

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

IMPERATIVE FOR THE SEVENTIES -- TRAVEL LIGHT!


"So the people took their dough before it was leavened,
their kneading bowls being bound up in their mantles
on their shoulders." (Exodus 12:34)

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



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A Christian though he lives by faith needs as much as any other man a strategy for coping with the times. We live in response to the gospel but we also live in response to the claims and climate of the age. Many Christians suffer frustration needlessly because they do not combine their trust in God with a life style that is appropriate to their era. This failure of the faithful may have prompted the observation of Jesus that "the sons of this world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light." (Luke 16:8b)

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On this first Sunday of the new year and a new decade I should like to propose that to manage life in the seventies we will have to learn to travel light. I say this out of a conviction that we are passing through an Exodus experience. True, our Exodus is not the geographical event that the Hebrews knew when they migrated out of Egypt toward the Promised Land. Yet, the Exodus of the Old Testament community can be instructive for us and provide us with a model. The Exodus that served to birth the Hebrew nation was a going out from the familiar to the new, from bondage to freedom, from relative comfort to privation, from security to risk.

And right at the start they learned that they would have to travel light. Let your imagination play upon that frantic scene. Apparently the tenth plague had finally convinced Pharaoh. There was need for haste, lest this tyrant should change his mind again. All through the land Hebrew families had to decide what to leave and what to take. The order of the day was "Travel light!" It is out of this ex-

perience of choice and haste that we find in the narrative these words: "So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their mantles on their shoulders." (Exodus 12:34) So swift and disruptive was their move that they hadn't even time to leaven their dough. To this day unleavened bread stands as reminder to the Jews of the circumstances under which their fathers moved out into an open future.

It takes some doing to master the art of traveling light. Any man who has ever tried to pack the family car for a trip will recall the pressures. It's amazing how four women's hat boxes can crowd even the largest trunk. But there's always the glove compartment for his things! Years ago when domestic airlines were limiting us to forty pounds of luggage per passenger some of us learned how to get along with less than we thought we could.

The seventies will demand, especially of white American Christians, that they develop the knack of traveling light -- it's that kind of a time.

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We will be called upon, I believe, to hold our material possessions with a light touch. We have been far too serious and intense about our tangible wealth. The generation gap that we hear so much about these days is not simply a crisis in conduct and behavior; It is a crisis in values. Somehow our young people in growing numbers refuse to put the same premium we do on material well-being.

The assumption that unless the Gross National Product and the Gross Personal Product go up each year we must be charged with failure will be challenged. Why should a man whose salary does not go up each year regard himself as any kind of a failure in the light of the gospel? How long will this nation be allowed to increase its Gross National Product through advantageous imports of vital resources

from all around the world? How long do we expect the up and coming nations to sit back quietly and applaud us while their land is stripped in order to support our way of life?

Our affluence raises some very serious moral questions. Years ago Soren Kierkegaard noted that a man who was genuinely Christian would not buy a second coat for himself if he knew of someone who had none. I think we would agree in our better moments that Kierkegaard is right. The question of what we do if we say we are Christians when we have more than we actually need is a question that each of us has had to deal with. We have built up some kind of rationale to justify what we spend on ourselves. We talk of the necessity to maintain standards in keeping with our role in the world. We tell ourselves we deserve the good things in life that have come our way. We whisper to ourselves and a friend or two that if the less fortunate would only hustle more their fortunes would rise too.

Every one of us sharing in this worship has made a determination of what he has a right to expend on himself as opposed to what he will make available to the needs of the world at large. In the seventies this question will have to be reopened and the rationale that we have developed reconsidered. If this be heresy, then let it be, but there is something radically wrong with a system that allows a man to make more in one hour in a Wall Street speculation than a husband and wife working full-time can earn in a month for their family.

We will be called upon to divest ourselves of unjustified advantage. We will do this by what we give. We will do it through taxation. And, please God, we will do it by settling for a lower standard of living in order that others might come up. And all of this not because "things" are bad, but because they are good -- so good, in fact, that they are vital to man's life.

Moreover, we will be called upon to travel light administratively. That is, we will be called upon to wear whatever authority we carry with a light heart; parents in

their authority over children, teachers in their authority over students, police in their authority over citizens, elected officials in their authority over the populace, and the church, especially, in its authority over those it claims to lead.

The by-laws under which we operate ought not to be confused with the law of God. Robert's Rules of Order, for all its helpfulness, is not one of the sixty-six books of the Bible. Our ways and procedures and our style of leadership have been historically conditioned. They can thus be reviewed and revised.

The seventies I believe will be a decade of the consumer. This means that all of us who are connected with institutions, whether in business or education or religion, will have to think more of how what we are doing looks to those whose needs we are here to serve.

Most men when they go shopping for a pair of pants or a suit put the ordeal off until the very end -- then rush in, pick one out and suggest to the clerk that they would like to wear it home. I recall an experience in Michigan in which I needed a pair of trousers. I walked into a store with an established reputation, found a pair that struck my fancy, and asked the clerk whether he might have them cuffed in time for me to take home that night. The salesman elaborated at great length on the way the company handled alterations. None of the work was done locally. It was all done in a large central work-room in Detroit. A truck came by every other day for pickups and deliveries. Result: It would be a week before the pants were cuffed and back. In obvious irritation I let this loyal clerk know that however valuable this procedure was to the company I would have preferred a humble tailor in the back room who knew how to use a needle and thread quickly.

How easily institutions forget why they're around. Some of the noise in our society is the sound of people who wish to participate in the decisions that affect their life. This will be no decade for the man who likes to finger his

prerogatives and remind himself of his authority. It will be a decade for the man who can wear his authority lightly, and listen attentively to those over whom God has appointed him.

Finally, in the seventies we will be called upon to be less rigid and more open regarding the convictions that we hold. James Pike said it for me when he asserted that we need fewer beliefs and more belief. In a time of Exodus we can carry only so much. Faith must be simplified down to three or four basic convictions. Some truths fade into irrelevance when life becomes a struggle for survival. It's not that these truths are wrong in themselves, or unworthy of our belief, it is simply that in a time of change and motion we must be done with subtle refinements and intramural disputes.

Someone should pass out medals to the people who have been able to negotiate the sidewalks in this area over the past week. It seems to me that there is always enough wind whistling through 120th Street toward Riverside for a dozen Pentecosts. When that wind is strong and the sidewalks are covered with ice, it's all a man can do to make a block. The other morning I watched a man tread his way carefully towards Broadway. It would be hard to imagine a keener instance of total concentration. I submit that there was nothing on that man's mind at the moment other than surviving the ice. He wasn't concerned about the Arab-Israeli question. He wasn't concerned about the 30¢ fare. He wasn't even concerned about the condition of Joe Namath's knees. He simply wanted to survive. Some of the refinements that are precious to us in more normal days take on the cast of irrelevance when the Exodus comes.

Less is necessary to our faith than we imagine. Roland Bainton tells how back in the sixteenth century Erasmus had a contention with a Carthusian monk by the name of Sutor who asserted that "if in one point the Vulgate were in error the entire authority of Holy Scripture would collapse, love and faith would be extinguished, heresies and schism would abound, blasphemy would be com-

mitted against the Holy Scripture, the authority of theologians would be shaken, and indeed the Catholic Church would collapse from the foundations." 1 Well, some not so minor mistakes have been found in the Vulgate and the Roman Church is still strong. Let's not get up too tight about what we think is necessary to the faith we hold.

Some of us can remember when it was par for the course for Protestants to be antagonistic towards Rome. Who would have thought that in the sixties we would be thinking in terms of Roman Christians and Protestant Christians and happily turning our backs on bigotry. There is good news on the horizon that in the seventies we will be entering upon a deeper and more meaningful dialogue with Judaism -- a dialogue opened by the Vatican just a week or so ago. We may even find ourselves entering into serious conversations with communism. I know how much we need the communists. They are as vital to our equilibrium as the villian was to the old melodrama. But what if in this time of universal Exodus we should find some common ground?

We lost last week one of our most perceptive reformed theologians in the passing of Joseph Hromodka. Professor Hromodka had it made in this country. He could have stayed at his post at Princeton Seminary. He chose to go back to his homeland to live on the frontier where east was meeting west -- not only geographically but ideologically. He sought ground that was common to both sides of the curtain. Once someone asked him how long he thought it would take to Christianize communism. He answered with a twinkle in his eye, "No longer than it will take you to Christianize capitalism."

What if Joseph Hromodka was right -- that atheism is not part of the essence of communism? It was his view that the anti-religious character of communism was not inherent in Marxism but rather the result of historical circumstances. "Communism," he said, "fell back on the shallow, atheistic outlook of 19th Century rationalism because religion had been closely identified with the forces

against the socialist revolution." 2

If we lose our rigidity and maintain a stance of openness -- less beliefs but more belief, we will be better equipped for the Exodus into which we pass. What beliefs are important? I can only tell you which ones are important to me. First, the conviction that creation is good. Second, that man in community, for all of his radical evil, is the crowning glory of creation. And, most important of all, that in Jesus Christ we find in an unparralleled and unrepeatable way God's will for his creation and men and women in it. In times of doubt we return to this certainty at the center of our faith-- as to the eye of the hurricane.

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"So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their mantles on their shoulders." (Exodus 12:34) The Exodus is upon us and we are being called upon to travel light. To hold our possessions with a light touch. To wear our authority with a light heart. To lighten the number of our convictions and believe more intensely in a few. We travel light as did the Hebrew children, and, like them, we travel not alone. There is a presence with us -- a saving presence, the God of the Exodus, the God of the wilderness, and the God of our Promised Land.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Bainton, Roland H., Erasmus of Christendom, p. 135, Charles Scribner's Sons, N. Y. 1969
2. "New York Times," p. 29, December 29, 1969

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