

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE



RELIGION A LA CARTE

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"RELIGION A LA CARTE"

One of life's minor but consistently appealing pleasures is the pleasure of dining out. A hectic work week laced with unrelenting deadlines and appointments is made a bit more bearable by the prospect of a restaurant engagement with friends or family.

But this pleasure is not without its moments of decision. The main course determined, the question then comes up, will we go for the complete meal or order a la carte? Sometimes cost is the crucial factor. "How thick is my wallet?" Sometimes appetite decides. "How hungry am I tonight?" Sometimes eating habits prevail. "Who needs soup or salad? Why spoil my figure further with dessert?" Meanwhile the waiter stands with pencil poised ready to record our answer. What will it be - complete meal or a la carte?

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However justified ordering a la carte may be in a restaurant, it is always unwise to approach our faith a la carte. Ever since the Protestant Reformation and perhaps before, the Christian church has been saddled with excessive individualism. In reacting against tight ecclesiastical control we have over-corrected. As a result we pick and choose: What we want to believe about God; what form of devotion, if any, we will practice; what commandments we will consent to obey; what virtues we intend to perfect; what duties we will perform; what sections of Scripture we will attend to; what parts of Christ's mission we will support; what degree of enthusiasm we will bring to ecumenism. In short, our commitment tends to narrow as our imagined options grow.

The upshot of it all is not a pretty or winsome picture. Because we have conveniently forgotten that the gospel is of a piece and that God wills our completeness, we find in the name of Jesus Christ today some who dwell so

much on the love of God that they fail to see His judgment. Some who will march but not pray and others who will pray and not march. People who will fervently herald the commandment not to kill, but overlook the commandment about adultery or the word that says "Thou shalt not steal." People who without so much as a "by your leave" will drop the Old Testament from their Bible and focus on those portions in the New that support a personal experience of God and leave unaddressed questions of throbbing social concern. Folks who want to politicize everything in the gospel and others who insist on divorcing faith from anything political. Folks who sense the scandal in our dividedness, and many who feel that since they are happy in the congregation of their choice that's all that matters.

One Lord! One faith! One baptism! This claim is mocked by our fads and idiosyncracies, our hobbies and eccentricities. By going at religion a la carte we tend to suffer spiritual malnutrition. The man who eats only his favorite dish had better keep his doctor's phone number handy.

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Partly to keep our individualism within healthy bounds God has given us the church. No man can adequately perceive God by himself. No man can adequately respond to God by himself.

The opposite of a la carte is table d'hote. My menu French is brittle, but Webster's unabridged reports that table d'hote means the "host's table." The opposite of a la carte is to eat what the host sets before you; or, as we say, the full-course meal.

One of the primary functions of the Christian church is to spread before men the gospel of Jesus Christ in its fullness. The preacher, of course, has a major responsibility here. One of my favorite passages in the New Testament centers on a scene at the port city of Milétus. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem suspecting that his death is imminent. He invites the elders from the Ephesian church,

some thirty-six miles distant, to gather for a last farewell. When they arrive Paul recounts his ministry among the Ephesian Christians. He had been there in all likelihood at least two and a half years and had done his finest work among this people. In summing up his ministry among them he asserts, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." (Acts 20:27)

The minister is not to simply give homiletical knee-jerk reactions to the crisis issues of the day. He is not only to expound his favorite parts of the gospel or those parts that are most congenial to his own character and experience. He is not simply to play up and down within the octave of his choice, but to bear in mind that there are some ten other octaves on the keyboard of truth.

In some traditions ministers are bound to follow the lectionary. That is, they are expected to preach from passages which are assigned for the various Sundays of the Christian year. In this way, it is hoped, the gospel in its fullness will be proclaimed. The gospel has both challenge and comfort, judgment and grace, command and promise. John Oman, who was an effective preacher to preachers, said: "Accents, like other achievements, differ in attractiveness, but is any accent, even the most approved, so perfect as to have a right to play the part of Aaron's rod, and swallow up all the others?" 1

But the preacher does not have sole responsibility here. As members of the body of Christ we are to complete and round out each other. We sharpen each other's awareness of God. What one man believes is corrected, refined and reinforced by his brethren. Together we are, in that felicitous term of Peter's, "stewards of the manifold grace of God."

If you would understand why the Ephesian church became Paul's strongest church, notice how he prayed for the Christians there. "That being rooted and grounded in love you may have power to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge." (Eph. 3:18)

The key phrase for me today is "with all saints." For this is the only way we will be able to make even a beginning towards comprehending the love of God. We cannot do it alone. We can only hope to make a start in company "with all saints." So great is this love that no man can comprehend it by himself.

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The other critical function of the church is to develop and coordinate a full response to the gospel. No man by himself can see fully all that needs doing in the world in Christ's name. My friend William Dixon Gray of Nashville says, "No man should project himself beyond his own ability. It is reckless say the state troopers to overdrive one's headlights." We can see more clearly together than alone the path of Christian duty. As a Christian contemplating the mission of Jesus Christ in the world I must say "we" and not "I."

Now a certain "a la carte-ness" is necessary at this point. We cannot serve everywhere at once. In the interest of sanity and realism we must pick a cause within the larger cause and respect our brethren as they do the same. The late D. T. Niles thought of the early Christian era as the beginning of a great revolution. He noted in an address shortly before his death that within this revolution there were many roles to play: "James," he said, "had the responsibility of maintaining the link between the old and the new, for even when God raises children from stones, they are raised as children to Abraham (Mat. 3:9); Peter had the unenviable task of now supporting James and now supporting Paul, seeking in every way to maintain the unity of the whole mission; and in the midst of it all, Barnabas fulfilled the role of a friend of Paul when Paul and Peter quarreled (Gal. 2:11-13). John helped by keeping out of the controversy. The demands of obedience," Niles went on, "are never the same for all, for even within the same enterprise the responsibility of each will be different." 2

What the hippie says of society at large is true of the church as well - "Different strokes for different folks." The

body has need of eyes and ears, hands and feet. Mid-week prayers may not be your thing, but aren't you glad that some are concerned to have a Wednesday evening chapel? The reformation of society may not be your cup of tea, but aren't you glad we have a New Priorities Movement in this church? You may not be one who likes to worship God in silence, but you can rejoice that our Quaker friends gather at Riverside every Sunday afternoon. Death to you may seem a distant or forbidding subject, but are you not pleased that we have a Memorial Society here?

The Black Christian Caucus may not be for you, but can you not find cause for praise that Christians meet to bring their faith to bear on the racism of our society? Music may not be your specialty -- all the more reason to be grateful for those who raise our hearts to God in song. You may never have given a thought to theological education, but surely you can praise Almighty God for those who pour their life and time into our various seminaries. The plight of America's farm workers may seem remote to you, but there are grounds for gratitude that we are affiliated with a denomination, the United Church of Christ, that works to help these disadvantaged migrants reach their goals.

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No man can adequately perceive God by himself. No man can adequately respond to God by himself. We need each other. And God has given us each other. A la carte is for restaurants. It has no place in religion. Least of all the religion of Jesus Christ.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, through our brother's eyes
increase our sight.
Through our brother's work let us
see our own more perfectly fulfilled.
Till we all come into the fullness of
the stature of Christ - in whose strong
name we pray. Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Oman, John, Concerning The Ministry, p. 117, John Knox Press, Richmond, Va., 1963
2. Niles, D.T., The Ecumenical Review, p. 332, WCC, Vol. XX, No. 4, October, 1968

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