

The Church: Has It a Future?

From the series: The Church: Critical Questions

Text: Matthew 7:4; 31:31; Matthew 23:37-38

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
October 4, 1998

Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is the month of October, and being the son of the Reformation, the month of October always makes me think about the church and I have often in the fall season reflected on the nature of the church, its mission, and its function. I want to do that again this year in October, raising critical questions about the church and, in November, talking about the nature of the community that is the church. I do so this year, perhaps particularly, because I am anxious that we should think together about the nature of the church, the church's future, a future that cannot be taken for granted, ever, but certainly in this congregation as we go into a new church year with a status of independence, somewhat unusual because most of the time, most of the church is interconnected. Not that we are outside of the body of Christ. Nonetheless, we have a particular situation, a circumstance, I believe a particular opportunity, but we ought to be about it intentionally and thoughtfully. And so, if you would for a few weeks just think with me about the church and, this morning, The Church: Has It a Future?

I think I can answer that immediately - of course it has a future, but I would also respond to that immediately by saying it will not be the nature of the church as it has been in the past, I believe, as we look into the future. There will be some significant transformations, I'm quite sure, and I do believe that we can be a part of that movement toward a creative newness, which I would hope we would find ourselves engaged with. Think with me, then, for a bit about the church and perhaps the future shape. Maybe that would be a better title. The kinds of things that will be true, increasingly, as we move together into the future.

I cannot help but remember the couple of weeks that some of us traversed the European continent. Every place you go, there is another church or another cathedral. There are those who have accused me of leading ABC Tours - "another bloody church." But, we seldom miss one. When one is on the European continent, one is impressed with the fact that those spires that ascend heavenward all over that continent bespeak an age of faith. There was a time when the European culture, which has become so thoroughly secular, was marked by faith, Christian faith, to be specific. Those magnificent sacred spaces,

still awesome upon entrance, taking your breath away, making one realize the function of sacred space, of the aesthetic that is able to reach the depths of our being and draw out that attitude of worship, causing us for a moment simply to be still. In one such moment someone said to me, "Whatever else one can say, one would have to admit that was a day when somebody really believed in God." They say you can determine the nature of a culture by its architecture, and that certainly is true of that European scene as it reflects those centuries in which faith was dominant and great cathedrals were raised to the glory of God. I suppose our own day would be marked by the glass and steel skyscraper of the commercial world, the business world. Ours is a different age. But, there was a time when in every village, in the most prominent location, there stood the church as a symbol of that faith in God that was as solid as the rock on which the church was built.

But one cannot traverse that continent today without the sense that, when one enters those magnificent spaces, one is in the environment of the museum. That is not to say that there are not still godly people gathering in worship, but one does have the feeling that many of those beautiful edifices are more now a place where tourists come and light candles and stay a moment to pray, rather than being the cutting edge of the society over which the spire dominates. And so, one recognizes the fact that with religion and with now specifically the church, there are periods of ebb and flow and that to raise the question about the future is significant, it is important.

I read an article some time ago about some of these buildings in The Netherlands. When a building has served as a place of divine worship, there is a general recognition, even for those who have no affiliation or participation in that act, nonetheless some feeling that such a building, such a place ought to be used appropriately when its function is no longer needed in the community. There are a lot of such buildings in The Netherlands, for example. So, how do you find a use for an old church? How do you use a place with dignity that once was a house of worship but no longer functions in that way? What of the future of the church? What of the future of this congregation?

As I was thinking about this a month or six weeks ago, and put together this present series, I received an issue of *The Christian Century* that had an excellent article in it by Peter Berger. Peter Berger is a Lutheran; he's a sociologist; he's been one of the most acute observers of the religious scene, and he writes an excellent article, which was precisely what I had been thinking about, entitled "Protestantism and the Quest for Certainty." He raises the question whether or not the church can survive and have a future if it must live with less than absolute certainty in matters of faith. His answer is "Yes," but not to be taken for granted. In his analysis of the present situation, he says in our world, which is marked by pluralism, there is the interfacing of cultures and religions such as formerly was not the case. Formerly, in previous generations, people could live pretty much isolated in their own communities. People were socialized pretty much the same

way and, where there is a stable community and a stable tradition and a relatively homogenous population, you have a lot of things that are very important about life that are simply taken for granted.

Peter Berger plays on that phrase, "taken for grantedness." Much of life is taken for granted, and that's not all bad. It simplifies life a bit. You don't have to think about every action. You don't have to make a decision every time you make a move. There are things one takes for granted. But, in the arena of religion, the pluralism of our times, the presence of the great religious traditions in our own communities means that, in terms of our religious faith, we can no longer take it for granted. We simply know that there are other options. There are other people who evidence the fruit of the Spirit who believe differently, who act differently than we do, and whenever that happens, when you come into a situation that is genuinely pluralistic, that taken-for-grantedness is obviously undermined. One has to begin to think about what one believes and how one behaves and how one values, etc. Peter Berger says that's our situation.

He quotes the philosopher John Dewey, who speaks about a quest for certainty, and recognizes that it is endemic in the human heart, in yours and mine, that we do seek certain certitudes, certain securities. I like to use the phrase, "lust for certitude." Some things we want to know absolutely. We want to be able to say, "Here I stand," and we don't want to waffle all over the place. Religion and the church as the bearer of religion have fed into the human desire and quest. It's simply quite normal, but I think the disservice that the church as a religious community has visited on its people is to give the impression that it's possible to live with absolute certainties, failing to point out that it is the very nature of our human existence that absolutes are denied us. We are in the stream of history; our lives are marked by change, by development. The future is open, and it is impossible to freeze, absolutize church structures, liturgical forms, creedal formulations, and consequently, we live with a tension, a tension that stems from our quest for certainty and the reality of our human situation which denies us certitude.

I happen to think that the church has played into that lust for certitude and promised what it really cannot promise honestly, and that what we ought to do, what we must do, rather, is help our people learn to live by faith where those absolutes are unavailable. But the question is, can such a church have a future? Can such a community face honestly the human situation and survive, refusing to play into that which has motivated so much religious activity, that quest for certainty and security which, once again, I must say I think is simply not available in our human situation?

Well, Peter Berger in this very fine article says the very heart and center of the Protestant movement of the 16th century Reformation was the refusal to absolutize any human structure, be it the structure of the church, or be it the structure of the faith, or even be it the Bible as the infallible, inerrant word of

God. Anything that a human hand has touched is denied absoluteness. That was the insight of the 16th century. The nuance of the word Protestant is negative, like protest, as being against. But, as a matter of fact, in the 16th century the Protestants were protesting. *Pro* is *for*. Calling for something, so that out of that 16th century movement, at its heart, which was already denied by the 17th century, there was a recognition that there is always a danger to absolutize human forms and structures and institutions, and freeze against the future, and try to create a situation of taken for grantedness, and I have to tell you there's no such place. My question is: Can a congregation survive where there is that kind of honesty up front that denies you the certainty for which your soul longs?

But, in taking that position, I am being true to my heritage, because the essence of the 16th century was that the church was being reformed according to the word of God, and always being reformed, and there was no point, no creed, no structure that could ever finally be absolutized. That's what the whole thing was about, because there was an explosion in the 16th century because churches do what churches do. It happened in Jeremiah's day. They thought, as long as the temple was sitting in the midst of Jerusalem, everything was going to be hunky-dory. And so, the prophet comes. How does God speak to Jeremiah? I don't know. Middle of the night, or did he just overeat the night before and have indigestion? Anyway, he stands on the church steps on the high holy day and they're coming to worship and he says, "Don't trust these deceptive words, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord is this.' Do you think you can just go out and live any old way you want to live, denying the justice and the compassion that God requires, and everything will be just fine because the temple is standing? Not on your life."

Oh, Jeremiah's got a story. What a story. I can't go into it, but they call him the weeping prophet no one ever heeded. Finally he lost his life, but he wasn't alone.

And Jesus, in his controversy with the religious leadership of his day, confronting them with the best in their own tradition, and yet recognizing that it would be true of him as it was true of Jeremiah. Jesus said to the religious leadership of his day, "You've always done it. You're simply the children of your parents who have shed all that righteous blood down through the centuries. The prophet, the one who dares shake the foundations, the one who dares to tell the truth, the one who refuses to cotton to that lust for certitude where certitude cannot be found, that one who will give answers knowing more than one can know." Jesus says, "I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not."

So, Judah went into exile. The Jesus movement split off from the Jewish movement. The Reformation was a rending of the body of Christ because institutions will not live in the light of reality, which is a non-absolute posture in all of life. That's the nature of human existence. I'm sorry to deny you the kind of security and certainty you would want, but if I would give you security and

certainty in this human pilgrimage, I would be giving you something that is not possible. You, rather, have to learn to live by faith.

Sola Fidei; Luther, one of the cardinal planks - By faith! There's no church that's absolute; there's no doctrine that's absolute; there's no book that's absolute; there's only God Who is absolute and God is Mystery and we trust by faith, we lay hold of God. Colette prays a moving prayer that touches us deeply and recognizes the infirmities and the fragility and the tragedy and pain of our human existence, and then the choir sings, "All will be well. All will be well; all manner of things will be well," quoting Julian of Norwich who is quoted here regularly and will continue to be quoted here. Eventually we'll sing it, as well. All will be well. All will be well; all manner of things will be well. I believe that. I live in faith; I trust that, but in the meantime, I don't know. I don't know what tomorrow will bring. I don't know about the next decade or the next century or the next millennium. I have to live, trusting, trusting. The Protestant Principle, said Paul Tillich, refuses to absolutize anything human - church, state, culture, social, whatever. We are pilgrims, we are on a journey, the future continues to open up, we move toward it, trusting, without that kind of certainty that we would so love to have.

I'm thinking about all this, and then I'm reading this article and Berger says, "How can one build institutions on such a fragile base?" I said, "Peter, you tell me. How can you build institutions on such a fragile basis?" Don't viable institutions require a strong foundation of taken for granted verities? Require representatives who exude self-assured certainty? Let us assume that over time it is difficult to fake this, and we must ask, if one constructs institutions on the basis of the sort of skepticism that the Protestant Principle implies, will these institutions not be extraordinarily weak, associations of individuals with no deep commitment? Can such institutions survive? I want to say, "Peter Berger, you're reading my mind."

Do you know what sells in Peoria? Do you know where the vitality and the strength and the resources are in the religious world? They are in places where there is absolute certainty, where there is promise without qualification. Where there is triumphalism. Where there is reveling in this victory and triumph of God that makes all things well. They're flourishing, folks, and my question to you is not whether we will flourish, but simply whether we'll survive. Can an institution that is deadly honest with the human situation, simply trusting God, survive?

Peter Berger says, "Yes," but he said there will be a difference. You can believe a lot of the same things, but you hold them differently because you know there are other options, and you know that you have intentionally decided to be here, and that you have deliberately embraced a certain faith and posture, and that you are an association of voluntary members. There's no coercion. Nobody forces you. No peer pressure. No community pressure. Just plain saying, "That's what I believe, and I can live with that kind of uncertainty because underneath it is a deep trust

in God that will enable me, come triumph or tragedy, light or shadow, radiant sunshine or the dead of winter, to prevail.

In 1972, a man who was working for the National Council of Churches named Dean Kelly, wrote a book, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*. This was 1972. I had been back here about a year. Kelly was observing, as Peter Berger, sociologically, phenomenally, the church scene, and he asked why conservative churches were growing, that is, churches with a very rigid creed and a very rigid social code, (you do this and you don't do that), and a series of demands, (you're here on Sunday, Wednesday night, you tithe your income), etc., etc. Why, he said, are conservative churches marked that way growing? He said, "As a matter of fact, they *are* the churches that are growing," and he has been proven to be at least partially right. In 1972 I took that book into the pulpit in that little sanctuary over there and I held it up and I said, "Folks, if Dean Kelly is right, we are doomed, because I am trying to do something that is absolutely opposite, diametrically opposite from what he says works." So, if we're in trouble, it was intentional, and it's the only way, it's the only way that I can be a part of any church in the future. An honesty, a trust, and that's all there is. So, let's keep thinking about it.