

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


ARE CHRISTIANS AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?

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ARE CHRISTIANS AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?

Are Christians an endangered species? I readily concede that this is not the most pleasant question in the world for us to contemplate. But I hazard the guess that we've all thought about it some. Not in the same words perhaps, but with the same concern.

Authorities tell us that an extinct animal is an animal that lived on earth but has died out. The dodo is gone. As is the passenger pigeon.

Presently endangered, largely because of man's intemperance and cruelty, are the leopard, the wolf, the cheetah, the ocelot and others.

Most extinct species died out gradually as a result of changes in the environment to which they could not adjust.

* * *

What about us? We who bear the name of Jesus and are glad to call ourselves Christians? More than once we have been told that we live in a "post-Christian" age. That the faith has had it, and with it the church and other Christian institutions. That Christian values have lost their momentum -- even in the West.

Some of the evidence is unnerving. "Travel and Leisure," a magazine put out by The American Express people, recently provided its readers with a full page form for listing vital telephone numbers. The introduction read: "Protect yourself and your family by filling in the emergency phone numbers below." And this was the list: Doctor, Pediatrician, Hospital, Police, Fire, Ambulance, Plumber, Electrician, Telegram, Heat, Neighbor, Dentist, School, Gas Station, Landlord, Pharmacist, Clergy, Insurance Man, Veterinarian and Others. When I saw that list I could only thank God for "insurance men" and "veterinarians" and

"others" -- else we would have finished dead last in a field of twenty!!

Upon my return from Australia this fall I picked up a book by Donald Horne that I should have read before I went. It is entitled, The Lucky Country -- Australia Today. Australia is basically a western country despite its geographical location. In writing about religion in Australia he said: "Belief in the dignity of man, in the human potential and in the value of human life is almost universal. The official beliefs of Australians are essentially humanist and those parts of Christianity that fit this belief are retained. . . The prevailing emphasis is on practical matters: doctrine is unimportant. Signs of revitalization are sometimes proclaimed but they are usually matters of good works; money raising and raising church attendance by gimmicks; young executives immerse themselves in the practical affairs of a parish as they might otherwise immerse themselves in a bowling club."¹

The headline recently in a newspaper in New Jersey read, "Emergency Fuel-Oil Curbs Sought." This is how the article opened: "Sources say the White House will ask Congress for the power to implement what it calls a mandatory conservation program which would involve fuel cut-backs to non-essential fuel users. These include theaters, restaurants, shopping centers, churches, and some large office buildings."²

The Harris Poll people announced just this week that public trust in American institutions is down: medicine, the military, government, universities, labor unions and organized religion. Since Christians predominate, at least numerically, in this country one can only infer that confidence in the Christian church is not what it used to be.

True story: A man survived an air crash and said later, "In the hour when death was upon me, I did not

think to ask, 'Am I right with God?' But, 'Is my insurance paid up?'"

In the light of this and other evidence, it would appear that Christmas is a happy and harmless gesture flung in the face of an unbelieving world, a circling of the wagons to keep courage up while the enemy grows ever larger and closer. Are Christians an endangered species?

* * *

Let's be sure when we worry this question that we worry it for the right reason. The essence of the Christian faith is not under threat. We ask those who unite with this church, "Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ?" Which among many, many other things means, "Do you find in Jesus Christ the foremost clue to God's nature and work?" To believe in the Lord Jesus Christ is to believe in the values He embodied and proclaimed; the reality of the kingdom of God; that He can fit us for that kingdom. It is to trust that the forces with which Jesus aligned Himself are life's prevailing forces -- primarily and most especially love.

Man's quest for God is not over. To reduce life to a grocery list, a Playboy centerfold and the Dow-Jones Averages is to create a restless longing for a tryst with the Eternal. And when a man gets down to reckoning with God, he gets down to Jesus. For there is that in Jesus which corresponds to universal human longings. How interesting that the growth rate of Christianity in Africa these days is twice the growth rate of the population.

I like this rendering of John's prologue as found in a recently published harmony of the four Gospels: "Jesus Christ is and always has been what God has to say to mankind. He is eternal and He is God. All creation exists because of Him. He is life and His life is a light to show us the way -- a light that

nothing can extinguish."³ Nothing! Not Herod or Pilate. Not Caesar or Stalin. Not democracy or the totalitarian state. Not prosperity or adversity. Not indifference or fanaticism. Nothing can extinguish that light! The essence of the faith is not under threat.

* * *

What is under threat is ourselves. We who form the earthly vessel to which the treasure is entrusted. In one of the classic prayers of the church we confess that we have sinned against God in thought and word and deed. I believe that we have failed our inheritance as Christians in these ways too.

We have failed in thought by our reluctance to conceptualize the Gospel anew. Over the last 15 or 20 years, in whatever churches I have been privileged to serve, I have asked those who wanted to share in the congregation's life to open up the God question again in pre-membership discussion and orientation sessions. Every now and then people coming by Letter of Transfer would resist. "We went through that once thirty years ago." "I covered that in a Confirmation class once" -- out there in Toledo or Burbank. This is what I call the "Set it and forget it" mentality. The view that one can neatly embalm his early convictions about God and never seriously open up the subject again.

In Protestantism this attitude is unfortunately helped along by a host of ministers who week by week continue to do homiletical needlepoint on the same theology that they got in seminary 10, 20, 30 years ago. We cannot maintain old thought forms and patterns in a changing world.

It was tragic, to my mind, that the National Presbyterian Church was brought into existence this week. This new denomination, comprised of people who are not happy with the Presbyterian Church of

the United States, is determined to go back and encamp around the pronouncements of the Westminster Confession. Why any confession of a given century, even the 17th, should be considered normative for all Christians in all times and places eludes me.

Somewhat sleepily the other night I picked up a copy of "Harper's" and was jolted awake by a disturbingly candid statement. The author is Frank Herbert. It began: "When I was young and my world was dominated by indestructible adults, I learned an ancient way of thinking that is as dangerous as a rotten board in a stepladder. It told me that the only valuable things were those I could hold unchanged: the love of a wise grandfather, the enticing mystery of the trail through our woodlot into the forest, the feeling of lake water on a hot summer day, the colors (ahh, those colors) when I opened my new pencil box on the first day of school . . . But the grandfather died, a developer bulldozed the woodlot, loggers clear-cut the forest, the lake is polluted and posted against swimming, smog has deadened my ability to detect subtle odors, and pencil boxes aren't what they used to be. Neither am I."⁴

We live in an age, whether we will it so or not, in which absolutes are suspect. In which deductive reasoning is unacceptable. In which imposed authoritative theologies are rejected. In which fixed and static categories are repudiated in the name of an expansive and surprising universe.

We shall be hurting for a long time in this church and elsewhere because of the death of Dan Williams. A minister from out west volunteered the information to me just this week that Dan Williams had come out there to lecture in his university town and had made such a winsome presentation of the faith, showing cognizance of modern scientific developments, that scientists flocked around the college chaplain and said, "If we knew that the faith was of this quality we would have been here long ago."

We have failed our inheritance in word. I listened the other day to a man who has established an enviable reputation as a counsellor to alcoholics. He made the point that when someone has a drinking problem it is imperative that those who love him sit down with him and tell him straight out that he has the problem. It might be a group made up of a secretary, the wife, and a business partner gathering to say to the alcoholic, "John, we are here because we love you. But you are driving at 75 miles an hour now as you tear home each night. You are taking 2 1/2 hour lunch breaks and coming back intoxicated." The phrase that stuck in my mind was this: when those who love the alcoholic describe his situation to him they must do so in "receivable terms." One doesn't take this kind of information and put it out uncaringly.

When I think of so much of what the church attempts to say to the world I can only conclude that much of what we say is not delivered in "receivable terms." We have a way of slipping into a theological jargon that is out of touch with all reality. We keep using words that are unaccompanied by experience and thus are unintelligible to other people. What does it really mean in human terms to speak of love and forgiveness and purpose and meaning and hope?

We have also failed our inheritance in deed. That is, by the way in which we have acted, and structured ourselves to act, in this world. I mention structures because there is no way around structuring. I am no innocent purist, thinking that Christians ought to meet along a river bank every Sunday and remain completely unorganized. We cannot go from vision to program without structure.

But what I think I have so often missed, and perhaps you have too, is the awareness that form must serve the essence of what we believe and not the other way around.

More years ago than I'd like to tell you, I used to shoot baskets in this neighborhood, sometimes in the gym of this church, sometimes in the Stone Gym, sometimes on other floors. In that distant past players used to hold the ball with two hands to shoot. Then one day word came across the country of a man by the name of Hank Lusetti of Stanford University who dared to shoot the ball with one hand! There were people, purists, up and down the country who thought that this was the end of basketball. But it was not! No one shoots with two hands anymore.

Pete Maravich, perhaps the modern counterpart of Hank Lusetti, predicts that in years to come the two-handed chest pass will be obsolete. Form can change without diminishing the essence.

I was a proud pastor last week as I walked into the Cloister area and saw those twin posters that the Grips Group had put up. Did you catch them, one facing the other? I should say for the benefit of those who do not know, that the Grips Group is made up of younger couples in this church who came together three or four years ago to try to get us to concentrate on neglected aspects of our life and program. By their own admission most of those who formed the Grips Group are now part of the establishment. Most of their goals were realized. So, the Grips people decided to vote themselves out of existence and become a fellowship. The poster on the left said, "Celebrate with us the life and death of Grips." Wording on the other side was taken from the book of Ecclesiastes: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to break down, and a time to build up. . ." (Eccles. 3:1-3) Why can't we learn from the scientist that shape can be changed without a loss of volume.

But it is not only our structures that have compromised our inheritance and rendered us endangered, it is our actions as well. We have mixed up the Gospel

with some crippling, almost fatal, idolatries. We have attached the Gospel to some bad politics and economic theory.

A few years ago in one of the fashionable suburbs of nearby New Jersey a courageous minister sat down with one of his spirited, emancipated young people and said, "Tell me honestly -- what's wrong with your parents, and with me, and with our institutions, and with the establishment, that you want to be so different?" The young man said, "Ever since I was a little boy, I've listened to you people talking about lifting the burdens of life for the world's people. In this very building I sat through ten years of Sunday school where that's all I heard.

"What you taked about hasn't worked. Anyway, most people don't really believe it. My father lives and dies for the stock market, but he doesn't give a damn for the starving. Business is his god, and all that rhetoric about Jesus Christ and love your neighbor is lost on him."⁵

They're still at it in great numbers and with considerable influence in Protestant American, those "gnosticizers" who want to rescind the incarnation. I've sat through two or three meetings lately where some smug defender of the status quo raised the question, "What will be the next phase for the church now that we have passed through the social action phase?" Social action is not a phase in the church's life, it is an integral part of the church's life. It is one important way in which the church affirms in its own time and being the meaning of the incarnate Christ.

Personal action alone is not a sufficient ethic with which to meet corporately inflicted hurts. The ethical question that any church that is to survive must keep posing for itself and others is "How can we behave rightly in an increasingly corporate world?"

I am attempting to make a case for a comprehensive faith that will be worthy of a comprehensive Gospel. We do not need a Gospel that is merely psychological, merely political, merely devotional, merely institutional or merely doctrinal. But a faith and a church that reflect the widening splendor and activity of God.

* * *

Are Christians an endangered species? Some are and some are not. Most extinct species died out gradually as a result of changes in the environment to which they could not adjust. If we keep on thinking in outmoded forms, talking only the hearsay language of another day, taking ourselves seriously but not the world, we will lose the right to live and we will die.

Advent centers in a God who came, and comes, and keeps on coming. A God of new moves and bold initiatives, fresh starts and system-cracking breakthroughs. It is dangerous at times to follow, but ever more dangerous not to. Let us up then and be our father's business!!

CLOSING PRAYER

*"Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of Thee;
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they."
For which we thank Thee.*

Amen.

(Tennyson)

FOOTNOTES:

1. Horne, Donald, The Lucky Country, Australia Today, pp. 53-54, A Penguin Book, Baltimore, Maryland, 1964.
2. "The Record," p. A-6, October 31, 1973.
3. Jesus, The Four Gospels, p. 17, McClelland and Stewart Limited, Toronto, Canada, 1973.
4. Herbert, Frank, "Listening to the Left Hand," Harper's Magazine, p. 92, December, 1973.
5. Holland, Robert Cleveland, in Under Six Flags, edited by Lloyd George Schell, p. 108, North River Press, 1972.

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