

Preparatory Paper Number 9

Enlarged Meeting of the Working Committee

Department on Studies in Evangelism

Bossey/Geneva, April 9-16, 1964

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UNIVERSIDAD DE MEXICO

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THE CHURCH IN THE RACIAL REVOLUTION

In the course of the study on "The Missionary Structure of the Congregation" a number of crucial issues have already emerged. The purpose of this paper is to relate some of these issues to the racial revolution which, at present and for some time to come, is the dominant factor of the North American scene, and hence of American church life!

A. The Church In and For the World

1. The discussion in the Working Groups about structures of missionary ~~acn~~gregations has thus far pointed to two notions about the church in relation to the world: First, the church has been placed by God into the midst of the world as His people in order to exhibit in word and life the meaning of the true world, the world which has its origin and destiny in God, the world whose truth, justice and peace is Jesus Christ. In this sense it can be said that the church is a part of the world (The Church Reduced to its Simplest Expression, CONCEPT, Special Issue 3).
2. Secondly, the commission given to the church indicates that its existence is one of "pro-existence" (Hoekendijk), i. e. that the church cannot exist for its own sake but only for the sake of the world which God created and loves. Like the individual Christian the people of God has died to its old existence marked by regard for its own welfare and survival, and lives on in the new existence, marked by love and complete service to the neighbor--the world.
3. These two notions about the church are further based on a view of mission which has emerged in the study as an important part of the discussion. This is the view of mission as God's mission. It views God's redemptive work as a continuous 'going out' in search for man and the world. God's work in history is the work of love and this love is truly 'out-going'. In Jesus Christ he reveals himself as the one who in the midst of the world accomplishes everything for the world. Thus the church's commitment to the world is nothing but the reflection, the mirror, of the divine intention.
4. How are these notions operative in the church's present involvement in the racial revolution? There is no doubt that the church is today a part of the revolution. In this sense it fulfills the notion of being a part of the world which is--in our part of the globe--predominantly a world of racial revolution. But the question is more specifically: in what way is the church a part of the world? Does it participate in the world in fulfillment of its God-given mandate? Or is it involved

in the world mainly because it is inevitably swept along by the tide of events, forced into it by virtue of its ties to the culture which is changing? In order to deal with this question we must first sharpen it. We shall do so by considering three types of the church's involvement. The questions which arise out of these considerations will point to the issue which has been at the center of much of the discussion in the North-American Working Group: What does it mean to see and to acknowledge God at work in the world?

B. The Church at Work

We shall consider the church's involvement in terms of (a) public pronouncements by church bodies, (b) involvement in community action, and (c) the integration of the churches' own membership.

5. Public Pronouncements: Through such pronouncements by official church bodies the church has spoken affirmatively of the goals of the revolution. This type of action has the longest history and a look at this history shows a development in emphasis. Such a development can be observed e. g. in the shift of emphasis from desegregation to integration, from racial equality to racial justice, or from speaking of a denial of human dignity to speaking of a denial of humanity as such. Furthermore, the churches also have become more specific in terms of objectives by singling out education or housing, or by speaking about the non-violent character of the demonstrations and the sit-ins. The effect of this action has been to put the churches on record as being on the side of the revolution. The record could be useful either for church bodies as a whole in pressing for legislation, or for local groups or individuals as they prepared to engage in action.
6. The impact of this action has notoriously not been a very strong one. It did result in earning the churches a liberal image in the public realm, and the charge, on the part of conservative circles of being infiltrated by communism; but whether it substantially advanced the cause of racial justice is an open question. However, the question is not really that of effectiveness. The question is whether, and in what sense, the church was engaged in its mission at this point. A missionary action needs to make clear the source of its authority. In what name was the church speaking? In the name of Christ? Or of its members? Or both? The church has failed to answer this question when members who choose to ignore the pronouncements can do so without consequences for their standing in the church. Uncertainty over the question of authority also hampers those who are willing to engage in action along the lines of the pronouncements because of the lack of assurance that they will really be backed up. (This problem has now recently been recognized and with it the churches are moving to the new stage of involvement as illustrated by the creation of commissions on race which can render active support).

7. The question of authority was clouded not only because of lack of concomitant direct action, it also has to do with the substance of the pronouncements. Basically, the pronouncements aim at enunciating what is good about the revolution. They give support to efforts to bring about a better society in terms of the standards already accepted by society. Such an act is proper and a legitimate duty of the church in its mission. But it is so only provided the church fulfills its primary office, that of spelling out the truth of the situation. *

The church in mission discovers the truth by responding in faith to God whom it meets in the midst of the revolution. It discovers this truth beyond the social good of the revolution. In the discovery of this truth the church will find its proper authority which is also the authority to affirm the good for which the revolution strives. The question to which the church must address itself as it seeks to speak out with regard to the racial revolution is, therefore, not how much of it it can endorse (e. g. only the non-violent part, not the Black Muslims); primarily, it must answer the question: What is God doing in the revolution?

8. Involvement in Community Action. The churches are no longer merely speaking. During 1963 they have been compelled to move toward direct action. The forms of action can be seen in various ways in which the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council is developing its work: (a) To get regional or local church officials to declare themselves on a specific issue in a community. This is still in the line of pronouncements but it is a point 'where it counts' and practically involves commitment to action. (b) Joint action with secular groups, e. g. in organizing the Washington march. (c) Giving advice, counsel and support to local groups who join in direct action.
9. What is at stake here? The church here has accepted a new kind of involvement, it has embraced a need for action including the support of its members who engage in such action. Is this simply a matter of tactics, a means for the church to maintain its social position? Such criticism is justified as long as this type of involvement remains restricted to the racial crisis. For there are many other types of political and social action to which Christians might be called and for which they would need the support of their church if they were to sustain the pressures (e. g. nuclear armament, workers in unions, executives in companies, people in professional groups). If the decision for more active involvement in the racial crisis remains a tactical decision, owing to the acute stage of the crisis, it can scarcely be said to have a missionary character.
10. This means that the question of the church's action must be pushed beyond the level of tactics just as the question of the church's speaking up must be pushed beyond the level of what is good for society. Where does the question lead? Again, it leads to the

confrontation the church will receive God's command to act. Bound by such a command the church's action will be freed from tactical bondage (although it will lose nothing of the tactical effect), and will become the beginning of the church's involvement in different areas of life of the world!

11. Integration of the Church's Own Membership. This is still largely a task ahead of the churches, but we are nevertheless already involved in it. It follows, first of all, logically from the two other types of involvement. Church members, engaged in the struggle with others in society, will want to bring their own house in order. If the struggle is for opportunity and justice in politics, economics and education, it cannot be denied in church life. This logic is, thus far, still the most powerful factor in the efforts for church integration as is the slogan which expresses the logic most clearly: An integrated church in an integrated society.
12. One wonders, however, why the logic has not exercised more power, and the question of effectiveness, although again not decisive, is nevertheless more serious in this case than in the case of public pronouncements, since here it concerns directly the life of the church. What needs to be recognized is that in following this logic the church is forever trying merely to catch up with the revolution. Even if it did catch up there would still be the question as to what it accomplished in terms of its mission. This is not to say that there may not be any need for the church to eliminate all forms of segregation in its own life. There can be no doubt that it has to do so, if it wants to be the church at all. The question is what integration means for the church at this particular juncture of its history.
13. Integration is to be more for the church than adapting to social change; it is more than surviving in a society in which segregation has become outlawed. Social change is, of course, conceivable, but the question is, again, whether the church is merely to seek the best possible order for its own life, or whether it is to seek the truth about its common life. If the often mentioned parallel with the first-century reception of the Gentiles into the church has validity, it means that the church is not merely faced with the question of survival under somewhat changed social conditions, but that it faces renewal. The Gentiles did not simply enter the Jewish church. Rather, in the conversion of the Gentiles God was offering a new community, the third race. The first-century church was finally enabled to accept this new gift of God; it accepted to be renewed by him. If the parallel stands, this is also the issue for the 20th century church. Again it is the issue what God is doing in and through the revolution.

C. God at Work in the Revolution

14. In his book, Race and the Renewal of the Church, Will Campbell defines the racial issue in these words:

"In a real sense man is not the subject, the point of reference for his own well-being and happiness upon earth. Neither the racist nor the person upon whom he casts his indignity, the disinherited, Negro or white, the builder of houses or the rejected from the houses, the employer or the one deprived of employment, the passer of legislation or the victim of repressive legislation, the murderer or the murdered--none of these is the true referent, the true subject. The only point of reference is God.

The sin, therefore, is that the whole issue of race is an effort to deny the sovereignty of God, to negate the absolute supremacy of God. (p. 53)

We need to retain from this passage the affirmation that in the race revolution the church has to do primarily with God. In terms of the notion of God's mission we can immediately elaborate: It has to do with God at work in the world. As everywhere, so also in this revolution the church is placed in its midst in order to be his people, to declare his deeds. On the understanding of this relationship of the church to its Lord in the midst of the revolution depends the church's authentic participation in the racial struggle.

15. The clarification of this understanding is as difficult as it is being urgent. The difficulty is partly due to the fact that, it being a theological task, it is not considered to be an integral part of the church's missionary action. We are reaping the fruits of having for years separated the theological enterprise from the church's involvement in the world. As a result, theological reflection goes on outside the involvement, some people demanding that it has to precede it, others wanting to act first and to leave reflection to a later stage.
16. As long as the theological task is divorced from the church's actual involvement, it leads either to a justification of the past or to an attempt to guarantee the future. The former is currently the predicament of the Christian segregationist, while the latter is very much the temptation of the integrationist; but it is also the problem of every theology of mission, insofar as such a theology purports to be the theory upon which to base the practice.

17. The church in mission is called to go a certain way. Speaking about the way of the German Church under Hitler, Bonhoeffer said once:

"I would like to have Scriptural proof for my way as a warranty in my pocket. But this desire is never granted by the Bible, because it is not an insurance company for our ways which could possibly become dangerous... Scripture does not prove any way, it proves the truth of God... Precisely Scripture teaches us that we cannot know and overlook in advance the right way and then decide to embark on it; only he who actually goes, knows whether he is on the right way. Only in the doing, in the decision comes insight. Only he who is in the truth, knows the truth." (GSII, p. 25)

The church's way is given today by the racial revolution. But the church cannot have God's word as a guarantee for right action. This means e. g. it cannot accept some goals of the revolution on Christian grounds while rejecting others in the hope to make such judgments normative, either for its own members or for society at large.

On the other hand, the church does receive God's word at the outset and on every stage of its way. Its very mission depends on it. The church cannot simply embark on its way without bothering now or later about the word which God addresses to it. The church does not fulfill its mission simply by going a way--silently so to speak. Its mission is to be God's people on this way, exhibiting his divine missionary purpose for the world. Thus the church needs to go the way of the revolution, the way from segregation to integration; but the truth and basis of its mission is not in this way as such; it is in the word which God addresses to it on this way. To hear, to receive, to proclaim this word is the missionary, and also the theological task of the church in the racial revolution.

19. Thus, two conditions emerge as prerequisites for the carrying out of the theological task: The church must be on the way, and it must be able to listen. The trouble is that we are not at all sure whether the church today is 'on the way.' The current theological and ecumenical discussion puts great emphasis on 'listening', but if this is the initial consideration, we have put the cart before the horse. Is not the frightening question for us this: whether the church can really get 'on the move' with regard to the racial struggle? Whether "its introverted structure can be turned outward" (Spike)? The point of this question is, of course, not to make us despair, but to make us realize that the dynamics which will get the church moving today in terms of its mission are not the urgencies of the revolution as such, but the command of its Lord to go. If this is kept in mind, what follows from it for the various programs aimed at getting the church involved?

20. On the other hand, once the church is on the way, it is not just up against an unknown future! The way is known insofar as the church knows that the Lord who sent it is present on the way. It knows that it is on this way to meet its Lord! With reference to the race revolution it is perhaps most meaningful to point to this encounter in terms of judgment and promise! To know judgment is possible only for him who comes under it; and to know the promise is possible only for him who enters it. In other words, judgment and promise become real to him who is 'on the way'. The following observations grew out of conversations with persons who may be considered to be 'on the way,' i. e. leaders in the freedom movement in the South and others who are involved in the racial struggle in the North. The observations are grouped along the same lines as the three types of involvement considered earlier: Seeking the truth about the revolution, maintaining freedom in action, discerning the signs of renewal.
21. Seeking the Truth about the Revolution. What does it mean that the truth comes to the church in the form of judgment and promise? It would first of all concern the church's own life. In his letter from the Birmingham jail, M. L. King states that "the judgment of God is upon the church as never before." Similarly, the letter by the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. last November speaks of the fact that in the perpetuation of segregation by the church "God's judgment falls upon us." The question is: why is the church under judgment? Certainly because of the church's participation in the system of segregation and its slow pace in moving toward integration. But do we not need to push further? Is this the actual failure, the sin of the church? Is segregation not rather the sign of the judgment. If it were the judgment, the church could remedy the situation by a great effort toward integration. But if we speak of judgment, we speak of sin, i. e. of something that can not be remedied. Judgment means that while the church might rehabilitate itself before society it cannot do so before God. Is not the truth of the racial crisis in terms of the judgment on the church that it has failed its mission, failed to preach the gospel in its most comprehensive sense? Not just for the last few years, but perhaps for the last hundred years? Failing in this sense would mean failing the neighbor whether it be the Negro, the segregationist, the slum dweller, the unemployed, etc.
22. Would it not be necessary for the church seriously to ask itself whether it still has any positive function with regard to the racial revolution? Simply to take for granted that the church is still in business, and moreover in business as usual, seems unrealistic in terms of what God is doing in the world. Not to take it for granted--would this not have to mean to receive it anew in repentance and by God's mercy?

Judgment--repentance--forgiveness should be key terms in the church's mission; not simply--not even primarily--in its pronouncements. They must become embodied in action.

23. But then the question is also: Is the word of judgment not also a word of promise? Is not the truth of the racial revolution in terms of promise that there is a new beginning? Here the question might seriously be considered whether the freedom movement in the South is not a sign for the church of a new beginning. Might not the chance for the non-violent character of the movement signify more than a method or strategy (even if many in the movement consider it as such)? Could it not be a sign--from God to the Church--that in the midst of judgment he promises forgiveness and time (how much?) for amendment of its life? If this were so, what would follow for the churches' attitude toward, and participation in, non-violent action? How could such participation become an act of repentance and a sign of accepting forgiveness?

24. If the church faces up to the truth about its own life, it may also be free to see and speak the truth about the revolution concerning society. It seems to me there is need in the church for frank discussion as to what is at stake for society in the revolution. When the father of a Southern white boy who marries a Negro girl cries out that "This is the end," what does he mean? Would it not be closer to the truth to admit that integration really means the end of something, than to accuse the racists of exaggeration? *

It is understandable that many groups in the civil rights struggle cannot admit this because they might jeopardize certain goals for which they are striving. The church, too, might have to take such tactical factors into consideration, but can it be bound by them if the truth is at stake? What does it mean for the church (or for the individual Christian) to speak the truth, and how does it remain free to do so? This leads to the next observation:

*NOTE: In this connection it has been said that the two most important groups in the revolution are the White Citizens' Councils and the Black Muslims. Why? Because both groups know--and are saying so--that this revolution means the end of the Southern (and perhaps--in the case of the Black Muslims--the American and Western) way of life.

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25. Freedom in Action: The freedom envisaged here is mainly a "freedom of movement," a freedom in which the Christian or the church is able to "move around" in the revolution. Is not the church, when it is on its way in the revolution, bound by the word of judgment and promise and therefore free to be all things to all men? In this freedom it can embrace the goals of the revolution without being bound by them. It can speak out and fight for a better society and higher justice without attaching to these goals a messianic character. It will not think that the revolution heralds the kingdom, but it will be free to see and to point out signs of the kingdom, even those that arise outside its own life.
26. The freedom, however, is not one to withdraw from the revolution. On the contrary, the freedom includes the possibility to go further. It could mean to embrace goals which seem too costly to others.* This raises the question of the role of sacrifice and of the cross in the action of the church in the revolution.
27. Discerning the Signs of Renewal. It may be that the most important question raised by the racial revolution for the church is the question of the renewal of the church's own life. Once more the issue for the church is not survival but renewal. Survival is possible as a social institution but not as the church under God's judgment. In the judgment the only chance for the church is the promise of divine grace that it may be renewed. Since the church is still so much at the beginning of this particular way, there are very few signs which may help in an understanding of renewal. It is, therefore, all the more important to see what signs God may provide outside the church. Here again the freedom movement is truly significant.
28. There is, first of all, significant meaning in the way in which authority emerges in the Movement. It is not based on popularity or mere force of personality, but chiefly on suffering. Secondly, the groups which become involved in demonstrations and consequent arrest develop into real communities. They are gathered around both word and action. In fact only word and action are no longer separated. It is even hard to say when the speaking stops and the action begins in the case of a rally in preparation for a demonstration. At any rate, here the word is spoken and the response of the community follows immediately. Moreover, it is corporate action. The community enters the world as a body. This is markedly in contrast to the traditional gathering of our congregations where the word from the

*NOTE: Will Campbell tells of a white mother in Little Rock who said she could never again send her child to one of the schools who would not accept the child of another mother because of color. "She reported with some emotion how it felt deliberately to sacrifice her son when by a stroke of the pen she could save him," (p. 34)

pulpit has seldom if ever a direct relation to the deed of the hearer in the world, and never to any corporate act by the community. Preaching as a call to corporate decision has become a practical impossibility in our churches. And yet, how can the congregation be missionary without such preaching and without such decision?

29. Two more aspects of the freedom movement may be seen as signs, pointing to the renewal of the church. One concerns the notion of love, both of neighbor and of enemy. It is noteworthy that the notion of love of enemy has taken on new meaning for the people in the racial struggle. The church, in its conformity to the world has nobody who hates it. But nobody who loves it either. It has neither neighbor nor enemy and is thus deprived of love. In the racial struggle both neighbor and enemy emerge and with them the question of love towards them. The other aspect concerns the notion of hope. In the freedom movement there is hope. It is not the ultimate hope, and rightly so, because this would confuse the issue. But it is genuine human hope-- a rare phenomenon in today's America in which most groups are characterized by fear and concern for their public image. This human hope may not be a sign of the kingdom for the church. But surely it challenges the church as to its own hope.

(* From Page 3)

The conceptual basis for making pronouncements in support of the social good as such is mainly provided by the theory of 'middle axioms' which have been defined as ways of stationing the 'common moral convictions which Christians share with non-Christians and which guide Christians in making decisions about matters of public policy in which non-Christians are also involved.' They are intended to provide the basis for 'spelling out what the good of the neighbor is in the world as we know it.' (J. C. Bennett, Principles and the Situation (1958), quoted by P. Lehmann, Ethics in a Christian Context (1963), p. 148 f.)