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Abstract

The church in the intermediate future confronts issues just beyond the present but before the remote “end time.” The article uses four metaphors to describe possible actions of the church in such a time. *This article is reprinted from: Ted Ward. The Church in the Intermediate Future. Christianity Today Vol. XXIII (18) June 29, 1979: 14-18.*

What can the church expect to face in the intermediate future? Will it be able to withstand the onslaught of secularism in the world? What developments and problems will it confront? What will be its role?

The term “intermediate future” is used deliberately. For most people, the “near future” is almost inconceivable except in terms of extending the present. On the other hand, the “distant future” brings to mind for Christians the ultimate judgment and/or fulfilled kingdom. So in order to help us grapple with issues beyond the present and before that seemingly remote time to come, the term “intermediate future” seems appropriate

For the future of society in general, there seems to be little hope. The likelihood of some sort of catastrophe seems overwhelming. Yet for the church—for God’s people and God’s work in the world—there is great hope. Secular society is crumbling around us and the probability of persecution of the church increases. Accounting for society’s pessimism while living out one’s own optimism requires more than psychotherapy, it requires faith.

The church needs to prepare energetically for the future, not just as a matter of personal spiritual readiness and ostrich-like millennialism, but in order to determine what it can do to make a difference in the world until the end.

The Bible uses various metaphors to depict aspects of the fulfillment of the kingdom. These metaphors suggest two themes: what God will do, and what God’s people will be doing. Concerning the first theme, metaphors such as lightning, angels, a trumpet all suggest that God alone knows the details of the end of this era.

To describe what the church will be doing, the biblical metaphors indicate vigilance and ongoing preparation: keeping the home protected against intruders, keeping adequate oil supplies, continuously watching, being hospitable to travelers. The emphasis is clearly on continuous activity.

The scientific study of the future has become an important activity within virtually all fields of academic research. Scientists, especially in the natural sciences, are confronting world-scarring consequences of some of their finest efforts. Social scientists are undertaking futuristic studies with steadily growing sophistication. Gone is the straight line notion in which the future is seen merely as an extension of recent history. Anything can happen. Responsible futurism not only studies trends but seeks to identify the possible emerging factors that could alter everything.

To explore the relationship of evangelical Christianity and secular society in the intermediate future, we must begin with today, though we dare not confine ourselves to current problems and perspectives.

What is the condition of society and of the church today? What trend-changing events may be about to emerge?

To use the vernacular, secular society is “a mixed bag.” Even as the church is not all of one stripe, secular society cannot be described responsibly in one set of terms. The variations within “secular” range from aggressively anti-Christian attitudes to those warmly sympathetic to Christian values and virtues.

The expressions of evil in secular society are widely varied. From time to time and from place to place “spiritual wickedness in high places” takes various forms. Sometimes it is an overt attack on the principles and the people of God; at other times evil forces may infiltrate and subvert. Probably the latter describes the current era of North American Christianity, though the intermediate future may well be different.

God’s witness in the world through natural revelation, human conscience, and the living Word within the church has made a persistent mark. What Christians stand for has more influence than Christians themselves. The warts and pockmarks show up only too well on close examination of any exemplary Christian; but the total effect of Christian influence is undeniably in the direction of morality and spiritual concern, even as defined by secular standards.

Religiously, contemporary society speaks of an inner quest, suspecting that there is little if any responsible authority outside oneself. According to Ellwood, it is an “increasingly privatized sort of searching and yet it’s a very intense and very real searching in all sorts of directions.” Looking ahead, he sees these “religions of feelings” taking two possible roads. Worldwide hunger and starvation may lead to “doomsday religions,” or else, if somehow human societies muddle through without catastrophe, scientific mysticism would be the religion of the future (*Alternative Altars*, Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., University of Chicago, 1979).

In our present society, solutions to basic human problems are often sought piecemeal. Unaware of the spiritual dimension that ties together all human traits and functions, massive government and private agencies treat only bits and pieces of larger, interdependent problems. For example, the World Health Organization has announced its new worldwide goal: “Good health for everyone by the year 2000.” They will claim to strive for this. But by the year 2000, it is likely famine will be wiping out hundreds of thousands of people, partly because of the continuing population explosion which, ironically, will be accelerated by whatever gains are made on the health front.

If Christians are too inclined to grasp for a spiritual panacea, secular people grasp at far more absurd bits of the whole human dilemma. Technology is seen as the major alternative to moral renewal, especially because of its proven capacity to usher in “brave new worlds.” It is both the oppressor and the savior. “What science has created, science can overcome” is the first article of faith for a dominant sector of secular society. At the same time, others are becoming aware that some technological creations cannot be brought under control.

Christians who walk away and mumble, “I told you so!” are irresponsible. Perhaps as never before, Christians are needed in science and technology, not to be slaves of materialism designing automobile bodies and attachments for electric hairdryers, but to bring the marvels of God’s creation back into

harmony with God's design before they become any further the tools of intentional, accidental, or negligent death and destruction.

The secular world is changing. The church and its ministries are changing. At the very least, any discussion of the future relationship between the church and the world must deal with change. The important questions are (1) What is happening? and (2) What are the implications for the church? These two questions center on change. Most traditional societies resist change and thus avoid change-related questions. Consequently they develop only minimal competency in dealing constructively with change.

Because of its historical-documentary eschatology, North American evangelical Christianity tends to explore the future by asking deterministic "is" questions—What is God's plan for the ages? What is the surest sign of the end times? When is Christ returning? Rather than focusing on the developmental unfoldings that characterize the holy scripture, these questions force the discussion into the concrete "is" and thus impoverish biblical theology and weaken our ability to cope with the intermediate future. We evangelicals seem quite at home with the present and happy to think about the ultimate future ("the end of this age"). Observers wonder at our lack of burden for the needs of the lost world between now and the Lord's return.

The desperate here and now demands foresight and planning as never before in history. Within less than a century, in our own time, all of humanity has been made subject to petrochemical technology, the energy for which is now virtually waning. The oldest among us are no younger than the petroleum industry. The single-century doubling of world population arrived in our lifetime. The conquering of disease and the global proliferation of bio-damage is the mindless tradeoff of our lifetime. The war to end wars and the looming possibility of the war to end life, these are of our lifetime.

Where will the needed thinking and planning come from? Can evangelicals rise quickly to the challenge of the times? Can we learn to do belatedly what the evangelical subculture has previously discouraged, to think and plan for the intermediate future? Or will we continue to burn our midnight oil for the discussions of when and where the rapture?

Preoccupations and anxieties tell much about people's faith. The Christian's faith is not taken seriously if it is only concerned with the mechanics and chronology of rapture and tribulation. Nor is faith worth having if it forces us to overlook human need. Does the dividing of sheep and goats in Matthew 25 reflect the value system of the kingdom of God, or does it only inform us of the logic of some future judgment when Nazis and anti-Christian Arabs will suffer for their treatment of Israel? Faith that refuses to address the realities of our troubled times is not worth having. Our bumper stickers make us a laughing stock: "What do Christians miss? Hell." It may be good enough for the insiders but not for those outside watching for evidence of a viable alternative.

If the issues of the intermediate future are not static, neither should be our means of dealing with them. We must seek ways to deal with the dynamics of change in the relationship between the church and the world.

Our heritage is a vital asset; we believe in the future. Secular society may well become more despairing; the trend is clear. We believe in the future because of faith not technology, not in utopian dreams, not in human self-improvement, but in Jesus Christ as Lord of the universe. Such faith makes us flexible and responsive. Many surges of creative spirit in human history may be traced to Christians who saw visions of the possible while secular society despaired. There is no reason why it cannot happen again. So we must choose well the path to walk into the future.

What are some of the roads the church may take? In what situations might the church find itself? Consider the following four metaphors that may describe the church in the intermediate future:

1. *The unheeded conscience.* If Herman Kahn and others who foresee a rosy future are right, the church is likely to be all but forgotten. If science and technology are able to solve the dominant human social problems (hunger, disease, political oppression, war), Christians should thank God for yet another reprieve for sinful humankind. But with the passage of time, especially of an easy time, Christians will find the “light of the world” less welcome. “Who needs it?” the world will say. The church of Jesus Christ will be seen as superfluous. Good times produce less God-consciousness than do foxholes. Thus the church as the unheeded conscience, may itself lapse into profound neglect or apostasy.

Though it is unnatural to choose hardship, we must hope that the intermediate future will not be a time of fatness and ease. The church in North America has had about all the fatness it can take. Indeed, the church here today is flabby partly because secular society has incorporated a cultural religion (with Christian name and overtones) that wants Christianity’s benefits but not its conscience. Were it not for the ominous clouds on time’s horizon, we might pass from lukewarmness into oblivion, the church as the unheeded conscience of secular society.

2. *The ghetto.* Minorities of various sorts, particularly religious and racial, have been pushed into ghettos. Throughout history, minorities that posed a psychic threat to groups in the ascendancy were enslaved or oppressed. In the Middle Ages, a ghetto was where a minority population chose or was required to live. This people were distinct, peculiar, and had an assigned place apart from the larger society. Interestingly, the institutionalization of the ghetto in Europe and much later in the United States was to keep God’s ancient people, the Jews, “in their place.”

It can happen again. If conditions reach the point where a scapegoat is needed as in Nazi Germany to mobilize and energize the ascendant society, some minority may once again be singled out for “special treatment.” In order to qualify for this dubious benefit, a group of people must indeed be distinct, different in dress, look, belief, or custom. People should view them as thinking themselves superior in some way that is irritating or offensive to their larger society.

As long as evangelical Christians are mostly white, middle class, aspiring, acquisitive winners in the capitalistic game of secular society, they are unlikely to qualify as unique except for their self-proclaimed pietism. An offense for the sake of the Gospel? “Defamed, made as filth of the world.... the offscouring of all things”? Hardly today. Yet, even as it was true of the vigorous young church in the apostle Paul’s time, so it will be again when the church truly takes Christ seriously.

As the church comes more directly into confrontation with secular society, the conditions for persecution will have been met; then it will be only a matter of time and a question of intensity and the church will once again come under sustained and systematic persecution. The community of God’s family may be invited, encouraged, or even compelled to keep to itself. The church will then be the ghetto of godly influence, isolated, its effect as salt and light neutralized.

Through their experiences during the holocaust of Nazi occupation, Polish Jews learned something very curious about ghettos. Forced into isolation, people come to accept a “ghetto mentality.” They see being cut off from the ascendant society as somehow appropriate or deserved. Today “ghetto mentality” has come to mean a lack of self-esteem that makes a person or group particularly vulnerable to persecution.

Since the church in modern times has had no large-scale experience with the demeaning effects of the ghetto, Christians may do even as the Jews did in the early Middle Ages by voluntarily creating their own ghettos as a misguided investment in group security.

God never meant for his people to accept a ghetto mentality. The ghetto proclaims hope for saving oneself and one’s own but it sidesteps any love or burden for the outside world. To retreat to the ghetto is to relinquish the contacts by which the church ministers to a dying society.

3. *The underground.* “Underground” connotes the necessity to achieve principled objectives in covert ways. For example, in the period when the United States was developing a moral conscience about slavery, the underground railroad, a slightly organized network of godly and humanitarian people working together, spirited escaped slaves to freedom in free states and Canada.

Evangelical Christianity in North America encountered its own “underground” in the late 1960’s. Alienated young people, “turned off by the (formalized) church but turned on to Jesus,” sought alternate ways of Christian expression and communion. Increasing coldness and rejection by the Christian “establishment” led them to go underground. Much of the movement was spiritually motivated and biblically sound. But reaction to the changing of the political guard and the suspending of American military vandalism reduced the need young people felt to be underground.

The broader use of the term underground refers to resistance or guerilla movements within an invaded or occupied country. There is something romantic, almost rhapsodic, in the courage and persistence of resistance fighters. Their heads are high. To live is honor; to die is greater honor. While the underground lives, the enemy’s victory is hollow. If the underground dies, hope dies with it.

This is our Father’s world. We claim it in His name to further His redemptive works. But the enemy has invaded and occupied our Father’s world. The church, if not highly visible, is at least present as underground resistance. Satan’s victory is hollow as long as this underground lives. And it will live. Our Lord promised, “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18).

The underground metaphor has one major problem. In wartime the watchword of any resistance movement is “kill or be killed,” but the Christian command to love our enemies and to pray even for those who spitefully use us requires a most unusual underground. If the metaphor applies at all, it suggests that we should subvert secularism through love and good works. We need to be infiltrators.

The church may become a bold and brave underground if it seeks to recapture the secular world in the name of Christ.

4. *The field hospital.* Conscientious objectors in some countries are given alternative service assignments in wartime. While they do not condone or support immoral acts of war and would prefer to be as far away and as unsupportive as possible, they often find themselves in or close to the front lines of action. The debate has raged over whether medical services contribute directly to a war effort, bolstering morale and fitting service personnel for return to combat, or relieving the consciences of politicians, but humanitarian values almost always outweigh others.

The conscientious objectors are needed to staff the field hospitals. The Christian community, although resented and persecuted in annoying but tolerable ways, may well be appreciated for its healing and restoring influence.

The world is literally and figuratively at war. Nations use war to express righteous concern about other nations, to settle old grievances, to test their “superiority.” Always war is an expression of or a reaction to sin, and as long as sin dominates human processes there will be war. Even if one tribe or nation were to build a near-Utopia, it would be so sinfully self-centered that those less fortunate would demand warfare.

There is a spiritual warfare that affects all humankind and shows every promise of increasing. As secular society seeks freedom without responsibility, truth without source, and the good life without justice, the decline will lead to hysterical trauma. Casualties are already piling up; one can hardly imagine the suffering to come.

It is part of the redeemed nature to engage in the relief of human suffering and to be active in constructive and restorative processes. Evangelical Christians are beginning to move in that direction. No longer can we self-righteously weigh each good deed according to its opportunity to serve as a vehicle for verbal witness. Rather, we need to return to the heart of Christ’s compassion wherein the motive of good works is not clever strategy but to express what we *are* (Matt. 25:31-46).

The field hospital is more than a tent and a stack of medical supplies. What makes it work is people who know what they are doing. The field hospital as one of the proposed metaphors of the church in the intermediate future demands the most in the way of preparation. To fulfill Christ’s ministry to a needy world we must claim the task, identify and enhance the skills involved, and practice the gifts of healing and helping. It may well be the church’s destiny to minister in the front lines among the spiritual, emotional, and physical traumas inflicted by the enemy. The church may honor its Lord best as a field hospital, a prepared community of relief and restoration in tragic times.

These four metaphors describe the choices may confront Christians who will live in the intermediate future. They have in common an increasing distance between the church and secular society. In North America today the distance is not great at all. Although this country has reflected some of its heritage of Christian social values, the continuing slide toward worldly values may force the church finally

to put its own house in order. After centuries of drifting with the secular tide, the church can hardly go further; even the crucial issue of family values (love, fidelity, and responsibility) may differentiate Christians as a peculiar minority.

There can be optimism about the place of Christians in the intermediate future. “The world is tiring, but we are to endure,” John Perkins has written. “The world will become frustrated, but we can have hope. The world will withdraw, but we must strike. We are God’s guerilla fighters, His spiritual saboteurs. We must now go to battle in our communities armed with the evangelism, social action, and political encounter through which Jesus can work.”

Persecution will come. Christians could be forced to go underground. More and more we will need to maintain a godly lifestyle in the face of increasing secularism, especially since that secularism is destined to be materialistic and spiritually vapid. But the church of Jesus Christ will stand. We need not fear the intermediate future. Let us eagerly prepare for it by acting as God’s agents of redemption in the world *today* so that the world will have been profoundly affected by the church when the end finally comes.