

The Church Lecture

The Dynamical Understanding of the People of God

The Theoretical Task – Clarifying Our Understanding of the Trinity

Our task, the theoretical task of the church in our day, is to get stated in clear terms what we mean by the Trinity – God, Christ, and Holy Spirit, what we have been talking about up till now in the seminar – so that the 20th century person can understand it and choose to live out of that profound understanding. That’s our basic task. Your job and my job are not done until we are able to get that said so that it gets communicated to “the last fat lady” in the back of the audience. Now, we are ready to consider “church.”

Before I start on what we mean when we say “church” in the 20th century, I want to again read a bit of poetry. Right now I think this is the greatest poem ever written. Tomorrow I’ll decide that something else is the greatest poem. You see, it is my business to decide what is the greatest poem ever written.

II

I was so weary of the world,
I was so sick of it,
everything was tainted with myself,
skies, trees, flowers, birds, water,
people, houses, streets, vehicles, machines,
nations, armies, war, peace-making,
work, recreation, governing, anarchy,
it was all tainted with myself, I knew it all to start with
because it was all myself.

When I gathered flowers, I knew it was myself plucking my own flowering.
When I went in a train, I knew it was myself travelling by my own invention.
When I heard the cannon of the war, I listened with my own ears to
my own destruction.
When I saw the torn dead, I knew it was my own torn dead body.
It was all me, I had done it all in my own flesh.

III

I shall never forget the maniacal horror of it all in the end . . .
I anticipated it all, all in my own soul
because I was the author and the result
I was the God and the creation at once;
. . . it was a maniacal horror in the end.

I was a lover, I kissed the woman I loved,
and God of horror, I was also kissing myself.
I was a father and a begetter of children,

and oh, oh horror, I was begetting and conceiving in my own body.

IV

At last came death, sufficiency of death,
and that at last relieved me, I died. . . .

V

God, but it is good to have died, to have been trodden out,
trodden to nought by the sour, dead earth,
quite to nought,
absolutely to nothing,
nothing. . . .

For when it is quite, quite nothing, then it is everything.
When I am trodden quite out, quite, quite out,
every vestige gone, then I am here
risen and setting my foot on another world
risen, accomplishing a resurrection
risen, not born again, but risen, body the same as before,
new beyond knowledge of newness, alive beyond life,
proud beyond inkling or furthest conception of pride,
living where life was never yet dreamed of, or even hinted at,
here, in the other world, still terrestrial
myself, the same as before, yet unaccountably new.

VI

I, in the sour black tomb, trodden to absolute death
I put out my hand in the night, one night, and my hand
touched that which was verily not me,
verily it was not me.

Where I had been was a sudden blaze,
a sudden flaring blaze!

So I put my hand out further, a little further
and I felt that which was not I,
it verily was not I,
it was the unknown.

Ha, I was a blaze leaping up!
I was a tiger bursting into sunlight.
I was greedy, I was mad for the unknown.
I, new-risen, resurrected, starved from the tomb,
starved from a life of devouring always myself,
now here was I, new-awakened, with my hand stretching out
and touching the unknown, the real unknown, the unknown unknown.

("New Heaven and Earth," *The Collected Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, pp. 256-59)

Now this bit of gospel poetry:

Never think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. No, I have not come to bring peace but a sword! For I have come to set man against his own father, [If you feel a little bourgeois, and want to leave, feel free, and come back when I have finished.] a daughter against her own mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man's enemies shall be those who live in his own house. Anyone who puts love for father or mother above his love for me does not deserve to be mine, and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and neither is the man who refuses to take up his cross [that is, lay down his life, in case you've got that wrong: neither is the man who is not willing to lay down his life] and follow my way. The man who has found his whole life will lose it, but the man who has lost it for my sake will find it. Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me is welcoming the one who sent me. (Mt. 10: 34-40, JBP)

This is the 49th year of the radical renewal of the church in the 20th century. This ought not to come as any surprise that the church has a new operating image, for Calvin long since said the church is never without historical manifestation; but it is never synonymous with any historical manifestation.

Master and Functional Images of the Church Throughout History

In the history of the church there have been great master and functional images. In the ancient church, she saw herself as the eschatological congregation that put the limits of temporality before all mankind and promised that if in the everydayness of their lives they would live before those radical limits, they would discover in the here and now what Life is, with a capital "L."

The second great operating image of the church was forged in the medieval period. The church grasped itself as the super-agency that welded together every facet of the structures of humanity that disclosed the final meaning of their existence. She promised humanity that if in the midst of the everydayness of their lives they would live before the final meaning of that life, they would discover what Life – spelled with a capital "L" – is all about.

The Reformers' image was that of a priestly/prophetic community that held before all of humankind the propensity to live in the illusion that hid us from the actualities of life. She promised humans that if they would come to terms in the midst of the everydayness of their life and deal with their illusions about themselves, new possibility would be theirs, which would be Life – with a capital "L" – from the bottom up.

Now, to continue my oversimplification, each of these images was perverted. The first one ended up in the desert; the second one ended up in ecclesiastical tyranny; and you and I are the living embodiment of the perversion of the third great image.

Here we have to slow down just a bit. It seems to me that this happened about a hundred years ago in America at the close of the Civil War, when the new science impacted our nation, as it had not impacted it up to that time. In the midst of that impact the church lost its courage to understand itself as significantly engaged in the civilizing process. When you and I lose that kind of a sense of significant engagement, we have to conjure up some kind of pseudo-image of significance. The one the church brought into being in our time was that of the defender of the status quo.

It reminds me of that ancient Greek myth: out on the edges was chaos, then the area of the irrational, the area of the unexpected, the area of change. Humanity with its rational capacity built a little island of security in the midst of that irrationality and then put a dyke around it to keep out change, and then created a class of people called dyke walkers, sometimes known as clergymen, whose job it was to see to it that no change poked through that dyke. If any trickle came, they stuck in their finger or their arm, or, if necessary, their head. That's the picture of the church, as she became the defender, the knight in shining armor defending the status quo.

I have the idea most of you are still trapped in that kind of morality, and not only trapped in it, but you still think you have to defend it. There's a kind of irony in it. The Lord is sneaky – instead of attacking the

dyke, the Lord moved in the 20th century down underneath that island and shook it until its teeth rattled and the church was left with its sword drawn to defend it. And guess what, it looked around and it hasn't got a damn thing to defend anymore.

Being trapped, it moved to the second stage that we call the sick, sick, sickness of the church. That was turning in upon itself so that we became a group of crippled characters huddled together, trying to waddle to the grave propping one another's psyches up. That was the end of the road of the detachment of the church from significant engagement in the world. I do not mean to belabor this. I only want to point very quickly to three indications of this sickness.

Three Sicknesses in the Church Today

One of our sicknesses in the church today has to do with *doctrinalism*. Whenever any person or group of people no longer has a sense of creative involvement, they become the defenders of a body of truth. That is to say, whenever you have to defend God, you can be damn sure it's not God that you are defending but some little reductionistic concept in your mind out of which you are trying to suck some kind of meaning. God is that goingness, that thereness, which has no need of defense and cannot be defended. If you get yourself worked up about little old atheists here and little old atheists there, you can be sure that you are not concerned with God in any way whatsoever, but some abstract concept that you think is of importance and comfort to you.

Also, by defending doctrine I'd point to the way we use, or don't use, the term "Christ." Whenever you sense you are defending Christ, you can be sure it is not the Christ Happening you are talking about but some abstract category. And some of you are almost ashamed to use the word "Christ." All Christ ever meant for you was some kind of an abstract concept which now you grasp is as empty as it was in the beginning. Therefore, your rebellion against that term has nothing whatsoever to do with the reality that term has pointed to in history. That reality has no need of your defense or anybody else's, and cannot be defended. That's the happening that judges you. You never judged it and you never could judge it. And whenever you find it necessary to defend the church, you can be sure that it is not the church you are defending. It cannot be defended, and has no need of it.

The second manifestation of our sickness is *institutionalism*. I didn't say "institution." Mark you, there are young squirts running around who are attacking the palaces as if the evil is in structures. What are they talking about? There isn't such a thing as social existence without structure. There is no such thing as a marriage without structure; there isn't any friendship that is not structured. Structure is that in and through which two or more people do something in history. If we don't want to do anything in history but to waddle off into some phony work to handle the salvation of our shriveled-up soul, then we start beating structures over the head.

"Institutionalism" is something quite different. Institutionalism is a set of structures without a sense of mission. The function of the structures comes to be the maintaining of the structures themselves. That's a perversion, whether it's in a fraternity or in your family. Since you couldn't find a womb any place else, you may have made your family into a womb. That means you've got institutionalism in your family. We Methodists need to listen to this. We need to listen hard. We know more about how to keep wheels within wheels within wheels going and well oiled, I suppose, than anybody in the world. Part of what I am screaming is this: the creative, awakened, young clergymen across this country are not shooting their guns in the right direction, and therefore they are wasting their efforts.

The last thing has to do with *communityism*, and Lord, I almost hate to talk about this. Navel-gazing is not what the body of Christ is all about. Sometimes I think that when I worked in Austin, and we had a college house for students at the University of Texas, we made a big mistake putting the term "Christian" out in front – Christian Faith and Life Community. We told the students coming in that "this isn't a womb." They said they understood, but they didn't understand. That word "Christian" gave them the wrong idea. "Christian" meant to them a bunch of old ladies who made gentlemen's agreements that they would like each other and agree not to do naughty things. About the time some creative tension was about to bring something useful into being, the little old lady put on a band-aid and said, "Woo, woo, if you just got to know each other better you'd see that you agree." I always wanted to say, "Bullshit." When you understand

Christian love as having a nice feeling toward a fine Christian person, then you've gotten turned inward. You're more concerned with being a loving animal than you are with loving your neighbor. And because we weren't the only sick part of society, there were little old ladies of both sexes outside the church. They brought into being the vocation of group dynamics, wherein one glows with the fact that they are liked by other people. The church picked this up, this kind of raw barbarity that destroys humanness. This is the end of the road of community. That's what I mean by the sick, sick, sickness of the church.

A New Operating Image: The Church is Mission

But, thank God, the church is forging a new operating image in our time: *mission*. Not that the church *has* a mission, but the church *is* mission. If all of us were suddenly on Mars today, we wouldn't have a mission; we would be the Mission of Earth to Mars. The old image of the church was that she had a mission, or many missions. The new image of the church is that she *is* mission. Not *a* mission in civilization but *the* mission to civilization. The church is not in competition with anybody. The church is the mission to the civilizing process. The tragedy is that we haven't put much content on that yet, but the content is coming clear.

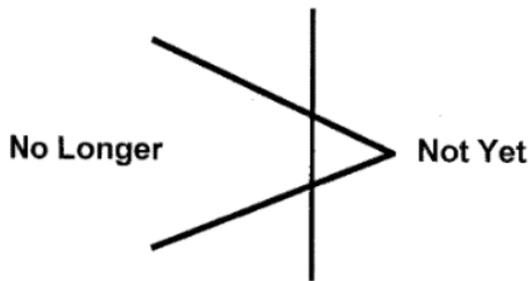


Figure 1-2: The Wedge of History

Take this wedge to represent the goingness that we call history – that move-ment from the *No Longer* to the *Not Yet*. History is not some philosophy *a la* Marx and Hegel, something you learned in school years ago, which you either flow with or get ground beneath. No, history is that goingness where human decisions are made.

To speak theologically, human self-hood was made at the same time as history. But in our day, when the theologian is using social categories to articulate the faith, he stumbled on a more fantastic awareness: wherever you have this goingness between the *No Longer* and the *Not Yet*, there you have the *elite cadre* in civilization. That is to say, the elite cadre lives

between the *No Longer* and the *Not Yet*. The elite cadre and history are inseparable.

This goingness of history has never taken place save there was a body of people who moved out into the twilight zone, into the no-man's land onto the beachhead between the *No Longer* and the *Not Yet*. They were calling into question the structures of humanness and their inadequacies and dreaming new visions of more adequate structures that would minister unto the well-being of all. They laid down their lives to bring these structures into being for the sake of the mass of humanity.

The People of God

History has never been history without this body of people. Call it what you will. Call it the revolutionary cadre, call it the prophetic minority, call it the testimonial remnant. History has never been history without these people. When I use the category of the "People of God," I mean those people who move out before us into the unknownness of the *Not Yet* and lay down their lives on behalf of the mass of humanity. That is the People of God, and when you see that, then you understand that God has never been without his people. God is not now without his people, and God shall never be without his people. The historical process is not without the People of God. It never has been and it never shall be.

The dynamic of the People of God has absolutely nothing to do with those who gather when they ring the 11 o'clock bell on Sunday morning. When you use the categories "church" and "People of God," you've got to be clear what you're pointing to. If you're pointing to what I call that twilight zone, that's where people are laying down their lives for the sake of the future of civilization.

This is not radically new. If you have any recollection of the development of the liturgy and the great prayer of the congregation, you know we took that prayer away from the great congregation and now we call it the pastoral prayer. In the original structure of the great prayer of the congregation we go around the

circle twice – first we pray for the various structures of humanness, the orders of society, for domestic order, educational order, economic order, political order. And when you are symbolizing it on behalf of the whole congregation, it means responsibility for every structure in civilization. This is what Bonhoeffer means by the category of obedience: that you are totally responsible for every structure of humanness. Then we go around the circle a second time in prayer and we remember those who have fallen out of the structures: for example, the widows, the orphans. We pray for the ignorant and the bigoted, for those in prison, and all the suffering. We pray for the poor and the unemployed.

The Perpetual Revolutionaries

As long as one person is suffering in this world, I intend to keep at it. That's the prayer of the People of God, the perpetual revolutionaries. As long as one baby suffers in this world we stand as a protest. We stand in revolt. We are the ones who utterly embrace this world and at the same time are the perpetual protesters. That's the People of God.

But don't you hurry out there, into the Not Yet, if you want community. Don't you move out there, for out there is the solitary life. I mean you stand there alone. The person who moves out there asks no one. She moves at night. She is a solitary. This became clear to me as I was marching in Selma. I became downright irritated with the white people alongside the line, but I became angrier at the black people sitting up there on their porches, sitting in their rocking chairs, waving at us as we marched down the street. Down inside I was screaming, "Why aren't you out here? This is your revolution." Then I remembered that the revolutionary of God is out there of his own volition, on his own, in the first instance.

This reminds me of my eschatological hero heading toward the place on the edge of the Not Yet, and he walked on ahead. If you want sweet community you stay back in the No Longer. That's their business. The People of God have a solitary life. If what you want is a real sense of entitlement, don't move out there into the Not Yet. That's their business back in the No Longer. They give you a sense of integrity. It's their business to remind you of the certainties of life and give you a sense of righteousness. They give you a sense of peace. That's the business of the bourgeois. If you move out there into the Not Yet with the eschatological hero, he's the one who calls the certitudes of humanity into question. He's the one who calls the justices of humanity into question. He's the one who calls the complacency of humanity into question. His life is lived in perpetual uncertainty, ambiguity, and anxiety.

Out there in the Not Yet, people witness in a strange way to the joy which is the joy unspeakable, incomprehensible, to the strange peace that passes human understanding. The peace that passes human comprehension is the peace that is no peace. It is the joy – do you remember the great phrase "the merry men of God"? The merry men of God are merry in every situation, even in the midst of those three hundred thousand who slept out on the sidewalks of Calcutta last night. The one out in the Not Yet takes upon herself the tragedy of the whole world and in that finds her life's joy and peace.

No Rest, No Time Off, No Rewards – Just the Cross

You want some kind of rest? Don't you move out there into the Not Yet, not if you have to have a day off a week, your wife is sick, you've got to be home more, be with the children, and you have to have a month-long vacation with pay. And if you think you have the right to retire at 65, then you stay back there. The People of God are on duty 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, until they are 92 – unless they live to be 93.

To be the People of God you have no time off. This is not for pious reasons; it's because the job is never done. About the time you deal with some structures that misuse people and build some new ones, about the time you get it finished, you look back and see you missed somebody, or your new structures are abusing many. You have to go back and build another structure or radically renew old ones. Do you understand? The job is never finished. That's the task of the People of God, the ones who know their work is never done.

If you want some kind of reward, for God's sake, don't move out there. There aren't any merit badges in the Not Yet. To put it in mythological categories, God loves me just as much but not any more than he

loves anyone else. This is why those in the No Longer are God's People and those in the Not Yet are the People of God. Each drops just as fast from the Empire State Building, and each dies just as fast. Back there they have all kinds of recognition. They pay salaries that can indicate you are somebody, they have positions that indicate your status. There's only one reward out there in the Not Yet – the cross.

These are the strange ones who care. I mean they care. If you want to have nice lovey-dovey relationships, then you stay back there. But those out there in the Not Yet are those who really care. If you talk to them about being a loving person, they ask to see your life being laid down for humankind. The People of God: there's nothing pious, nothing religious, nothing Christian about it. It's not some philosophy. It's cruciformity, with open eyes and a joyous heart.

Sometimes I wonder how our fathers came up with that bit of poetry, "the way it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be." Nothing religious, just the way it is, which means that every person who ever lived on one level or another with one degree of consciousness or another, with one poetic image or another, has made a decision as to whether or not she's going to be God's people back there in the No Longer or the People of God out there in the Not Yet. Every person who ever lived made the decision as to whether he is going to be a part of the masses upon whose behalf the others laid down their lives, or whether he was going to be a part of those who laid down their lives on behalf of the masses. Every person who ever lived – in one metaphor or another – made the decision as to whether or not he was going to be the Church, with a capital "C". There's nothing pious about that. There's nothing religious about that. And there's nothing Christian about that. Being the church is just a part of the way life is that we can decide to be, with all the passion of our being.

The Twofold Task: Witnessing Love and Justing Love

Let me talk about the task of the people who live in this no man's land. It's a twofold task, it's the task of the *word* and the *deed*, and the two are inseparable. It's what I call "witnessing love" and "justing love," and I say the two are inseparable. While the People of God are thinking about the line between the No Longer and the Not Yet, they are busy announcing the secret since the very beginning of time. It's the secret that everyone knows in his heart. It's synonymous with the self-conscious part of oneself. But one has to hear it from another to know that he knows the secret. While they're busy digging the sewer lines of civilization, the People of God are pronouncing the *word* that enables one to know what he already knows. They have a million and one languages, and they understand that there's not any content to this *word* other than the suffering of the person that he's dealing with. This brother pronounces the *word* to enable humanness – the *word* without which no human being ever shall be a human being. Our fathers were so very clear about that.

I need to point out that the emphasis comes down upon the *deed* and another time the emphasis comes down on the *word*. Now is the hour of the *word*. This is the time of the new evangelist, and I do not mean whatever is meant by the Department of Evangelism of some denomination. This is the age of the evangelist. This may give you pause as you rush into social action work, even as men are leaving the ministry to get really engaged in justing love. How stupid can we be? Now the church once again acts as the stand-alone caboose, after the engine has already pulled out of the station and gone down the track.

Let me see if I can spell this out. Yesterday in the church we were concerned with the laity. Tomorrow, only with the cleric, but not in the sense of that antiquated dichotomy between some characters known as clergy and laity. All God's people are born to be clerics, born to live on behalf of all. Out there in this twilight zone, a self-conscious person – I mean one who knows he's the church – understands that there are other people out in this twilight zone who would not be caught dead within the 11 o'clock service on Sunday morning.

You know some of those men and women in the twilight zone between the No Longer and the Not Yet of our time beckoning to us, "Come on out." I always felt like I was a little tiny mouse crawling behind the giants – the non-church giants of our time. I call them the latent church, after Tillich. They're damn well there. Let us beckon others to join those giants, whom I can name by the score, and so can you.

And yet, as I have crawled along behind some of those giants that wouldn't be caught dead being in the church, I've come to see something. I'm out in front at the same time I'm crawling behind them, and I

am one of those countless nameless ones who went before, who kept this *word* in history. Do you think that the Jean Paul Sartre's could ever have been out there had they not been in a civilization that had been impregnated with this strange *word* of humanness?

We only remember in terms of mythical figures such as Luther and Calvin and Anselm. They were the ones who thrust this *word* into history. And mark you, the church always understood that its evangelism has to target those gathered in the community and those who cannot be gathered.

Since history began, the *word* has been spoken month after month, year after year. The play goes on. The *word* is about being a human being, coming to terms with your pretensions about being a human being. That's the role of the church. Our Roman Catholic friends understand devotedness to the ministry is to assume responsibility for keeping the play of civilization going, whether you feel like it or not.

The second way to keep that *word* in history is through a ridiculous inner faith, and if you don't see the ridiculousness of it, you don't have the discipline. Despite what sociology, psychology, the natural sciences, philosophy, art, history, and theology may be discovering, our role is to make it clear in history that the *word* is that Jesus Christ is Lord. That seems such ridiculous language, yet if we can make it clear it will keep releasing the Gandhi's of our time.

And the third way to keep the *word* in history is to *be* the people. *Be* the people. There are not clergy and laity anymore. Some of the people are lawyers, some doctors, some plumbers, some teachers, and some of them are pastors – they are in different disguises. Behind those disguises there's a cleric, only a cleric, the People of God.

These revolutionaries, these People of God, have a double task that is really one. Besides witnessing love, their task is to engage in what I have called "justing love." These people out here are always digging the next foot in the ditch of the civilizing process, right down in the midst of the political struggle, in the economic struggle, the educational struggle, the struggle as religion turns into the new secular religion of our time. They are always there. And they have to be there because the person of faith is always concerned. I noticed your prayers in the service we had this morning. You were concerned with the poor. You were concerned with the widows and the fatherless. You were concerned for those who were under the heel of tyranny. Now what in the hell, in the 20th century, does it mean to be concerned? Does it mean that you have a sensitive feeling? I remember when I was a little boy. Mama was always gonna die. (She's still alive.) But she was always gonna die. And she must have had several great final acts in history. The doctor would finally call us in, and they could hardly get me in that room to say goodbye to Mama. And they all thought that Joe had a real tender heart.

Well, secretly, I think even then, it wasn't that I could not live without Mama, I just couldn't stand the pain within myself of seeing my Mama suffer. Do you see the difference? If you and I are concerned about those who have fallen out of the structures of society, that means that we have to be pushing into the future. That means we have to call into question those wonderful structures of justice that left even one soul out.

And since structures of justice are always relative, the People of God are always on the move. For when the new structures of justice are formed, somebody spills out, and that means the job is never done. That's what I mean by justing love. That's what I mean by the kind of love that manifests itself in the kind of action that's always altering the civilizing structure in such a fashion that in depth and scope humankind is always reaching after well-being.

One more thing. The person out there in the Not Yet has already died. This is the source of courage. The one who owns his or her death can never be threatened by anybody anymore. Their death is already rendered up. These are the people who take the drama and act it out in the actualities of the world. They're the ones who do the *word* and *deed* for the sake of the journey of humankind. They are the ones who stand there until their death, because they are called to be and have decided to be the church, the People of God.

Original paper document available at the Joseph Wesley Mathews Archives, Wesley Theological Seminary Library, Washington DC.