

The New Christian Age

The Rev. Alan Walker, one-time Director of Sydney's Central Methodist Mission who held world-wide responsibilities for evangelism for his Church, gave an interview, on 'the decline of the old Christendom and the emergence of a new.' As he explained in this interview, big changes are taking place in the Christian world. He spoke of the western world as now being - in his words - 'the toughest mission field on earth', and of the developing countries as being the centre of Christian vitality. 'Africa' he went on to say, 'would play a leading part in the Church's future'. The shifting focus of Christian growth and vitality, from the western world and, indeed from the old world generally, to the developing countries, is not, however, the only sign of change and ferment within the Church or the only indicator of new stirrings, new awareness, or of a new religious or spiritual age unfolding. What is interesting is that there is also ferment where the theology, the thinking, the doctrines and the traditional beliefs of the Churches are concerned.

In September 1972, five hundred leading members of the British and Irish Churches met together in Conference in Birmingham, England, for ten days, not, it is said, 'to legislate, pass resolutions and agree messages, but to join together in considering in depth, with a minimum of formality, the crises which Christianity faces today'. A Report of the Conference by the then Canon of Westminster and Rector of St. Margaret's Church there, David Edwards, was subsequently published. It is a challenging document, but also a hopeful one.

To be sure, it can be argued that the conditions which apply in Britain are not exactly duplicated in another country. Much, it may also be argued, has happened over the years since 1972. But has it? Are the basic problems identified then any different, or less of a problem, than they were then? A closer look at the Report goes a long way towards answering those questions.

It virtually begins by outlining the reasons for the Conference; why the heads of the Churches were called together in this way; the context in which it took place. Declining Church attendance, fewer candidates for ordination, the alienation of the young, and confusion about authority (now challenged and bucked far more than it used to be), are one thing. But (and the Report goes on), these are only part of it, "for" (and I quote) "the basic problem confronting the Churches is unbelief".

Here, in part, is what the author of the Report, David Edwards, wrote about this:

"Doctrines held for many centuries - and still held by many to be fundamental to Christian faith increasingly appear incredible. The doctrine of chastity before marriage seems remote to a generation well stimulated by commercial erotica, well cautioned against sexual repression and well equipped with contraceptives. The doctrines of turning the other cheek and loving the enemy seem more appropriate to fairytale than to the world which is real to this generation. . . Many of the doctrines about Christ Himself seem incomprehensible except as echoes from childhood's Christmas. Even the doctrine of the heavenly Father, so easily parodied by the picture of the grandfather in the sky, is to many a fantasy in a universe of terrifying scale and randomness."

I could add to that my own awareness of people's dismay about much of what is written in the Old Testament. I know of confusion as to whether the Bible is always to be taken literally. Periodically there is a new round of speculation as to who Jesus was. And on this particular point it is interesting that last year one of Canada's leading Anglican clergymen called for a re-examination of the traditional thinking and terminology about Jesus. His identity, work, and relationship with the Almighty all need, he said, to be re-examined and re-expressed. It was, he felt, like the fourth century all over again, when the Church realised its need to come to terms with this matter.

The basic problem, said David Edwards, is one of unbelief. There is a quandary about the logic, relevance and future direction of the Church's teaching and beliefs. And he summed it up this way:

"At the Church Leaders' Conference I saw more clearly than ever before that what Christianity needs is a new Pentecost, giving knowledge where there is now confusion, confidence where there is now doubt, and joy where there is now despair - and at the source of all this, giving a new disclosure of the truth."

I go back to what I said earlier in my talk that the shifting focus of Christian growth and vitality, to the developing countries, especially Africa, is not the only sign of change and ferment within the Christian Church or the only indicator of new stirrings, new awareness, or of a new spiritual age unfolding. There is as well, and more importantly, the awareness of the inadequacy of traditionally-accepted beliefs and concepts. There is, at least with some, a searching for something that will mean a new beginning. There is no knowing what outward form and organization the Church

will have in the years to come. There is no knowing whether, a hundred years from now, people will be worshipping much the same as we do today or whether, as some believe and advocate, the pattern will be smaller groups, meeting perhaps in one another's homes. What is important is that the stage has very much been set, and the foundations laid, for a new Christian Age. More than two hundred years ago, and at what is universally acknowledged to have been a very low point in the history of the Christian Church; a time when the doctrine of predestination was strongly advocated and the possibility of buying one's way into heaven was defended; a series of books began appearing which, while continually drawing on the testimony of the Scriptures, re-examined, re-defined, and explained in greater detail, the whole spectrum of Christian concepts and beliefs. These books were written by the Swedish philosopher and theologian, Emanuel Swedenborg.

It is neither an idle or an arrogant claim that we are entering a new age. There are all these indications that this is so. And re-examination of beliefs and concepts; the calling into question of traditionally-held beliefs; the turmoil and the upheaval; and the genuine seeking for alternatives are as someone referred to them - but the 'birth pangs' of this new age.

There have, in fact, been several religious ages through which mankind has passed, the most documented and familiar to us being the age of the Jewish Church and of the Old Testament, followed, of course, by the Christian age, and the teaching of the new Testament. And this doesn't have to alarm us. As an individual person progresses through different stages or ages, infancy, childhood, and youth to adulthood, so mankind, collectively, has passed through its different ages; and the important thing is that the truth which has been disclosed or revealed at any given time has been what was appropriate to that age. David Edwards, to whom I have already referred, is saying that the understanding and traditional beliefs of the Church are no longer adequate or satisfying where the probing mind of 20th century man, and beyond, is concerned. Simplistic concepts were adequate in the past. But not now. Something new is needed. So it was two thousand years ago. The concepts of the Old Testament, once sufficient, were found to be no longer so. There was a crisis of belief then.

There is a crisis of belief today. And as the Lord responded to that earlier crisis by coming on earth and teaching new things about Himself and about our relationship to Him, so He has responded to our present-day crisis and provided the input, in the form of a new revelation or disclosure of truth, on which can be built the New Age. At

the time He took His leave of the disciples, and amongst many other things, the Lord said this to them: "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth."

What can this be but the promise of further Revelation? The Lord wanted to tell them more things but knew they couldn't handle them. Later, He would. What is being said is that He has now done so. Some months ago there was a radio programme on another station on the subject, "Does Science need a God?" In the publicity about the programme it was said, and I quote,

"In recent years those working on the frontiers of knowledge have been startled with the discovery that there is a finite limit to that which can be investigated by the scientist. In this situation, and surrounded by many paradoxes in current scientific theories, learned men are now far more open to philosophic debate as to the nature of the universe and man's subjective view of it" .

How wonderfully encouraging this is. After all these years, since religion and science parted company, there is a willingness in scientific circles to look again at religious and philosophic explanations of the origin and nature of the universe. Resorting to the old insistence on the literal accuracy of the first chapter of the Book of Genesis is, however, not what's wanted. The old platitudes just won't do. Something else is wanted, and that something else has now been given.

In the first episode of the television series, 'I can jump puddles' a friend of the family was portrayed as commiserating with the family on the diagnosis of infantile paralysis and commenting that it was "God's will". This points to another area in which in the past there has been too little light and understanding but over which more is now shed. Can it really be God's will that a child becomes sick and suffers? That's what I'll look at next week.

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