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Transcriptions

The Church in the Intermediate Future

by Ted Ward

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This address is based on the article by the same name published in *Christianity Today* (June 29, 1979). Noting that educational processes demand some clarity on the part of the educator about what the future is to be, Ted Ward discusses four aspects of the church in the intermediate future.



This lectureship in a Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the field of education is a first for me, too, though I have had lectureships of this sort in many another theological seminary, conservative and otherwise. I'm thankful for this occasion because it allows me to share with you what God has done experientially in my own career as we have attempted to be faithful in the few things that God has given to us as talents so that we might be accountable before him in those matters of investment of resources.

I'm a social scientist in education. I began as a music teacher and I suspect Dr. Aikens remembers that part of it because when I was in my college days I saw little else except music. But there, as I suspect many of you could testify from your own experiences, God takes us from wherever we are. And, in my case, it was that of a very small-town boy whose main claim to fame was that he knew how to play a couple of musical instruments fairly well. It gave me a sense of adequacy and mission through that experience, and then led me on into the field of music education, music teacher education, and then specifically into the studying of the processes in education through which people become competent professionals. And, as a matter of fact, that area and its overseas counterparts in reference to the developing nation problems is the center core theme of my academic and professional career.

So I come to you this morning to share at this outset lecture just one little insight with reference to what it means to be a professional educator and to look at problems of theological education, parish-level Christian education, and all those things in between that we call the Christian education establishment. My specialization is called curriculum research. And curriculum, when we define it professionally, usually comes off of the definition that's something like this: curriculum is a concern about what ought to be taught and why; what ought to be taught and why.

Any view we take of an educational operation, whether in a local church or in a seminary or in a college; any view we take of education and any process of decision-making that we enter into contains some image of the future; some idea about what the future holds. Educational processes demand some clarity on the part of the educator about what the future is to be. Now never mind that so much of what we see in education tends to assume that the future is going to be nothing but a continuation; a series of multigraph copies of the past or, at least, continuations of what we know in the present.

Within the orientation to the future, you must face first and foremost whether we deal with a hopeful or a hopeless future. In our time, this is a very central issue. Much of secular society has lost hope. There is a kind of a futility on every hand. We even find it, as I will suggest in one point following, we even find it infecting our Christian imagery.

There are three central core values in Christianity one of which is Hope. In 1 Corinthians 13:13 they are summarized in ultimate brevity. The three abidings: there abide Faith, Hope, and Love; and the most important of these is Love, the motivator. But in the very center core of that little triplet is the word Hope. One of the things that I believe the Christian community offers today to the secular society is a responsible hope. It may have been in a time past, maybe even so recently as the era of the '60s, that the great message that Christians had for non-Christians was the message of love. And, indeed, we still have that message, but I think, personally, more urgently needed today is the message of hope.

Our view of the future, then, is extremely crucial as we nurture ourselves within the community and as we relate to those outside our community. As a social scientist I am caught up, as I suspect virtually every social scientist in the Western world is today, in the propositions of futurism and futuristics. Occasionally I'm introduced as a futurist and, worse yet, as a futurologist. I don't think futurists, in general, have any particular insight on truth. I would refer you to the writings of Herman Cohn.¹ If you want to see the highest paid futurist in the world and check out his views of the future over the last twenty years, you'll discover that he misses about as often as he hits. The thing of it is he usually makes very, very convincing cases, and I guess that's what's involved in at least credibility.

I'm not a futurist by career, but as a social scientist I have to ask myself, how do I understand what's going on and where is it apt to lead if it continues? And if it doesn't continue, what'll take its place? And if that should happen, then what would that present as secondary problems? Now, you say well, that gets very speculative. Indeed, it gets speculative and very, very

¹ See Herman Cohn in Retrospect: A Parable for Futurists. Beyond Tomorrow—What? *Educational Horizons*. Vol. 50 (1) Fall 1971: 27-29

unreliable; but it still makes good exercise. And it makes one a little more alert when one sees certain kinds of clues occurring that maybe only five, ten years ago we said, ah-hah.

Now I could get into this in some detail with illustrations from the technological realm and probably amaze you, but I'm much more interested in getting to grips with some theological issues. And whether they're amazing or not I feel constrained, and I will deal with them primarily in this session this morning. However, as we go into the less formal parts of our time together, I'm perfectly willing to thread out some of these matters in less profound framework.

As a futurist, I am less a reader of the images of the future than I am a reader of people and the images of the future that *they* hold. As an educator, I'm very concerned about what people are like. And I feel that this is a proper responsibility with reference to the scientific leg on which Christian education stands. We are students of people because they are God's creation; God's very exalted creation on that sixth day when he set apart a very special act in that creation story. And in that sixth day in creating man, he created a creature very much worthy of our study and our examination. And I am very interested in how people look at things and what difference it makes in their behavior, in their activity, in their investments of time. And I discover, for example, with reference to Christians and their view of the church that we can classify about four different views of the church in the intermediate future and I'd like to share these with you. These come from people-watching, reading, noting how people react to things, and paying attention widely to the church of Jesus Christ in North America and not limiting myself to any particular denomination.

I'm very concerned about this matter of how Christians view the future because I think that our Lord was a future-oriented person himself. He said on several occasions, "I would not have you to be ignorant." I don't want you to be unknowing. I want you to be sensitized to what will happen ahead. His disciples apparently picked that up because they kept probing him for more and more detail. Now some details he said, it's not even for me to know in my incarnate person. I didn't bring that detail with me. For example, the date of his return; he didn't bring it with him. He said, it is not mine to know. It's not yours to know.

There are things we do in eschatology that sometimes are absurd. There are other things we do that are sometimes ignorant. There's a great deal of difference between absurdity and ignorance. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference, but there is a difference. I think one of the things that we learn about eschatology is that we have to have some orderly notion about where things are headed and how God intends to work. Christians I have discovered, because of their eschatological preoccupation, tend to think of the future in absolutistic and ultimate terms. Christians have a historical sense, a present sense, and an ultimate future sense, and quite often lack the texture of how you get from the present to that ultimate future. It's been a characteristic of the history of the church down through the years for Christians to think in terms of ultimate in time. And you notice, even in the disciples at the time of Christ, they were thinking in terms of all those things happening in their lifetime. And, indeed, Jesus said in one way or another they will. But they will continue to happen, as well. There is more yet to come.

One of the things that we know today is that, though Jesus Christ could come back on his own timetable, responsible Christian preparation is a matter of assuming that he might not come back today or tomorrow or the next day. Our Lord taught in the 25th chapter of Matthew that there was a distinction to be made between those who are believing as a sub-division of those who are believing. There are those who are believing with such explicit faith in a return that is imminent, and

those who are prepared somewhat more conservatively—we might even say somewhat more skeptically—with a kind of a long view of return that Jesus distinguishes between these two sets in the parable of the virgins between those who are wise and those who are foolish. And the issue of wisdom is not the matter of having such explicit faith that you say, the return of Jesus Christ is *now*. In fact, Jesus calls that foolishness. The particular teaching had to do with those who did and didn't bring extra oil. And I submit that anybody who brings extra oil while watching for the return of the expected bridegroom is a person who has just a little less explicit conviction that it's going to happen right away. Do you see the imagery? And what we have in Matthew 25 is a sharp distinction between wise and foolish behavior that calls for an alert preparation for an intermediate future. There is a sense in which our preparation as Christians requires us to answer the question, what are we going to do between now and the ultimate end of the age? Never mind the shape and the form of the ultimate end of the age. I think Christian theology has preoccupied itself too much with the mechanics of Creation and the mechanics of the Second Coming. And I think by preoccupying ourselves with exactly how God did it and exactly how God will time it all at the end, we miss the crucial issues which are, how do we now live, and how do we prepare ourselves for that intermediate future that is associated with Christ's view of wisdom.

I see the church looking at that intermediate future in four ways. I see Christians who are almost like the secular society viewing the church with a kind of defeatism, a kind of all is lost, the ball game is over, we might as well give up; a model that I call *the church viewed as unheeded conscience*. It's a conscience for the world. The believers in Jesus Christ constitute a voice of righteousness in a wilderness of evil, but the darkness is too great and the voice cannot cut through. That image of the church does prevail among many today, and I'm doing this deliberately to ask you to reflect upon your own views and those to whom you have been and will be ministering. We deal today, even as Baptists, with those who really don't think of the church as having much to say that'll be effectual considering the darkness of our times. A conscience? Yes. Speaking responsibly? Yes, but doomed not to be heeded. This is a very defeatist posture and it results, I believe, in many sorts of inactivity, inactions that ultimately are destructive.

It, for example, reduces evangelism to informing. We still have, in that unheeded conscience model, a responsibility to attempt to evangelize, but we've done it once we've informed them. I think one of the characteristics of that particular model of evangelism is mass media evangelism. If all you have to do to continue your responsible evangelistic activity is to just tell people then the trick that'll get the monkey off your back quickest is to buy radio and TV time and tell them en masse. I ask you, to what extent are we using that notion of evangelism because we really don't believe in evangelism. Now that is not intended to be some sort of a categorical judgment on the use of the media, but it is to raise a very sober question. Media research shows that decision-making among human beings is rarely triggered by mass media. Consciousness is. Consciousness-raising can be, but decisions are triggered almost exclusively through primary contact.

There's a second view of the church. It's a kind of a survival view. I call it, *the church as ghetto*. The word ghetto is today associated with problems of the urban environment; the problems of minorities in the center cities. The problems of Blacks, the problems of Chicanos, the problems of people who live to themselves—who have their own communities within the larger community and, in one way or another, are somewhat oppressed. But the word ghetto comes from an earlier source. It comes from a Middle Ages' concept of the handling of Jewish people in and around European, especially Eastern European, cities. Ghettos were created in order to cause certain people to be kept away from the general society. Jewish people were asked, please, to keep to themselves, and in many

eras they were forced to keep to themselves. The word ghetto is not a Black word. It is a Jewish word in terms of its source origins. I didn't say that it was from the Hebrew. The word ghetto implies, then, a group of people who, for one reason or another, have had to form a kind of sub-society and be separated away from the mainstream.

For the ones of here who are older, we remember very well that the ghetto term became a popular term in American life during World War II because of those same Eastern European communities where the Jewish folk, for centuries, had lived in Jewish ghettos. And we remember specifically the resistance that was put up against the Nazis by the Warsaw Ghetto. You know Warsaw, Poland? Solidarity, so forth? Well, Poland's been around a while and those of us that remember World War II issues can remember very well that Warsaw and the Jewish community of Warsaw was very much in the news because that was the first clear-cut example in Western media of how far the Nazis were prepared to go to exterminate the Jewish people. This is before we really understood what was going on in the death camps. But we did know that they came in with heavy artillery and the, then, equivalent of bulldozers and leveled, with explosives and force, leveled the Warsaw Ghetto and killed thousands and removed the rest.

There's been a great deal of research coming out of that period after World War II on the ghetto and what is involved in what's become known as the ghetto mentality. There is a thing called, among social scientists, the ghetto mentality and it has a very interesting quirk in it. It has the quirk of willingness in it. There has to be, for any group of people to become ghettoized, a degree of willingness to *be* ghettoized. And this was not exactly easy for the Jewish folk of Central Europe to take, after that research began to be clear, because it seemed to have a kind of critical quality in it that said, if you have such a low view; if your self-esteem is so low that you will allow yourself to be pushed away from the general society, you are a collaborator in your own isolation.

I don't want to extrapolate this too far with reference, for example, to the contemporary use of the word ghetto among Blacks and Chicanos, etc., but one has to wonder. Because we do know, for example, that the effects of long periods of oppression are that people tend to get increasingly poor self-images, and they tend to let themselves be pushed around in ways that are not humane.

I see Christians doing exactly that to themselves. There is a ghetto mentality rampant in our society today. North American Christianity has a very strong streak of ghetto-ism. And I see it among Southern Baptists; I see it among many others in the so-called Bible-believing evangelical sector. I have even been in communities where the Christians; not only are pulling their community together to kind of create a barrier against the evil of outside, but they're even printing their own Yellow Pages. Have you seen that?

It's one thing to be interested in giving your patronage to a brother or a sister in Christ. It's quite a different thing to be so internal, as a Christian community, that you are taking deliberate steps to decrease your interaction with the outer society. Now that's ghettoization and it's dangerous. It's dangerous because it produces a kind of a survival mentality that is very, very self-centered. It sees a great accomplishment in being able to preserve oneself and one's own family. And we take ourselves to Glory saying, o-o-o Jesus, look what I did. I stayed pure and I even kept my kids from getting into drugs. Well, thanks. Good. What else? Isn't that enough? No, it's not enough. It's not even what it's about; though it is part of the foundational concern in Christian community.

There's a tendency to preserve and conserve a conservatism that looks for me and mine; a preservational quality that asks, what values must we preserve at all costs? How are we different? How can we let people know that we're different? How can we pull to ourselves so that we will not be challenged in our difference so that we can be allowed to continue to live as we have been? I see an awful lot of what the Christian community is trying to do right now with reference to asserting itself in matters even of legal rights so that we can have the right to continue to do our little thing in our little communities. I submit that that ghetto mentality, which is one of the images of the church in the intermediate future, is hazardous. It lacks a big view of God.

There's a third model. I call it *the church as underground army*. Now, again, if you'll allow me the respect that veneration of years would call for, I would go back again to World War II and tell you that some of the most exciting stories that came out of World War II were stories about the Dutch and the French underground. Some of the funniest stories were about the Italian underground, but that's another matter. The Dutch, under the heel of the Nazis, continued to resist even though they sacrificed their lives in the hundreds. Faithful Dutchmen continued to plague the German occupiers and forced the Germans to continue much larger investments of troops in the Netherlands than the Nazis really could afford and, thus, they contributed substantially to the downfall of the Third Reich.

The romance of being an underground, faithful person is enough to make a very good story for *Red Book*, if not for something even more high-priced. And there's something about that romance that has a kind of purity to it that goes along rather nicely with a Christian presupposition about faithfulness, even to death. There is a legitimate view, then, of the church as the underground army that says as its first creedal point: this is our Father's world. It has been invaded and occupied by Satan. It is, therefore, our responsibility to rise up wherever we can and in the model of the underground, even to come up out of the sewers, and bite the ankle of the occupying force. Very romantic imagery. And not nearly as dangerous in its own terms, perhaps, as the ghetto because at least it has an outward focus. At least it has an energy behind it; at least it does something. But the great hazard in underground army activity is that *ends* always justify *means*. I don't believe that Christians ever can get to the point where defending righteousness by engaging in sinful act can be condoned.

Today, there is rampant in our country a militant Christianity that is, as an underground army, claiming even to be a majority and engaging in some legitimate and some illegitimate acts always presuming that the *end* justifies the *means*. I submit that that is abhorrent to the righteousness of God. If you take as a matter of concern whether or not God intended us to win or lose the conflict, you end up with one moral scheme. If you take as a given instead that our first moral premise is truth, you end up with a different scheme. It's very interesting to notice that some of the most militant forms of underground army-style Christianity today are attempting to grab power away from the powerful. In effect, to be more powerful than the powerful. And one of the standard techniques is misrepresentation. So we have all sorts of mudslinging. We have all sorts of carping criticism based on half-truths and, in some cases, based on downright lie. I want nothing to do with that kind of Christianity. I have learned to be very suspicious of the church as underground army.

There's a fourth model and it's a redemptive model and it's service-oriented. And so you could guess that, in true preacher-style, I've left the best 'til last. But I see it and it's not just a creature for my sermon. There is a model of the church in the intermediate future that I would call, *the church as field hospital*. Do you know what a field hospital is? A field hospital is a group of dedicated, prepared, and able people who are trained, number one—able and trained. They're not

just volunteers trying to do something helpful—able and trained. Mobile in the sense of being willing to put themselves where the action is. And, third, not primarily engaged in the overt conflict.

My view of the intermediate future is not a model of good against evil. Not a notion of somehow the world dividing into white hats and black hats and choosing sides and poking at each other. I haven't seen any conflict recently on the world scene that I could diagnose as a good guys/bad guys kind of example. Or did you attempt to figure out the Falkland Islands? Or did you attempt to figure out the Lebanon invasion? Or did you attempt to figure out anything else that's been going on lately? It does not reduce itself to good and bad. It comes down to different forms of evil. You see the ultimate depravity of Satan is that Satan is unfaithful to his faithful. Think about it. He turns them on each other. The world we live in is a world that is characterized increasingly by evil on a large scale; but not evil against good, evil against evil. And I submit that the great issues for us in the days ahead are not where do we stand in order to fight evil; but where do we stand as the people of God to rescue the fallen in the battles of evil? And that's different.

That fourth model of the church as the field hospital for some of you may take its imagery; not from the realities of field hospitals, but from that not altogether wrong caricature called M*A*S*H. Now we could look at the topical handling of various sorts of human relations issues on M*A*S*H and have a good experience in ethical analysis. But one of the reasons I am convinced that that particular series has had the life that it's had and has the following that it's had is because people detect in it something that is essentially sound. And they could be detecting exactly that same thing in your ministry, in mine, and in the church in general and they would see it to be essentially sound.

We live in a society of great hurt. The people in our country are increasingly caught up in this, that, and the other that is destructive; destructive of their person, of their interpersonal relationships, of their worth, of their careers, of their lives. There is not a congregation of Christians in this country that is not, as a body in itself, already embracing many hurting people.

As I see it, the church in the days ahead has two tasks that I would refer to as the twin tasks; the inseparable Siamese twin tasks of nurture and competency development. You're perhaps more at home with the term nurture; but competency development isn't a bad word to get hold of. We're talking here about prepared capability; prepared capability to do something constructive. Nurture has usually been put over against evangelism as a purpose of Christian education—and we'll talk more about that in another lecture—because there is a tension between Christian education as a nurturant ministry and as an evangelizing ministry.

The crying need today, as I see it, is the intensive nurturing within the community of Christ that will get our house in order. That will build true communities of the faithful. That will create the basis of field hospital-oriented people who can move, then, into the outer society. And that's when we get to the other part of this twin: the competency that can be developed within the church to be of increasing assistance to those in need. All we've got to do, for example, is look at some of the standards, statistics about homes and families to understand something of the runaway problem that we have; rampant problem every decade doubling, the number of people who are being raised in single-family homes, and doubling the number of children who are being raised by no one in particular.

Our society is a needy society. The people we deal with in our communities are needy people. The people in our churches are needy people. The issue is to what extent are the people of God, as they are equipping the equippers, focusing on the broad range of human needs? Evangelism was never intended to be a verbal proposition. Evangelism was intended to be the whole of the gospel of Jesus Christ and it involves a multitude of facets of transforming of human existence. Now do not misconstrue. The name of Jesus Christ must be proclaimed. But the prepared field hospital of the intermediate future must be able to do many other kind of helps ministries in order that the Christian community can be all that God is allowing us to be in the days ahead.

There's a heavy message in Matthew 25. I started with it and I'm going to close with it. I started with the issue of wisdom and foolishness in reference to the future, and I asserted that wisdom is associated with being prepared. I'm going to close with the judgment section: the sheep and goats—the story of the judgment of the nations. I won't run through the whole story in detail, but I want to call your attention to one particular. The criterion used by the judge was not whether people were willing to do things for Jesus—in fact, those people were called goats—but whether or not the people *were* doing to those who had need, appropriate to their needs, whether or not they were aware they were doing it for Jesus. The sheep made this sound: Yes, we were doing those things, but we didn't know we were doing them for *you*. And the righteous judge said, "When you did them for one of the least of these my brethren, you did them for me." And condemnation to us, it was the goats who said, pardon the paraphrase: Well, yeah, maybe we weren't, but if we'd known it was *you* we would've.

Let's pray:

Father, may we not be strategic, wise, clever, working our way in to get licks for Jesus. May we be transformed to become the sheep of your fold, responding to human need in prepared, able ways because it is our nature to respond. May this nature be born in us, and may our educational ministries make something of it so that we might, indeed, be the nurtured and prepared people honoring Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.