

WHAT IN THE WORLD HAS HAPPENED TO THE CHURCH?

The twentieth century has experienced an earthquake. Mankind has been shaken by a disturbance deep at the heart of human existence.

Venerable empires have fallen. New nations have been built upon the rubble.

The age-old pain of human toil has been eased and poor men everywhere have seen the promise of prosperity.

The structures of the historical church have also been severely shaken. Lofty absolutes of doctrine have fallen to relativity. Great systems of morality lie crumbled in ambiguity. Ancient springs of religious nurture have become choked with uncertainty.

Churchmen in this century have bravely attempted to build upon well-tried ways, only to find that they have split or shifted radically.

The Denomination Was the Thing

In the decade following World War II many church people felt that denominations would rise up and reclaim their status in society.

That intuition was essentially correct. Activities abounded, numbers increased, and buildings multiplied. Denominational boards, agencies and commissions gave congregations plenty to think about doing.

Numerous denominations were so equally successful in their appeal that people started changing from one to the other with an ease that terrified the tradition-minded. The number of people concerned about the difference between John Wesley and John Calvin—or even Luther and the Pope—diminished drastically.

Something happened to the denominational dimension of the church. It became clear that this alone was not enough.

Ecumenical Economy Emphasized

Some people soon began to press the issue of why the church's efforts should be weakened by division, when there would obviously be such strength in unity.

Thus in recent times eloquent statements from ecumenical officials have become intense and lengthy. Interfaith dialogues have gone on from simple living rooms to august world assemblies.

Yet the gap between ecumenical organization and universal renewal is getting smaller very slowly. The church is moving sluggishly, half frozen in fear between the twin demons of denominational defensiveness and ecumenical day-dreaming.

It is clear that something unexpected is happening to the ecumenical dimension of the church. Something is still lacking.

Movement in the Third Dimension

What then? Are denominations to be discarded? Is ecumenicity already outmoded?

No. Denominations are crucial if the diverse heritage of Christian history is to be transmitted to the present, so that there will be a continuing context for fresh experiments. And ecumenicity is essential so that the constructs of unity may be translated into common mission, and the sign of oneness of the Christian faith be raised.

It is just that the structure of denominations and the forms of ecumenicity are always changing.

Whenever there is a movement at the depth of human history, the church does not remain unaffected. The structures and forms are shaken. Some may be beyond repair. But this makes possible a new departure, and a rebuilding can begin.

What Is Really Happening

The twentieth century churchman has no choice but to live in an era when a great quake has rocked the church. For the Lord of history alone decides the time of such a tremor.

Men of faith today have new permission—because the movement has broken into their lives—to reformulate denominational and ecumenical structures appropriate to the demands of the present day.

Those who respond to the movement as what is necessary for the continuing renewal of the church will both honor the past and build the future on behalf of all mankind.

They will be part of what is really happening to the church in the world today.



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