

“The Problem With the Church”

a sermon by

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**Text: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.”
(Matthew 5:14)**

This past year marked the death of William Sloane Coffin, who was a well known Presbyterian Minister. As a chaplain at Yale University in the 1960’s, Coffin was an active participant in the Civil Rights movement as well as a very vocal critic of the Viet Nam war. Later, he became the minister of the Riverside Church of New York City, where he maintained a remarkable preaching ministry. I remember on a number of occasions visiting that church. It was always packed with people representing a great diversity of people from many different racial, national, and economic perspectives. I remember one Sunday in particular. It was the Sunday following the death of Nelson Rockefeller, who had been Governor of New York and a presidential candidate for the Republican Party. The funeral for Nelson Rockefeller had been held in the Riverside Church on that Friday, and Coffin was reflecting in his sermon on what had been obviously a rather tumultuous week.

Nelson Rockefeller’s father, the famous industrialist John D. Rockefeller, Jr., had paid for the construction of the Riverside Church and even though the Rockefeller family no longer attended that church, they insisted in having the funeral in the church. Moreover, the family had asked Henry Kissinger, who was then Secretary of State to deliver a eulogy. Coffin admitted that he found that awkward for a number of reasons. One was Kissinger’s involvement in the support of the Viet Nam War. The second was that his presence meant that the Secret Service would be present in the service – which meant the presence of high-powered weapons in the sanctuary.

Coffin confided in the congregation that he had found the Rockefeller family pretty strong-willed and hard to deal with. He finally concluded that as the minister of the church, he needed to put his foot down somewhere. He just didn’t know where to put it. Finally, he did issue an ultimatum. He refused to allow the family to have a cash bar in the Narthex of the church.

As a minister, it was not hard for me to identify with some of the angst that Coffin had experienced. Most of us who serve as ministers have had some difficult experiences –

particularly surrounding weddings and funerals, and I certainly could understand some of the frustration that Coffin expressed.

I.

The church, as the New Testament understands it, is the “body of Christ.” It is a manifestation of the presence of Christ in the world. As we are often reminded, Christ has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet. The New Testament holds a very lofty view of the church. It is also referred to as the “Bride of Christ” and Jesus himself promised that not even the gates of hell could prevail against it.

But, as all of us are aware, the church is also a very human institution. It is made up of people – and because it is made up of people, it experiences the glories and agonies that all human institutions experience. It can inspire, comfort, and encourage. It can also stumble badly, bringing great discredit to itself as to its Lord.

II.

One of the temptations that the church always faces is the temptation to lose the essence of the old in the attempt to assimilate the new. Harry Emerson Fosdick once preached a famous sermon entitled “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” in which he argued for the inclusion of the insights of the new science of Darwin, Freud, and Marx in the Christian message. Fosdick was greatly attacked by the religious conservatives of his day and was removed from preaching at the First Presbyterian Church of New York City.

One of the last sermons he preached however, was entitled “The Church Must Go Beyond Modernism,” in which he warned the church in his day not to be swept up by every fad that came about, but to retain the basic truths of the gospel.

Today, the church lives in this kind of tension. We are living in a rapidly changing society. The rise of technology is so amazing that it is hard for anyone to keep up with the great changes that are all about us: computers, iPhones, and Blackberries.

Moreover, there are many challenges that face the church today on the scientific front – with stem cell research, genetic counseling and a host of other issues that stretch our imagination in many ways. So one of the great challenges that every church faces is the challenge of embracing the new without abdicating the verities of the past.

When the Apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, he said that he had become a Jew to the Jews that he might win the Jews, and he intimated that he had become a Greek to the Greeks that he might win the Greeks. “I have become,” he said, “All things to all people that I might save some.”

That is a very modern passage of adjustment and accommodation. But that is not all Paul said. Had it been all, Paul would have disappeared from sight in an indistinguishable blend with the Greco-Roman culture of his day and we would have never heard of him.

But when he wrote for the second time to the church at Corinth, he had a different word: “Come out from them,” he warned and “be separate from them,” says the Lord, “and touch no unclean thing.”

That is a word we need to hear today. When the church becomes indistinguishable from the culture, it ceases to be the church. That is why we are called not simply to embrace the culture but to challenge in the name of Christ.

III.

Another temptation that is always present in the church is the danger of seeking the relevant at the cost of the essential. Some years ago, a Presbyterian minister by the name of John Frye wrote a book he entitled *The Trivialization of the United Presbyterian Church*. It was a book that angered a lot of people in high places. In many ways, Frye attacked the bureaucracy of the church that remains out of tune with its constituency. He also criticized the church for its endless preoccupation with reorganization. For Frye, the continued reorganization of the church – what he called the “global significance of brass tacks” did not enhance the mission of the church. It became the mission.

Today, the great temptation of the church is to get lost in certain “issues.” These can be political issues, such as the church aligning itself with a particular political candidate or political party. They can be social issues, including abortion and homosexuality.

Now, issues are important. But they must not be allowed to divert the attention of the church from its fundamental mission: the proclamation of the gospel, the edification (or education) of its members, the role of pastoral care, and the outreach or witness of the church to the community.

John Leith, in his book *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say*, points out that there is only one thing that the church can contribute to our society that no other group can do. There are social scientists who understand the dynamics of our society far better than those of us in the church. There are psychiatrists and psychologists who are far more able to attend the healing of the human mind than those of us in the church.

But there is one thing that the church can do that no other group has the capacity to do, namely, to proclaim the saving gospel of Jesus Christ to a world that is lost.

For Dr. Leith, the success of the church is dependent on its ability to confess with Peter the answer to Jesus’ question “Who do you say that I am?” in clear and unequivocal language. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

IV.

Another temptation in the church today is the temptation to lose its moral bearings in its attempt to accommodate itself to the prevailing culture. Over the years, the church has had to adjust itself to new discoveries in the field of astronomy, geology, and biology. When Copernicus and Galileo both argued that the sun and not the earth was the center of our universe, the church opposed this. But later the church recognized that these men were correct.

Early Christianity went out from an old Jewish setting into a new Greek culture and it would have never survived, if it had not assimilated into its faith the profound insights of Greek philosophy. So, in the classic creeds, such as the Nicene Creed, we have a blending of the old faith with the new philosophy, and in that process John and Paul had already played a part.

But alas, it did not stop there. Christianity soon adopted itself to the court of Constantine, the war, to the lucrative enjoyment of imperial favors, to the use of bloody persecutions to coerce belief. One after another, it threw away the holiest things that had been entrusted to it by its Lord until, often hardly distinguishable from the culture in which it lived, and it nearly modernized itself into moral futility.

Today, the church faces the same temptation to accommodate itself to the culture – in turning worship into entertainment, in adapting its ethic to reflect the culture in which we live and not the Word of God in Scripture and in Jesus Christ.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges his disciples to be the “light of the world.” He reminds them that a city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Moreover, he admonishes them that when a person lights a lamp, that person does not hide it under a bushel, but puts it on a lamp stand so that all can see it.

We are living today in a time of great darkness. The economic recession that has gripped this nation has placed a great fear in us that threatens to unravel the basic foundation of our society. People are losing their jobs. The number of poor and homeless people in this community is growing on a daily basis.

In times like these, the church has a great challenge to be the church. Our task is to proclaim the gospel of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. We are also called through our programs of education to ensure that the faith of the church is passed from generation to generation. In the same manner, the church has a pastoral mission to care for those individuals in our church who face the loss of jobs and other grave difficulties. Moreover, our mission to the community is critical today as we reach out to children and adults whose lives offer very little future or hope.

In a letter he wrote to me shortly before his death, Dr. John Leith observed that the greatest problems facing our society are not economic, or social or political, but theological. The great question that each person must answer, if they are to grow to human maturity is the question: “Why am I here?” Does human life have meaning, or is it simply a senseless, meaningless episode in the history of the universe that will end in ruin without purpose or meaning? The second question is the quest about guilt and salvation. Is there some power in the world that enables each of us as humans to overcome the dominance of instinct and impulse that threaten to overwhelm us?

If we are to be the “light of the world” that Christ commands us to be, we will have to offer a clear witness to what God has done for our salvation in the coming of Jesus Christ, by whose life, death, and resurrection God has given hope to every human being who believes.

Amen.