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TOWARD THE NEW FORM OF THE CHURCH

I would like to read a Scripture passage which seems to have been added to the New Testament since I last looked:

We are near the end of all things now, and you should therefore be calm, self-controlled men of prayer. Above everything else be sure that you have real deep love for each other, remembering how love can cover a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to each other without secretly wishing you hadn't got to be! Serve one another with the particular gifts God has given each of you, as faithful dispensers of the magnificently varied grace of God. If any of you is a preacher then he should preach his message as from God. And in whatever way a man serves the Church he should do it recognizing the fact that God gives him his ability, so that God may be glorified in everything through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and power for ever, amen!

And now, dear friends of mine, I beg you not to be unduly alarmed at the fiery ordeals which come to test your faith, as though this were some abnormal experience. You should be glad, because it means that you are called to share Christ's sufferings. One day, when he shows himself in full splendour to men, you will be filled with the most tremendous joy. If you are reproached for being Christ's followers, that is a great privilege, for you can be sure that God's Spirit of glory is resting upon you. But take care that none of your number suffers as a murderer, or a thief, a rogue or a spy! If he suffers as a Christian he has nothing to be ashamed of and may glorify God in Christ's name.

The time has evidently arrived for God's judgment to begin, and it is beginning at his own House. And if it starts with us, what is it going to mean to those who refuse to obey the gospel of God? If even the good man is only just saved, what will be the fate of the wicked and the sinner? And if it is true that we are living in a time of judgment, then those who suffer according to God's will can only commit their souls to their faithful creator, and go on doing all the good they can. (I Peter 4: 7-19)

In listening to our reports these past two days, it seemed everything said was relevant to the subject of the new sociological form of the Church. The concern underlying all our reports is how to give shape and form for the People of God in this time and in the future. This is sometimes talked about as the new sociological form of the Church.

disestablishment-within-the-establishment days, I wanted to get rid of the traditional symbolism of the Church, because it was like a weight around my neck. As Tillich says, it is not possible to get rid of the symbolism in the first instance; it is a wonder of the Mystery that the symbolism has been sustained in history in order to chasten our revolutionary endeavors and ground them in the depths. We should be grateful that we have always been called into question during our forward thrusts.

The Church is renewed and religion is in crisis. The Church has made a profound journey into the world we live in and has the possibility of changing because its foundational understanding of being a catalytic renewal force in this world. We, as participants in the Church, share that possibility because--to use the language of the old vehicle--we are monotheists. We understand that this creation is one before the Mystery. We are not afraid to live in what is happening. We know that the totality of what God is doing is the wonder of his Love, the wonder of creation. We are also theocentric. I like to translate both "monotheistic" and "theocentric" in terms of indicative battleplanning. That would give us monotheistically, the possibility of looking at the whole, and theocentrically, trusting that the trends of the future are fundamentally for the fulfillment and wholeness of man. We could do everything possible to wrench ourselves away from the trends of history. But we are not those people. We have decided that the trends are for the wholeness of the future and therefore, we have the possibility of moving.

It is critical now that we not fall into an abstract universalism. Some of us have wanted to relate far too quickly to Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, before we fully understood the milieu and theological symbolism which we ourselves were grounded in. Even though the New is calling us to move transparently through those other religions as the catalytic agent for the creation of a new sociological form, we have no hope of being helpful unless we are grounded with clarity in our own religious form.

We have been at the work of metamorphosis for the past twenty years. We have participated in that activity every time we teach RS-I or any other course. The Local Church Experiment, in doing the spirit tactics, was about raising up a body of people who saw through to the depth meaning of the traditional symbolism and could reengage in a twentieth century world. We had the possibility of being a catalytic force to deliver the world in all its depths so that every man could see the glory of his existence in creation.

We have said many times that RS-I is a secular course; it is a course about living in exactly this one world as the place where transparency to the Mystery is experienced. Perhaps in another era, the two-story world view allowed you to talk about the sacred on one side and the secular on the other, but that is no longer possible. The wonder and mystery of existence, and the confrontation with the reality of life, do not come from some other place; they happen right in the midst of life. It is difficult to grasp that there was a time when symbol and the structure of religion were consistently and thoroughly within the framework of man's world-view. There was a time when there was no such thing as "going to Church." You were born into the Church and the Church was the framework which plumbed the depths of life for you. To talk of going to Church would have been as absurd as saying next Sunday, "Well, it's 11:00; we're going to the post-modern world."

grounded in the profound depths of humanness and replicable. We are about nothing less.

Not just any experiment with the sociological form of the Church will do. The global network we have been creating is a way to talk about the necessary components of the renewed Church: It needs the Parish, the Congregation and the Cadre. We have said that unless all three dynamics are operative, the Church is not operative.

We have become increasingly aware of the role of the congregation. The congregation comprises the liturgists, the equippers, those who give others the foundational wisdom necessary for life. They act out the discipline, or the Way. When we use the word "congregation," we cannot simply mean Christian churches, though that is where we have chosen to move at this point in history. The word congregation refers to the congregational dynamic in any community: the liturgists, those who act out the drama of life.

It is my belief that the Greek civilization went out of being the day the Greeks stopped doing dramas. The drama was the sustaining element through which they retold the story of their vocation and the meaning of their existence. The congregation is about the task of equipping. It is the training dynamic. Our training work in the Local Church Experiment has been an effort to rearticulate what it means to train people for the twentieth century.

We are clear that the congregational dynamic cannot be done in isolation. Those who seek to sustain some configuration of mythologies and rites are not a congregation. The more that configuration disengages itself from the real world, the more isolated its people. It creates its own world in order to sustain its own mythology. It is demonic in that it cuts people off from the possibilities of life they have been given.

The congregation is that dynamic which, in Gogarten's words, allows people to stand as those responsible to God for the world. The congregational dynamic is that which is constantly pointing to God; at the same time, it is that dynamic where engagement in the world is articulated.

The Parish is that dynamic which is called to awakening, justice and care in the midst of society. It is paragraph three of the Niebuhr paper, where the question is to stand before God as the sensitive ones, constantly awaiting the trends and waves of history in order to know how to move and respond.

Only God knows what the sociological form of the Church will be like when there is a parish stake and unit system across the globe. It will be a realization of the image of the transparentized, renewed community of faith, caring responsibly, structurally and sociologically for mankind. That is the stuff of the Guild experiment.

The Parish dynamic is not something other than, or separate from, the Religious. I think it is critical to understand that within the Guilding dynamic is the secular religious. Mind you, at this point in history, guildsmen may have nothing to do with the historical religious forms, but they are deeply religious. They care. We have often talked about the Parish as an "overlay of love." That is not an imposition, unrelated to life itself, but it is the

four years now, the Local Church Experiment has been doing tactics to break loose people's images of creation, of theology and of structures. Now that breakloose has happened both because of the Experiment and the events of history. The question now is, how to give form to the breakloose.

If you were a nineteenth century man, perhaps a Marxist economist, you would probably say the new form will just happen. For us, the reality is that if you start things the right way, then a new form can happen. It is a critical time. As the Church breaks loose in a new form, we must be careful and sensitive so that this form can freight the next thousand years of civilization. If not, we could be creating more demonic forms than we had before. Our task is to think through, in depth, what the future forms need to be.