

MANIFESTO FOR THE NEW LIBERAL CHURCH
PART II

May 23, 1976

Last week I said that these are times both of stress and of opportunity for the kind of Protestantism represented in churches like ours. This means that these are also times of temptation. One temptation was very evident a few years ago when the currents of doubt were so strong and the demand for change was so powerful. This was the temptation for the church simply to acknowledge the death of God, to let the outside world write the agenda, to let various group process gimmicks take the place of worship and prayer and to seek salvation in some purely human panacea.

Another sort of temptation is more evident today when there are signs that a very widespread spiritual quest is underway. The temptation is to try to ride the coattails of the evangelicals, to gather up the crumbs that fall from those tables where some form of old time religion is being served up with new relish.

It is difficult for what I have been calling "the new liberal church" to find a place to stand today, a place that is distinct from a purely secular outlook on the one hand and from various orthodoxies on the other. Yet that is the challenge before us. We must seek and we must bear testimony to a third option that is in keeping with our own progressive heritage and which faces squarely this startlingly new age in which we live. We must do something more than fulfill a rather unfair definition of the Unitarians that once appeared in a leading news magazine:

"Agnostics who can't kick the church-going habit."

That won't do if for no other reason than that we have proved the habit can be kicked.

The time has come to begin speaking boldly for our own option, even though that option may continue to remain hazy in these confusing times.

Hence my manifesto for the new liberal church. Last week I said that the manifesto has a negative side. There are certain attitudes that I believe we must reject quite emphatically. I listed five such rejections. Today I point to some affirmations for which I believe we may stand. The affirmations tend to pair up with last week's rejections.

1. First, the new liberal church affirms a faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ that is secure enough to live with changing images of God.

Not only outside the churches, but inside the churches there are many people for whom old ways of thinking and talking about God no longer seem very persuasive or very helpful. I am such a person myself, and perhaps in a couple of weeks I shall preach to you a little sermon called "Confession of a Fallen Away Atheist." In any case, we are forced to live without the security of fixed certainties. In this situation some of us lose faith entirely. Others panic into some form of fundamentalism.

I think that the new liberal church should be a place where people can struggle to steer clear of those alternatives. It will be a place where we can dialog freely with all the forms of faith and unfaith of our day. We

shall find the strength for this freedom in the belief that it is not our claim to the truth that matters, but rather the claim which the truth makes upon us. What matters is not the concepts of God that we claim as our own. What matters is our inescapable awareness that God makes us his own. This is a very biblical; very evangelical, very Protestant way of looking at things. We find no ultimate security in our own ideas. We do not claim to be able to say with any finality what we mean by the word, "God." But we find security in the faith that we are claimed for allegiance to a power that reaches beyond our own thoughts.

2. The new liberal church affirms its reverence for each person's spiritual insight. This is not to fall into the grievous error of holding that it doesn't matter what people believe so long as they believe something. It is not to do people the injustice of claiming that you can care about them while showing indifference to their beliefs. It is to say that every person has the need and the right to arrive at a faith that is truly his or her own. It is to say that people in the church will share beliefs humbly, not impose them arrogantly. Finally, it is to confess the faith that where people meet freely and in mutual respect, something greater than the people themselves will appear.

3. The new liberal church will dedicate itself forthrightly to the social applications of the Christian message. Today people are fatigued by the affairs of the world. Denominational officials who once thought they were Elijah on the mountaintop now are persuaded by shrinking budgets to appeal to us in the guise of shrinking violets. As I suggested last week, it is in just such a moment of church history that the new liberal church will heed the call to assert the social dimensions of the Gospel.

People in the new liberal church will not agree about how to attack the issues. It is not essential, or even desirable that they always agree. It is not particularly important that they pass resolutions about this or that. It is only rarely that the parish church will prove the most appropriate structure for acting upon social issues, although the time may be ripe for Christians to form other structures for that purpose. What is essential is that people confront the issues in the context of Christian community and of their individual discipleship.

Any version of Christian faith that does not grapple with war and peace, with human equality, with hunger, with the kinds of issues raised by such episodes as the Karen Quinlan case - any version of Christian faith, I say, that does not meet such concerns as these head on is not worth your time or my time. Such a version of religion can have no true significance for us, nor any authentic connection that I can see with the religion of Abraham, of Moses, of Amos and of Jesus Christ.

4. The new liberal church will accept courageously the open-endedness of the church's task in a fast-changing world. The faith that is active there will include not only the elements of belief and trust, but also those of venture and vision. Knowing that the future is open and that God alone is absolute, the people in such a church will decline to grant finality to any way of doing things either in the church or in society at large. Confident that their God goes before them as he went before the people of Israel, they will look upon the church not as a holding operation, but as a great adventure.

5. The new liberal church will stand for many things in particular.
It will stand for the things we have just observed.

It will stand for faith in the God who lays claim to us through Jesus Christ.

It will stand for reverencing the freedom of the human spirit.

It will stand for the social application of Christian ethics.

It will stand for accepting the challenge of the future.

In very specific ways it will follow through on these affirmations as it lives with the issues of life and death.

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It would be much more comfortable if we could make the church in our time what it was in some past times - a solid place in the center of town where the same cycle of ceremonies is repeated from generation to generation, the same ordered doctrines are taught in the same words, the same relationship to the world around it goes on and on. So it was - or at least, so it seemed it was - in the Middle Ages. I have often longed for such a church.

It would be more comfortable perhaps if the church would simply close down and let us all blend into the surrounding landscape with our private convictions and our private doubts.

The new liberal church will be for those who could not enjoy such varieties of comfort even if they tried. It will be for those for whom religion is an exploration, a quest, a seeking, and who seek company both in walking through the darkness and in celebrating the light.