

The Church: From Tradition to Mission

Text: Acts 6: 5, 8

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The Church lives in a tension. It is always caught in the dilemma of having to find the forms and structures that will enable it to execute its mission to the world and having to remain open and flexible so that those very forms and structures do not bind the Spirit and paralyze the mission. The Church will inevitably develop tradition and must continually struggle free from that tradition in order to get on with the mission.

Perhaps I should use traditionalism rather than tradition, for actually tradition is a positive factor in the life of the Church. There is a living tradition - the ongoing moving of the Faith embodied in the community of faith. Someone has said tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition rightly understood is a living, growing movement always being expanded, modified, enlarged in the light of experience, the experience of being in mission.

But tradition can so easily become traditionalism. Then movement ceases and the mission is paralyzed. Thus the Church must be always vigilant, self-critical, humble before her Lord, ready to learn new truths, gain new insight and design new structures that will enable her in every age to be God's agent of reconciliation in the world.

We cannot learn all we need to know about the form of the Church or the translation of the Gospel from the New Testament. We do have, however, in Acts and the Epistles some principles and models that can help us to find our way in our day. Let me use the early experience of the Church - the experience clustered around Stephen - out of which to make these very significant statements about the Church. These principles have been lived out in our past; they must remain our charter of freedom for the future as we seek to be God's people - the instrument of His purpose and grace in our day.

I want to say a word about Church structure, about Church growth, and about theological understanding.

My points are simple:

The form of the Church must flow from the function of the Church.
The growth of the Church must result from the care of the Church.
The theology of the Church must be shaped by the experience of the Church.

Form follows function. Growth rises from care. Knowledge is shaped by experience.

First of all, from the story of Stephen we can see that structure flows out of mission; form follows function.

You know the story. That beautiful community that took shape in the wake of Pentecost was a community of spontaneous sharing where no one considered his possessions his own but all shared their possessions so that none were in need. It was the true community of the Spirit and it was a beautiful sign of the presence of the Kingdom, but it did not last long. Soon the harmony was shattered. The Hellenist group - those who spoke Greek - complained that their widows were discriminated against in the distribution of food. The Apostles, deeply involved in the proclamation of the Gospel, saw the need of others to take responsibility for the physical needs of the community and they appointed seven whose names are listed in the sixth chapter of Acts, one of whom was Stephen. Although the name Deacon is not used we have generally seen that appointment as initiating the office of Deacon. However these seven were viewed, Stephen at least did not serve at table very long because soon we find him a powerful, persuasive preacher of the Gospel.

But let me underscore the point I am trying to make - *the Apostles met a specific crisis, a concrete historical situation with an improvisation of structure*. Now, to be sure, there was as yet no set structure. In fact, from the New Testament it is impossible to derive a structure for the Church. Whatever form of Church structure may be followed - Episcopal as in the Roman Church, or Congregational, or Presbyterian as in Reformed Churches, all can find data in the New Testament but no one system of polity arises as we have developed them in our structure.

Indeed Edward Schillebeeckx, the Dutch Catholic New Testament scholar, has published a book entitled, *Ministry*, in which he demonstrates beyond question that the Early Church in the first centuries after Christ had a fluid form of structure and government - a book by which he has not endeared himself with the Vatican.

This should put us on notice that the forms and structures of the Church are negotiable and that a constantly changing historical milieu in which we minister will call for changing structures. Structures are negotiable. Jesus Christ remains the same. Form must follow function.

This may seem obvious enough. Yet how often do we not get bogged down in structural questions? We tend to absolutize forms that arose in a given situation to meet a specific need, freezing that form forever as though to change the structure would compromise the Gospel.

Paul says, "Where the Spirit is there is freedom." The Spirit directed the mission of that Early Christian community, improvising forms into order to enable the community to function. We must live in that same freedom, determining how best to structure our life in order most effectively to get the Gospel out.

The structure of the Church must flow out of the mission of the Church. My mentor, Professor Hendrikus Berkhof of the Netherlands, writes in his book *Christian Faith* in the chapter on the Church that the Book of Church Order must be done in loose-leaf today. The implications of that are far-reaching. If only we would remember that when classes and Synods convene we would save ourselves so much energy. We would avoid painful debate and endless discussion and we would be able to get on with the task. Otherwise we are simply playing Church and we are no good to God or the world.

II. There is a second learning from this story that can aid us in getting the right perspective on our calling as the People of God. It is this: *Growth is the consequence of community, a caring community.*

Certainly there was strong proclamation of the Gospel in those Apostolic days and my claim here in no way is meant to detract from that powerful proclamation of the Lordship of Christ. But from the window Luke gives us on the life of that early community we can see that it was indeed a community that the Spirit created. The description of the life of the community in the second chapter is a marvelous picture of a caring community, where no one was left out, no one's needs neglected and where the wellbeing of the whole community was the deepest concern of all its members.

Barnabas' action is a case in point. He sold his estate and brought the money to the Apostles. In that paragraph in the fourth chapter, we read,

There was not a needy person among them....

Again we read,

... The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common.

Stephen and six others were appointed to see that the physical needs of the members of the community were met. The early Church was characterized by caring and that community life was so attractive that it drew thousands in those exciting days following Pentecost.

There is a great deal of talk about Church Growth in our day. At Pasadena, California, there is an Institute on Church Growth and from that center other leaders of the Church Growth movement have spun off. And, of course, who could or would desire to argue against Church Growth. The great Commission still stands and we are called to be witnesses to Jesus Christ bringing the message of His grace to the whole world including our own neighborhoods. Yet I sense sometimes that we get interested in Church Growth out of desperation. We see the statistics. We know if we do not turn things around many congregations will continue to wither and die. And so we decide to grow.

Now it is true that a church must decide to grow and without that intentionality it is not likely that much will happen. Yet to aim at growth for growth's sake is to commit a fatal error. Let me suggest that we must commit ourselves to be the People of God, a caring community reaching out in Jesus' name to share the compassion of God, ministering His grace with no question asked. We are called to give our life away – literally to die that new life may spring forth.

Church growth as I find it practiced today smacks too much of institutionalism, the preservation and perpetuation of our institutions. We get trapped into thinking that it is the institution - be it the denomination or our local congregation - that we must preserve when what God is asking is for a people willing to die to pride of tradition and denomination and congregational security and invest our lives in caring for the world.

We get so turned in on ourselves and begin to feel that in our church we are ends in ourselves, forgetting that we are blessed of God to be a blessing to the world.

Let me suggest that the Christian Church would do well to forget its heavy focus on evangelism and learn to love the world. We must concentrate on making our congregational life reflect the quality of the Spirit of Jesus. When we become a caring community the bruised and bleeding will come in seeking refuge, healing and grace.

Harvie Conn, a professor of Mission at Westminster Theological Seminary, was the Pre-Synod Festival speaker at Kalamazoo this year. He had spent some years in Korea as a missionary before becoming a teacher. He told of the first year of language study which was so frustrating because he wanted to get on with the work but first he must master the language. After nearly a year when he was still very insecure in the language, he could not stand it any longer. He packed a bag and took a train to a Korean city where there was an army base. As he arrived he walked by the base entrance where the prostitutes were lined up. A Korean came up to him and asked if he were a Christian. He said yes and the Korean invited him to his home. He was a Christian pastor and opened his home to him. He was served a plate of uncooked, beaten rice for supper and then when it came time to retire, he learned he was to sleep with the pastor's father, an old man who had asked him many questions. The family lived in very small quarters and he found that Grampa's bedroom was really a small space between two buildings with

walls improvised to keep out the wind. Grampa had one blanket and Harvie simply got under the blanket with Grampa, sleeping on the ground.

Two years later he received a letter from the pastor asking him to come to the village to baptize his father. He explained that his father had not been a believer. When Harvie ate the simple meal with the family and spent the night in those primitive circumstances without complaint, Grampa was impressed. He came to believe and now wanted to be baptized by Harvie. It was not the answers he gave in broken Korean, but the genuineness of his life, his love that penetrated the heart of that old man.

It was the same thing with two prostitutes with whom he shared a meal. He learned a few years later that they had become Christians because for the first time in their lives a Christian had treated them like human beings.

It is when God's love becomes concrete in the love with which we touch another that one becomes open to grace. If only we could genuinely love the world, God would handle the rest and the result would be a growing Church. Growth flows out of care.

III. The third learning I would share from this passage is that knowledge of God flows from experience of God. This is a word about our theology - the articulation of what we believe about God and His revelation of Himself to us in the New Testament.

God revealed Himself in Jesus:

... if you have seen me, you have seen the Father.

That revelation in Jesus finds expression in the New Testament.

The New Testament along with God's revelation in Israel's history is our Scripture and is the authoritative record in which we hear the Word of God, the witness inspired by the Spirit and the instrument the Spirit uses to reveal God to us today. From the Scripture the Church draws its knowledge of the Faith and, as that Scriptural knowledge mixes with our present experience, we seek to translate the Gospel for our day.

The point I am seeking to make here is that there must be an ongoing encounter with the witness of the Scripture and the contemporary culture in order that the Gospel of God's grace may come to expression in every age and generation in meaningful fashion.

The Church historically has erred on two counts:

The failure of orthodoxy has been to take the biblical record and absolutize it in every aspect - not only its witness to God's grace and that salvation that appeared

in Jesus, but also the shape and form of that revelation - that is, the historical accoutrements of that revelation. The result has been the freezing of the Word of God in the thought forms and world and life view of the first century.

The failure of classical Liberalism has been to fail to take seriously the biblical record as an authoritative norm by which every new expression of the Gospel must be judged, and to determine the "truth" only through analysis of the contemporary world with its "modern" understanding.

There are two poles of knowledge by which our expression of the Gospel must be shaped - the biblical record and the contemporary scene. Both are important. It is meaningless to convey biblical knowledge with no attempt to translate that knowledge in terms of what we have learned in the explosion of knowledge in the modern world. It is equally meaningless to master the latest of scientific knowledge and cultural wisdom and fail to bring it into confrontation with the biblical word.

The proclamation of the Gospel in every age must be a translation of the event of Jesus in the idiom of the day, which is the result of hearing the Gospel and possessing the best wisdom of the age. We must read the Bible and read the world. We must hear the witness of Scripture and be sensitive to the questions and insights of our age.

Let me illustrate this from the experience of the Apostolic Church. Think for a moment of what radical revolution the understanding of the Apostles had to undergo to realize that God was in Jesus reconciling the world to Himself.

It took a vision on the Damascus Road to break through to Paul. His fierce persecution of the followers of Jesus was his effort to stamp out a dangerous heresy. It was carried out in the name of the God of Israel.

Peter did not understand that God's grace was for all people, Jews and Gentiles, until the housetop vision and the experience at Cornelius' house, where he experienced the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit just as had the Disciples on Pentecost.

Look at the Scripture lesson – Stephen's great witness that brought him to martyrdom.

But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, and gazing intently up to heaven, saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at God's right hand. "Look, he said, there is a rift in the sky; I can see the Son of Man standing at God's right hand!" Acts 7:55-56

What a moving spectacle that must have been. Stephen, about to be the first martyr for Jesus because he had been the first to see and understand deeply all that had been accomplished in Jesus' life, death and resurrection – because,

therefore, he was the first eloquent witness - and *witness* and *martyr* are the same word in Greek - Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at God's right hand and he cried to all present, oblivious to the hostility and violence breeding in their breasts –

There is a rift in the sky! I can see...!

And there you have it; all the ingredients that eventuated in the historic Church's confession that God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are One God, blessed forever.

The Risen Lord has promised He would not leave His own alone but would come to them and He did. On the day of Pentecost those gathered in the Upper Room knew a power and a Presence that overwhelmed them with the conviction that God was in their midst, that the Spirit of Jesus was with them, that the Spirit of Jesus or the Spirit of God was one Spirit and suddenly it all became clear; they began to comprehend what God had been doing in and through His Servant Jesus.

It took a long time for the Church to be able to articulate that experience – centuries, in fact. The need to give expression to experience was obvious, for they were called to be witnesses to the world, but that was not so simple, for how does one express the inexpressible?

The Christian mission advanced through the Hellenistic world shaped by Greek language and Greek thought forms. Greek philosophy was the highest expression of human reflection on life's ultimate issues. Christian apologists borrowed the language and the philosophical concepts and did their best to say,

God has visited this world.
God revealed Himself in Jesus.
The Spirit of God is with us, dwelling in us.

After centuries of struggle to articulate the experience of the Apostolic community and the ongoing experience of the Church, creedal formulations were advanced - the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian formula - with which the Church has lived all these centuries. My point is that creeds derive from experience and those first Apostles had to do some radical revising of their theological understanding in the light of what confronted them in Jesus, his cross and resurrection and the baptism of the Spirit.

To be sure, God's dramatic intervention in our history was in Jesus. What happened in Jesus became normative for every subsequent age. But history is dynamic, history is movement and we continue to gain knowledge and understanding of our world, of history, of ourselves. All of that must be understood in the light of Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ must be proclaimed in the light of that knowledge .

Jesus Christ is the answer. That is true for every age. But what is the question?

The question that moves the human heart will be variously formulated in every age and it is the task of the Church to listen for the questions and then speak to the questions the Gospel in ever-new translation. Therefore, theological understanding will be dynamic, just as history is dynamic. Theology is derived from two poles - one rooted in a concrete history, the history of Israel and Jesus, one moving with each new age and generation.

Theology must be the expression of God's grace and salvation in Jesus in terms of contemporary culture in order that the timeless Gospel may come to timely expression.

Knowledge of God and experience of God are reciprocal. The knowledge in which we are nurtured prepares us for the experience of God in our life situation and out of the experience of God in concrete living our knowledge is reshaped and translated anew.

Thus we do not have the knowledge of God expressed in creeds once for all with the last word spoken. We have the knowledge of God revealed in Jesus coming to ever-new expression in every new historical context. It is thus that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Stephen's death was an eloquent witness to the insight of faith he had received. He died as Jesus died. He was filled with the Holy Spirit; he saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at God's right hand.

Stephen saw a "rift in the sky;" he was given a vision of God. The reality of his faith and knowledge was demonstrated in the manner of his death. In the midst of a violent crowd with murderous intent he gazed into heaven. They stoned him but he, falling to his knees, prayed,

*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.
Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*

With that, he "fell asleep." Is that not a remarkable description of the manner of death of one being stoned by an angry crowd? And is not the truest test of one's knowledge and faith the way one lives and dies?

What a dynamic movement the Church was in those days. A handful of convinced and committed disciples turned the world upside down. The Cross conquered the mighty Empire of Rome.

It could happen again if we stopped arguing about structure and got on with the mission; stopped worrying about bringing everyone into line with our faith formulas and simply loved the world; stopped debating doctrinal points that divide and allowed the Gospel to come to ever-new expression.

If, in a word, we could move from tradition to mission, we might become again a fruitful instrument in the Master's hand for the salvation of the world and the triumph of the Kingdom of God.