

THE TRIPLE CLEAVAGE

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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This is the first in a series of ruminations.. What I say today comes by way of an unsystematic introduction. It is the beginning of a dialogue to which I hope to return from time to time over the next several months. (I shall have these sermons copied so that you may continue to ruminate too. Sermon copiers are hereby invited to volunteer.)

These Triple Cleavage sermons will be more in the nature of explorations than of exhortations. They will aim to be thought starters not thought finishers. They will seek not so much to inspire as to unsettle. They will try to probe from a variety of angles a weakness at the core of contemporary American Christianity.

But how to begin? How to start toward the truth?

Perhaps with a little fiction.

Here is a fictional fellow named Herman. He was a delegate to The Thirteenth General Synod of The United Church of Christ, which convened at Rochester, New York earlier this summer. He found the Synod an exhilarating experience. He thought that most of the delegates either would be ministers or people like himself, a six handicap golfer and middle-aged insurance broker. But there were all sorts of people; Puerto Ricans, blacks, teenagers, Samoans and more women ministers than he ever knew existed. He'd been to a good many conventions before--Rotary, The Ripon Society, The National Association of Delphinium Growers--but never before had he heard cerebral palsy victims make speeches from wheelchairs or discussed a resolution with a person suffering from Downs Syndrome.

Though he considers himself to be a moderate on most issues, Herman was stirred on the opening morning when President Avery Post declared that he intended to pursue vigorously the mandates given to him at earlier Synods to lead the way on such "Mission Questions" as Equal Rights for Women, Civil Liberties for Homosexuals, Sanctions Against South Africa. Herman clapped loudly during the service celebrating the victory of the Wilmington Ten and he got a prickly feeling trying to keep his candle from going out as he stood in the rain during the ERA vigil on the steps of the Rochester War Memorial. He went along with most of the votes and he was glad to support International Peace and Family Life and Church Priorities for the next four years.

Herman wished though that The Faith Priority had won too. He agreed in principle with those who argued that Faith was presupposed in all that the Church did and therefore should not be made a special priority. But he had the feeling that in practice this presupposition was questionable. He suspected that many people at Synod were like himself, rather confused about their faith. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why they talked about everything else and voted on everything else. Why weren't there ever any resolutions on the Renewal of Spiritual Life, on Teaching the Bible, or Evangelism? A denominational Newsletter said that The Synod rejected a "Back to Basics" theology and a focus on "Narrowly Spiritual Concerns." Herman wasn't aware that he'd been doing that. He did feel he'd come out for a lot of good causes. But after he got home and the excitement wore off he was troubled by an empty feeling. He didn't want the Church to be "Narrowly Spiritual", but he just wished it could be spiritual one way or another.

Sally is another character out of fiction who belongs to the church. Her worship attendance is spotty and, to tell the truth, that whole side of things leaves her cold. She can't imagine what God gets out of people coming and singing hymns especially when they sing like her congregation. Sally was shocked to learn that in some churches continued membership depends on attendance at communion, because she herself always avoids The Lord's Supper. The whole "ritual side of things", as she calls it, makes no sense to her. Didn't Isaiah say that God took no delight in solemn assemblies and that what God wanted was justice? As for prayer and things like that, the world has too many narcissistic people sitting around contemplating their navels.

Sally keeps her connection with the church because she is interested in nuclear disarmament and the rights of women. She feels that the church has been woefully neglectful of both concerns. Any number of times, especially back in the late sixties, she was on the point of quitting the church entirely. But Sally always comes back because there are always a few people in the church who take such concerns seriously. And even though she doesn't go in much for prayer and worship, she feels her social concern is rooted in something deeper. She isn't at home with atheist reformers. She takes her inspiration from Amos, John Swomley, Jr., Rosemary Ruether and that nice young minister who got kicked out of his pulpit for advocating freedom of choice on abortion.

Abigail goes to church every Sunday. She doesn't think much about why she goes, but if she did think about it, she would probably decide that she goes to church because it is her duty. Abigail believes that people should keep the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments and she has always assumed that going to church has something to do with reinforcing a commitment to a lifestyle based on those guidelines.

Lately, however, Abigail has been feeling uneasy about church because she fears that churches these days have lost their dedication to morality. When she went to Sunday School it seemed to her that a good deal of stress was put on basic virtues like honesty and loyalty and purity. Even in public school that was true. It is hard to believe now, but there was a time when the story about George Washington and the cherry tree wasn't a joke. Children took it seriously. In fact, she can remember that when her own father discovered that someone had been smoking cornsilk in his pipe, the example of George Washington not telling a lie had something to do with her confession.

Abigail believes that children lack good examples today. More and more it seems as if society is experiencing a breakdown in moral integrity. Whether in business, government, school or family life the evidence is all around us. It is all very well to talk about social justice, but isn't public righteousness undermined by breaches in personal morality? How often one hears of some social prophet who casts discredit on his movement by the revelation that he has been taking bribes or cheated on his income taxes or is mixed up in vice. The church ought to get back to training people in basic virtues. After all, isn't that why we have churches?

Then there is Archie Gorham. Archie is the sort of all round, contemporary church man that is cultivated by the ecclesiastical brass. He's an active organization man and yet he is also a deeply spiritual man who has more than once been featured speaker at a layman's retreat. Archie believes in the social justice mission of the church without setting this off against the inner life of faith. He's always right up to date in sensing the mood of the times, yet he never loses

his feeling for heritage either. Archie is fun to take along to conventions because he likes to have a good time and will even drink three bottles of beer in the conference caucus suite at the end of a long day of meetings. But Archie always keeps things under control. He'll be back there at 7:00 A.M. to discuss the next day's agenda.

In the best sense Archie is a devout secular Christian. He is Christian because he is committed to God as revealed in Jesus Christ and to the community of disciples that began with Jesus. Archie is devout because his commitment is sincere and put to work in many practical ways. He is a man of prayer and of conscience. Archie is secular in the original sense of that word--namely, having to do with "the present age." Archie lives in the here and now. He never much troubled himself about any hereafter.

But recently Archie's sister died. Archie had always looked after her quite a bit because she was younger than he and their parents died when she was only a girl. Archie always felt that his sister was a wonderful person, but somehow she had more than her share of trouble in life. She made a bad marriage and after the man ran off, Archie found himself mowing her lawn, counseling her kids, and filling out her tax forms. After one of her boys got into trouble and his sister got hooked on tranquilizers. Then just as things were beginning to go better, she contracted a rare illness and died at the age of thirty-seven.

Well, the whole thing caught Archie up short. He never thought much about the hereafter and he wasn't sure that he believed in it, but suddenly it seemed that unless there was something more, things here and now, including all the things he did in church, looked rather shabby and sad. He knew that people in his kind of church didn't talk much about "salvation" and "eternal life" and things like that. If he suggested that they talk about such things, most of them, including the minister, would be quite uncomfortable.

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There are our characters from fiction. They are a device for pointing to the truth in the concrete, the truth as it is lived and experienced. Now let me explain what I am about by growing more abstract.

I believe that American Christianity is troubled by some very deep rifts, cleavages, splits, divorces--use whatever word you will. Things that ought to go together in unity have a way of coming apart.

One such cleavage is the cleavage between personal devotion and social action. This cleavage in the life of the Church has been around for a long time. For a long time people have been talking about it and saying that it should not exist, but it does exist. In each generation the personal devotion-social action cleavage appears anew.

A second cleavage has received less publicity than the first. But I think it is becoming just as serious. This is the cleavage between personal morality and social justice. Obviously this rift in contemporary religion is related to the one between devotion and social action, but it is also quite distinct. It is a very much neglected issue in the life of our churches.

Now originally I had planned to speak of only two cleavages. But a few days ago I decided that we must also address ourselves to a third. This is the cleavage between the this-worldly and the other-worldly in the life of faith.

As we think about these cleavages we need to go beyond easy categories. For example I don't think it is sufficient just to classify attitudes as conservative and liberal. We need to go deeper than that. Nor is it sufficient to think only in terms of conflicting factions. The cleavages of which I speak do not only cut off group from group, or person from person, they cut through people's souls. As individuals we find certain elements in our religion flying apart inside of us.

Finally, these separations of which I speak do not necessarily reflect open conflicts in the life of the church. Silence may speak louder of them than controversy. Nobody is organized against eternal life. It is just that there are places in the church where nobody talks about it.

To speak of three cleavages is undoubtedly a superficial and inadequate way of getting at what seems to me to be the mass of inner confusion at the heart of much contemporary Christianity. But it is a simple diagram for making a beginning. One of these Sundays I'll begin to fill in the diagram.

In the meantime, there's a bit of contemporary slang that sums up the challenge we face in today's church. It is the challenge of trying "to put it all together."