

# SERMONS

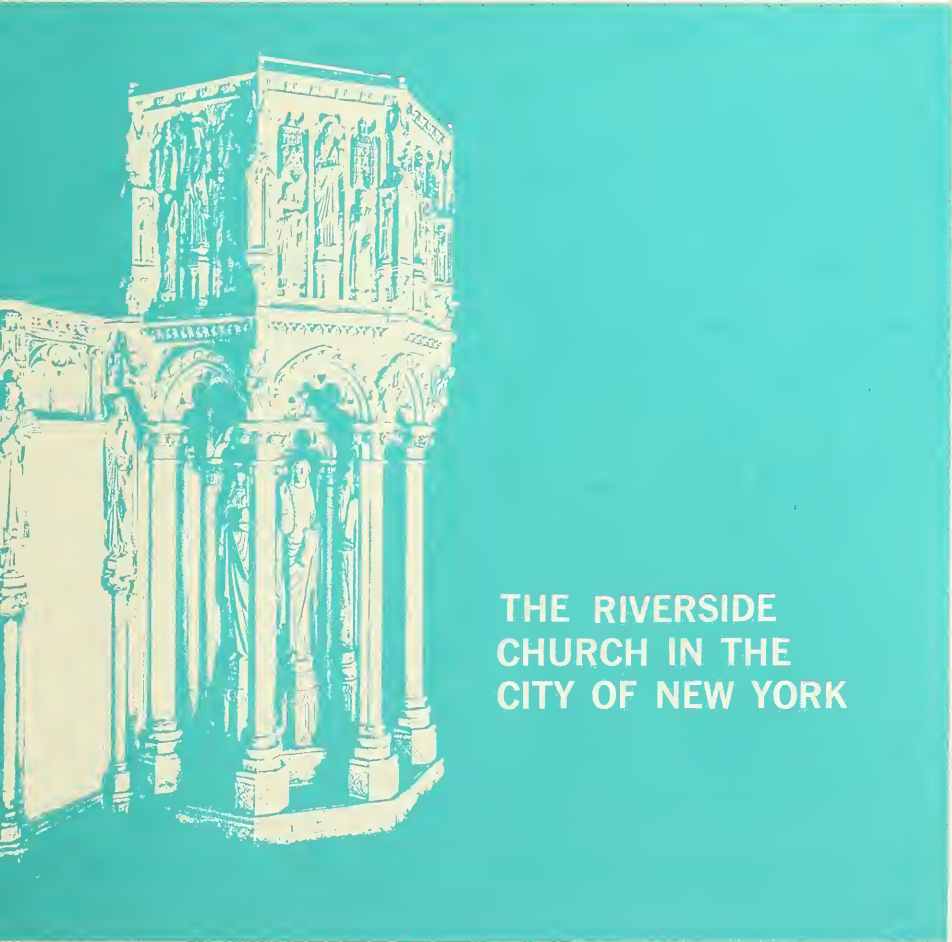
FROM RIVERSIDE

## TO CHANGE OR NOT TO CHANGE

"For everything there is a season, and  
a time for every matter under heaven."


Eccles. 3:1

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THE RIVERSIDE  
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"To be or not to be," this was Hamlet's question. But for us, "To change or not to change," that is the question. The winds of change whistle through our homes, whip across the campuses of academia, rip through the corridors of industry, buffet our courts and legislative halls and blow with unprecedented fury against the church. Creatures of custom and habit that we are, change seems to mock and baffle us as it pops up in the most unlikely places and with a puckish grin cries out, "Ready or not, here I come!"

To change or not to change. It is a matter of urgent importance that we ask whether there is such a thing as a Christian response to change. Must our attitude toward change be determined by our political affiliations, our economic status, the friends we keep, the number of birthdays we have celebrated, the temperament with which God has endowed us? Or should our faith in God give us a mind-set that will make us either resist or welcome change?

Hopefully, our faith should have something to say. The oldest creed in Christendom, as you know, is the affirmation, "Jesus Christ is Lord." Lord of what? Lord of my life, to be sure. I yield over my sins and my possibilities to him. I surrender my sovereignty to His will. Jesus Christ is Lord. But more, when we say this, we are saying that He is Lord also of the church. This is not my church, or your church or even our church. It is His church. St. Paul made this clear in many places. Take for example, Ephesians 4:15: "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth

and up-builds itself in love." (Eph. 4:15, 16)

But even more than this, when we say that Jesus Christ is Lord, we are saying that He is Lord of the world, that His will is sovereign over history. This is the claim and there is no mistaking it. It arises from many affirmations in scripture but this one will do for the morning: "He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation, for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities - all things were created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." (Col. 1:15-17) God is creator of heaven and of earth. Jesus Christ is Lord of my life and Lord of the church, but also Lord of the world. D. T. Niles is correct then in suggesting that when a Christian picks up a newspaper he should always ask, "What is God doing with His world today?" One might suggest a second question, "What is my part in what God is doing with His world today?" And this gets us back to the question, "To change or not to change."

It is perplexing to note that throughout the course of Christian history, some believers have felt that they were doing what God wanted when they resisted change, while others were convinced that they were serving God when they fostered change. The most helpful statement on this dilemma that I have come upon is that by Max L. Stackhouse of Andover Newton Theological School. He observes, "At stake in this dispute, we might suggest, are complex issues. One is a primal perception as to whether the 'problem' with history is that it continually threatens to break into chaos and must be ever and again ordered constructively toward righteousness, or whether the 'problem' of history is that it has been over-institutionalized and ordered so that new freedoms and creativities cannot break forth. In short, is the creative continuity of history to be found in breaking free from false bondage or providing frames for organized purpose?" 1

In other words, the conservative temperament believes that chaos is always trying to break in upon us to destroy, and that God's man will be found resolutely on the side of order. The liberal spirit, perhaps tinged a bit by Rousseau, believes that the institutionalization of life is what impedes the human spirit. In God's name, therefore, he goes out to minimize or overthrow the power of the institutional. We must allow that both positions can be held with equally sincere motivation. But this doesn't help us to know whether to change or not to change.

The very scriptures themselves are ambiguous at this point. The text of the morning is really a non-text: "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven." What does this say? The writer of Ecclesiastes goes on to indicate the various kinds of times: "There is a time to plant and a time to pluck up; a time to break-down and a time to build-up; a time to rend and a time to sew." (Eccles. 3: 2a, 3a, 7a) But what time is it now? His words are beautifully descriptive but they are in no way prescriptive.

Israel's mission in the main was a mission of conservation. Israel had to conserve monotheism against the threat of polytheism, the worship of God in spirit against the threat of idolatry, the covenant community against the threat of assimilation, so that out of Israel's loins, Messiah might come. There were times in Israel's history when the liberal voice had to be resisted. As per example on those occasions when there was counsel in the direction of an alliance with Egypt or Assyria. Such a change in national policy would have been wrong and contrary to the will of God. And there were those other times when not to change would have been to violate God's will. As for example, when God was moving his people from a nomadic kind of life to an urban life, when he was moving them from a theocracy to a monarchy, when in the post-exilic period, he was moving them from an ultra-exclusivism to a more inclusive society as embodied in the story of Ruth.

Let us review for a moment. The question we're asking is whether there is any such thing as a Christian response to change. And we said that if Jesus Christ is Lord, this ought to say something about our relationship to history. But we have acknowledged that the scriptures themselves are vague - now yes, now no, and that the history of Israel and the history of Christian people give us no decisive lead. Is it then a matter of a coin toss? Is it a matter of my reacting to change as a republican or a democrat? As a black man or a white man? As a poor man or a rich man? As a sophisticate or a philistine? As a daring individual or a timid? Let me suggest to you that while this ambiguity must prevail, there are at least four facts that Christians should reckon with in deciding what their stance should be toward change.

First, is the recognition that growth belongs to life and that without change there can be no growth. Maturity, progress, development - all of these are impossible without change. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin has been celebrated far and wide because he has made the church, among other institutions, aware that God's creation is not yet finished. In his writings he gave us an exciting, eruptive and expansive kind of universe. Years ago John Henry Newman did the same thing for the world of ideas. In a rather remarkable essay entitled, "On the Process of Development in Ideas," Newman grappled with the question whether truth in its origin is not to be preferred to truth's in its subsequent development. He writes, "It is sometimes said that the stream is clearest near the spring. Whatever use may fairly be made of this image, it does not apply to the history of a philosophy or belief, which on the contrary, is more equable and purer, and stronger when its bed has become deep, and broad, and full? It necessarily rises out of an existing state of things and for a time, savors of the soil. Its vital element needs disengaging from what is foreign and temporary and is employed in efforts after freedom which become more vigorous and hopeful as its years increase."

"In time," Newman goes on, "it enters upon strange territory, points of controversy alter their bearing; parties rise and fall around it; dangers and hopes appear in new relations; and old principles reappear under new forms. It changes with them in order to remain the same. In a higher world, it is otherwise, but here below, to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often." <sup>2</sup> To oppose change, is in most instances, to obstruct growth.

A second factor that I must reckon with as I seek to develop a Christian stance toward change is the simple awareness that being human, I tend to cling tenaciously to what is customary and familiar. We men begin to shave every morning from the same side of the face. We never change. Most of us have our own peculiar way of reading a newspaper, and we never change. Most of us put on either the left shoe or the right shoe first, morning after morning. When we are faced with change, the sin of sloth becomes a very strong temptation. We are just plain too lazy to make an adjustment to the new. How easily we become addicted to the familiar, forgetting that we are called to be pilgrims, and that the patron saint of faith is Abraham who went out not knowing whither he went.

A third fact to be considered is that my pride being what it is, I tend to want what is good for me and resist what is bad for me. That is to say, I tend, unless I make an effort otherwise, to make my decisions on the basis of self-reference. We must learn to discount in ourselves and in others arguments that rise from self-reference. We must discount the argument of the theater owner against pay TV. We must discount the argument of the gun manufacturer against a gun-control law. We must discount the argument of the millionaire against the graduated income tax or an enlarged inheritance tax. We must discount the argument of the relief recipient who wants his monthly income quadrupled. In all of these, self-interest obviously plays too strong a role.

I asked a friend of mine this week, promising not to bring him into the sermon (but he lives too far away to hear,) "How do you know whether you should be for change or not?" His answer was simple and quick, "If it hurts, it's good." If something I opt for will hurt me in the wallet, if it will get me out of familiar patterns and customs, if there is pain of adjustment, chances are, as a rule of thumb, it's good.

There are some very lovely homes up along the Delaware that will presently be destroyed in the interest of the Tock Island Project. A new dam and national park is in the planning stages. There were protests naturally, from those who have enjoyed their riverfront cottages for years. At last, however, this counsel prevailed: The few would have to sacrifice their personal enjoyment for the good of the greater number.

The fourth fact that I must bring into view as I contemplate my stance toward change is this: My church, unless it takes pains to be otherwise, will be an obstacle to change. The church likes to wear a belt and suspenders. Perhaps the Freudian slip that betrays the church's attitude toward change is to be found in a line of one of our favorite hymns, "Abide With Me." In the second stanza, Henry F. Lyte wrote: "Change and decay in all around I see; O thou who changest not, abide with me." <sup>3</sup> What an unfortunate and unwarranted linkage, that change should be equated with decay. I come more and more to believe that this is the church's basic stance toward change, unless it is diligent to overcome it.

The church comes by this position understandably. After all, a large part of the church's mission is to stand for continuity in society. Church is a place where the ages speak to the moments. We are here to keep ourselves and the world in remembrance of a love that will not let us go. We do this by reiteration, by ritual, by the celebration of the sacraments, by preaching, by singing, by praying. Because this ministry of continuity is so much a part of what we are trying to do, a sameness overtakes our ecclesiastical



life, so that our organizations look today just about the way they looked twenty years ago. Our official meetings go on and on, more or less centering on matters that have to do with ecclesiastical housekeeping. The new doesn't have a chance to get in unless it is brought in deliberately with conviction and persuasion.

The second reason why this is true is because, quite frankly, the church has developed a dependence on the system. We have a building to maintain. We have a program to finance. We have a staff to employ. It is logical to expect that income from the church is likely to come from those who are satisfied with the system as it is. You can't expect much support from the have-nots. And so you learn to look for it from the have's, and the have's like the way things are because the system has been good to them. And so the church has learned through the years to lower its voice in order to raise its budget.

The church is a bastion against change for another reason, because most of us in the church are too idealistic to work for relative improvement in society. We keep looking for absolutes and we don't find them. Rheinhold Niebuhr should have straightened us all on this point many years ago. We keep saying that the world is so hung up and the ambiguities are so difficult to live with that until there is an action or decision that involves an absolute right or wrong, we won't get involved. John Lindsay has never yet seen an absolute in all of his years as mayor of New York City, and he is not likely to see one. But he sees relatively good possibilities. Niebuhr said somewhere that if we keep choosing the relatively right, God might some day let us look at an absolute head-on. Hegel noted that "The essentially tragic fact, is not so much the war of good with evil as the war of good with good." <sup>4</sup>

The church tends to sit it out because no absolutes stand out to capture her imagination and command her energies. The result is a church that tends

to drift further and further away from reality. And let it be remembered that the irrelevant church is the foremost barrier to evangelism. There is a Christian camp on the West Coast with a sign at its entranceway that says, "One mile closer to heaven." A youngster from that camp went to the deep south for a few weeks to work with the black minority. When she came back, she changed that sign and made it read, "One mile further from earth."

Isaac Newton gave as one of the laws of motion that, "Bodies at rest tend to remain at rest." Even ecclesiastical bodies at rest, tend to remain at rest. I should like to express the hope on this installation Sunday, that Council VII which is charged with thinking through this church's social relationships will give us all a hotfoot; that it will not be so much concerned with the minutes of the last meeting as with the action that is going on around us in this seething, revolutionary world.

I am not suggesting that there is one Christian response to change. I am insisting that our response to change ought to be Christian. This Council ought to bring us face to face with issues that we would rather ignore. It ought to supply us with speakers and literature so that our minds can be informed. It ought to give us action programs whereby we can implement our convictions and become the relevant church that God want us to be. "To change or not to change," that is the question. But to change or not to change as those who call Christ Lord, this is the context in which the answer must be sought!

#### CLOSING PRAYER

Lord make us responsive and responsible Christians. Make us willing to forego the comfort of answers that are congenial to our status in favor of answers that come closer to Thy will. Give us wisdom that we may know when to resist the new and when to encourage it. For we pray in His name, whose is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Stackhouse, Max L., "A Theology for the New Social Gospel," New Theology No. 4, p. 229, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1967.
2. Newman, John Henry C., The Development of Christian Doctrine, pps. 37-38. Longmans, Green and Company, 1949
3. Lyte, Henry F., "Abide With Me," #209. Pilgrim Hymnal, Pilgrim Press, Boston, 1960
4. Kerr, Walter, Tragedy and Comedy, p. 105, Simon & Schuster, 1967.

