LATE PROPHETS SPEAK

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The world into which I was born in 1878 seems very simple and tranquil compared to the world in which I died more than ninety years later. Yet it was a time of ferment when revolution was brewing in every sphere of human life. The major writings of Darwin and Marx were still very new, a violent strike occurred in Pittsburgh the year before my birth, and Colonel Ingersoll was storming around the country attacking "the crude and incredible orthodoxy" in which he was reared by his minister father.

I myself grew up in and around Buffalo, New York. My father was a teacher of Latin and Greek and later a high school principal. Between the two of them my father and grandfather taught in Buffalo for three quarters of a century. When my father and I went down the street, "I found it convenient to take my hat off and keep it off, for so many boys and girls in the city had been trained under him and his father, that his progress called out an almost continual salutation."

Ours was a happy and democratic family in which everyone was given his say concerning any family problem. Many years later, however, I reported in The Readers Digest, an incident that revealed where the ultimate authority lay. As my father started for school one morning, he called back to my mother, "'Tell Harry he can cut the grass today if he feels like it.' Then after a few steps he turned back and added, 'Tell Harry he had better feel like it.'"

"The main source of my unhappiness in early school days was religion." The faith of my Baptist parents was healthy and positive. "But some of the most wretched hours of my boyhood were caused by the pettiness and obscurantism, the miserable legalism and terrifying appeals to fear that were associated with the religion of the churches... I vividly recall weeping at night for fear of going to hell." According to the migrant evangelists, "the major sins sure to land us there were dancing, card playing and theatregoing. I hold it everlastingly against them and all their kind that once, as a young boy, because of their idiotic legalism, I refused my father's invitation to see Edwin Booth in Hamlet."

After high school I enrolled at Colgate University. There I established a lifelong friendship with the Colgate family, who were benefactors of what was then a school of about 200 students." My critical faculties were awakened, "...and I entered a long personal struggle over "the intellectual credibility of the Christian faith." That struggle was not mine alone. "Through the same kind of conflict went multitudes of youths in my generation, some emerging as fundamentalists, others as liberals, and others as agnostics and unbelievers. That was the choice in those days."

I was helped in my own search for a rational faith by the famous liberal, Baptist theologian, William Newton Clarke. After receiving my B.A. I studied with him for a year in the Colgate Theological Seminary before transferring to Union Seminary in New York. In later years many of my colleagues were justifiably critical of the old liberal theology. But it "offered to a generation of earnest youth the only chance they had to be honest while being Christian."

The first months I spent in New York were the most exhilarating I had ever known. I worked in a Bowery mission and threw myself enthusiastically into courses at Columbia and Union. Then suddenly one night in November I could not sleep. This was the beginning of what they used to call a nervous breakdown. I was forced to drop out of school for a year and to spend some time in a sanitarium. "I have often wondered whether if my father had not been there saying, 'Harry! Harry!' I would really have cut my throat with that razor." Later on when depressed people came to counsel with me, I knew just how they felt. "My God! how did you know that?" people used to exclaim when I described their own feelings.

Through those days of personal agony "I learned some things theological seminaries do not teach. I learned to pray, not because I had adequately argued out prayer's rationality, but because I desperately needed help from a power greater than my own. I learned that God, much more than a theological proposition, is an immediately available resource.....without that experience I do not think I would have written" my best-selling book, The Meaning of Prayer.

But with God's help I mastered my problems, graduated from the seminary summa cum laude, and began a long pastorate at the First Baptist Church in Montclair, New Jersey. Though I am mainly known as a preacher, "preaching has never been easy for me. In the beginning it was a continual struggle." In time I developed a distinctive preaching style based on the premise that "every sermon should have as its main business the head-on constructive meeting of some problem that was puzzling minds, burdening consciences, distracting lives." I did not think of my sermons as monologues, but as dialogues growing out of my day by day encounter with the congregation. Later when I became interested in psychology I conceived of my preaching as a "counseling on a group scale." My popular book, On Being a Real Person, is the result of that kind of preaching.

But during my days in Montclair, social issues were on the minds of many church leaders. In 1907 there appeared what is very likely the most influential book in this century by an American religious leader. It was Walter Rauschenbusch's Christianity and the Social Crisis. The concerns raised in that book and others sent me back to school part-time at Columbia University, where I earned an M.A. in sociology. I became something of an expert on labor relations and was commissioned by a magazine to cover the textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

I was also in increasing demand as a speaker at college chapels. Many students resented the compulsory chapel services of those days, and preaching under such conditions was quite a challenge. "The first time I preached at Princeton I faced a sea of Sunday newspapers spread wide open when I began, and in the middle of the first sentence a huge six-footer on the center aisle heaved himself up with extended arms in a mighty yawn." But I got their attention before I was through. I also formed a close friendship with the president of the college, Woodrow Wilson.

In 1915 I left my pastorate to become a full-time professor of preaching at Union Theological Seminary. Shortly afterwards I wrote the only book I wish I had not written. It was a belligerent pro-war book that sold 200,000 copies. Later on I regretted our involvement in World War I and I opposed our entrance into World War II. In the middle of the latter war I spoke out against saturation bombing in which whole cities were destroyed and thousands of civilians were killed.

During that first war, however, I was sent by the Y.M.C.A. on a speaking mission among the troops in England and France. The tension and terror of that experience were relieved by the story of a letter opened by the military censors. "Stop those nagging letters," a soldier wrote his wife. "Do let me enjoy this war in peace."

"War is naturally followed by reactionary trends in religion, as in society at large. People long disturbed want to get back to what they think of as 'normalcy', and in religion this commonly takes the form of a retreat to orthodoxy." It is not surprising that the fundamentalist movement became very aggressive after World War I and began trying to drive liberal people out of the mainline churches.

It happened that during those years I served as a kind of permanent guest preacher at the First Presbyterian Church in downtown Manhattan. In March of 1922 I preached a sermon called 'Shall the Fundamentalists Win?' If ever a sermon failed to achieve its object that one did." It was meant to be a plea for goodwill, asking that people of various shades of opinion remain together in the churches. But a leading public relations man distributed thousands of copies which immediately raised a storm of protest across the country. Conservative Presbyterians led by William Jennings Bryan began action to force me out of my pulpit. A Baptist editor called me "a Baptist bootlegger and a Presbyterian outlaw...the Jesse James of the theological world." On the theological left, the editor of the Unitarian paper attacked me for continuing to call myself an "Evangelical Christian" and for lacking the honesty to adopt his point of view.

In the end I was faced with the choice of joining the Presbyterian Church, and thus officially subscribing to their confession of faith, or of giving up my pulpit. I chose to resign. During those last weeks that I preached at First Presbyterian so many people came to the services that traffic jams occurred outside the church. On my last Sunday, I said:

> "They call me a heretic. Well, I am a heretic if conventional orthodoxy is the standard. I should be ashamed to live in this generation and not be a heretic."

Not long after John D. Rockefeller, Jr. approached me in behalf of the Park Avenue Baptist Church, inviting me to become its minister. After raising several other objections I told him, "I do not want to be known as the pastor of the richest man in the country."

There was a dead silence. "Then he said, 'I like your frankness, but do you think more people will criticize you on account of my wealth than will criticize me on account of your theology?'"

So I accepted his invitation. In time, the church changed its name and location and became the famous Riverside Church overlooking the Hudson River on New York's accropolis, known as Morningside Heights. I insisted that this new church experiment be non-denominational, including Christians of all sorts in its membership. It was also inter-racial from the beginning. While the common belief that most of the members were wealthy is untrue, I do acknowledge to my regret that there were not many blue collar workers among us. We could not escape the class barriers that so divide American Protestantism.

My ministry at Riverside was mainly a preaching ministry. I spent up to thirty hours a week on my sermons, not counting the months I worked on them at my summer home in Maine. Rumor has it that I kept my secretaries

busy gathering illustrations for me. But I also gave time to a counseling ministry, to writing many books, and to encouraging my church's involvement in practical programs related to the decaying neighborhood to the north of our building.

Union Seminary was right across the street from Riverside Church. As I continued to work with the students and faculty there, I became aware of a new theological movement that was highly critical of the kind of liberalism of which I was regarded as a chief spokesman. This movement was known popularly as neo-orthodoxy. Even before it spread to America I myself criticized the superficial optimism of much liberal theology. I recognized also the vagueness of much liberalism, its tendency to reduce religion to moral platitudes and its naive reliance on human reason to solve all the world's problems. I noted that sometimes we liberals were more concerned with "adjusting Christian thought to secular culture" than with affirming the unique contribution of the Christian message.

But in my autobiography, written in 1956, I reaffirmed the value of the liberal movement. "The neo-orthodox today may condemn liberalism as they will;" I said, "they are nonetheless its pensioners and would not be here at all had not liberalism waged and won for them its indispensable campaign. We could be Christian without being deaf, dumb and blind in the face of modern knowledge. All truth, we said, is God's truth, and Christian theology can take it, rejoice in it, and incorporate it into the understanding of the gospel."

That is precisely what I tried to do in my pulpit, in my radio sermons heard across the nation and in my books. I do not claim to have been a great scholar or an original thinker. "My vocation was to be an interpreter in modern, popular, understandable terms, of the best that I could find in the Christian tradition." In that role I helped a great many people stay in the church and find meaning there who otherwise would have given up entirely on Christianity.

Were I alive today I would be disturbed that so many young people seem to be reverting to the same kind of crude dogmatism, biblical literalism and emotionalism against which I rebelled in my youth. I cannot believe that the future lies in that direction.

I would also be disturbed by the radical theologies around today that deny any place for God. For me God was always a living experience. I am not surprised that the job of trying to relate Christian faith to modern culture has to be done all over again. But my faith was always God-centered, Christ-centered, and indeed, though many might disagree, Bible-centered. I think my faith would find the same focus today.

No doubt there is much that I had to say that is now out of date both in style and in content. But that does not trouble me. For the main thrust of my message was that each generation must live out the challenge of Christian discipleship in terms of its own time. I tried to say that in the words of a hymn that I wrote for the dedication of Riverside Church, just forty-three years ago, on February 8, 1931.

I would be pleased to know that people are still singing that hymn in 1974.

God of Grace and God of Glory

God of grace and God of glory,
On thy people pour thy power;
Crown thine ancient church's story;
Bring her bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage,
For the facing of this hour,
For the facing of this hour.

Lo! the hosts of evil round us
Scorn thy Christ, assail his ways!
From the fears that long have bound us
Free our hearts to faith and praise.
Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage,
For the living of these days,
For the living of these days.

Cure thy children's warring madness;
Bend our pride to thy control;
Shame our wanton, selfish gladness,
Rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, Grand us courage,
Lest we miss thy kingdom's goal,
Lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.

Set our feet on lofty places;
Gird our lives that they may be
Armored with all Christlike graces
In the fight to set men free.
Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage,
That we fail not man nor thee,
That we fail not man nor thee.

Save us from weak resignation
To the evils we deplore;
Let the search for thy salvation
Be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage,
Serving thee whom we adore,
Serving thee whom we adore.