already an experienced treasure.

6. And finally it will be a community of hope. As I have already said, I think that one of the most striking features of contemporary Western culture is the virtual disappearance of hope. The nineteenth-century belief in progress no longer sustains us. There is widespread pessimism about the future of "Western" civilization. Many Christian writers speak of our culture in accents of embarrassment, guilt, and shame. In his study of contemporary Western society, the Chinese Christian writer Carver T. Yu finds as its two key elements "technological optimism and literary pessimism" (*Being and Relation: A Theological Critique of Western Dualism and Individualism*, p. 1). Technology continues to forge ahead with more and more brilliant achievements; but the novels, the drama, and the general literature of the West are full of nihilism and despair. It is not surprising that many Western people are drawn toward Eastern types of spirituality in which the struggle to achieve the purpose of a personal creator is replaced by the timeless peace of pantheistic mysticism. As I have tried to suggest in an earlier chapter, the gospel offers an understanding of the human situation which makes it possible to be filled with a hope which is both eager and patient even in the most hopeless situations. I must repeat again that it is only as we are truly "indwelling" the gospel story, only as we are so deeply involved in the life of the community which is shaped by this story that it becomes our real "plausibility structure," that we are able steadily and confidently to live in this attitude of eager hope. Almost everything in the "plausibility structure" which is the habitation of our society seems to contradict this Christian hope. Everything suggests that it is absurd to believe that the true authority over all things is represented in a crucified man. No amount of brilliant argument can make it sound reasonable to the inhabitants of the reigning plausibility structure. That is why I am suggesting that the only possible hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation which believes it.

If the gospel is to challenge the public life of our society, if Christians are to occupy the "high ground" which they vacated in the noon-time of "modernity," it will not be by forming a Christian political party, or by aggressive propaganda campaigns. Once again it has to be said that there can be no going back to the "Constantinian" era. It will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known, and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim

it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel. But that will only happen as and when local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society.