

Two Christianities

John C. Bennett

Journalists, historians, sociologists and religious leaders are all agreed that the American churches are badly split. The division is partly theological, but it recognizes no traditional bounds of denomination, afflicting Roman Catholics as much as the various Protestants. The thesis of Dean Kelley's *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York, 1972) is suggested by the title he himself had chosen for the book: "Why Strict Churches Are Strong." Churches that are ecumenical in spirit and open to the wider world do not prosper like those that are highly authoritarian and exclusivistic. Strict authoritarianism responds to the desire for secure foundations in a badly shaken culture.

If one takes a global view of the theological differences among Christians, however, it is obvious that our ideas of what is "conservative" and what is "liberal" need some revising. Conservative theologies in some other countries are not so tied to conservative politics as is the case in the United States. Right-wing religious Americanism naturally has no appeal in other countries, and it is precisely that type of religious expression in America which so inflames the split in our churches.

Then too, those who project an indefinite trend toward the demise of "open" forms of Christianity tend to ignore a long trend to the contrary. Denominations that take theological scholarship seriously usually move over a period of a few decades from right to center, and frequently beyond that. Scholarship is not very compatible with absolutistic exclusivism and uncritical authoritarianism. Theological schools offer the clearest example of this pilgrimage in recent decades, and their influence upon the churches is inestimable.

I want to focus, however, on the split between those who want churches to seek fundamental change in society and those who espouse an individualistic gospel removed from involvement in progressive social or political action. This split is often most evident between members of local churches and the stance of their denominational or ecumenical officialdom. Frequently and unfortunately it appears as a conflict between clergy and laity.

A summary of two common attitudes toward the social responsibility of churches might be useful, not because it is a new issue, but because it has recently flared up in new ways. On one side are those who see their churches as agents of social change and thus give strategic priority to the cause of oppressed people both at home and in "the third world." They stress the mission of the church to the outside world as much as, or even more than, its service to its own members. The church must engage in transforming institutions and structures, as well as caring for individuals and families. They are ready to risk involvements that will be regarded by their opponents as more "political" than "religious."

On the other side are those who would have the church stick to its traditional functions: the salvation of individual souls, often in an otherworldly context, and pastoral service to people in their private lives. Most of the social teaching and action of the churches is viewed as alien secular work. The belief is that converted individuals will do what needs to be done to change social structures. They seek to avoid controversy in the church, and have a special anxiety that some group within a denomination or local church may say or do something controversial that commits the denomination or local church as a whole. These are only the surface marks of the two types of Christianity.

Christianity, to say the obvious, is a many-sided faith. It is embodied in a multiplicity of institutions and activities and belief systems which are legitimate

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expressions of the faith, though some of them, when isolated from others, appear as caricatures of what one may believe Christianity to be. *This manysidedness of Christianity is the source of its richness and also of our current controversies.* People become Christians and join churches for many different reasons. For some, of course, it is merely a matter of following family patterns or joining a church in order to become part of a community. But among those who make a real decision we can distinguish between those who have had an experience of God through Christ that has given them inner joy and peace and deliverance from a personal sense of loss and those who are attracted to Christianity and the church because they see in them resources for social change, for justice and peace. Others see Christianity and churches chiefly as stabilizing forces. The last understand religion as giving sanction to the American way of life, to the so-called Protestant ethic and, in general, to American goals in the world.

To Comfort and to Challenge (by Glock, Ringer and Babbie, Berkeley, 1967), was a study of the Episcopal Church in the United States, but its findings as indicated by other studies probably reflect the experience of many other churches. Glock found that the dominant role of the church in the minds of most members is associated with the word *comfort*, while a minority see Christianity as a religion of prophetic *challenge*.

In fact the words "comfort" and "challenge" both have solid groundings in the New Testament. "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28-30). "I came to cast fire on the earth; and would that it were already kindled! . . . Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division" (Luke 12:49-53).

Professor Glock and his colleagues have been helpful in calling attention to this contrast within the church, but I very much doubt that the word "comfort" brings out the depth or range of the problem. I would substitute for the word "comfort" the phrase "the affirmative and supportive aspects of faith." These aspects are not only essential, but it is with them that Christianity begins and ends. Such affirmative and supportive aspects include:

Praise—thanksgiving—celebration

Gospel or good news—the promise of Salvation

Grace—forgiveness—acceptance

A sense of meaning in the face of the mystery of existence, of massive evil, of personal pain, of frustration and death

Healing of spirit and what Paul Tillich called "the courage to be."

Comfort is really a consequence of all these elements

in our faith. When isolated from this context it trivializes Christian experience, but comfort is not trivial. There would be neither Christian Gospel nor Christian worship nor Christian faith nor Christian church without these affirmative and supportive aspects.

No doubt Dean Kelley is right in underscoring the great weakness of mainline churches that are open theologically and progressive socially, but whose members often feel they are not helped in finding meaning for their lives. Comfort, in any deep sense, results from the discovery of meaning. Meaning includes the elements of judgment and prophetic teaching, but if only these elements are emphasized the result is a Christianity as distorted as when they are omitted. The omission is of course the more common distortion.

The faith in its wholeness witnesses to the God of judgment who transcends all nations and powers of the world. Judgment includes warning against the idolatries of one's nation or way of life, of power, security, success and affluence. Judgment illuminates our period in history. It involves the imperative that churches should identify with the poor and oppressed majority of the human race. Religious interpreters today see the last point more clearly than most of their predecessors, not because they are more committed or more intelligent, but because they have listened, have been unable to avoid listening, to the articulate representatives of the poor and oppressed everywhere. In this country the articulate representatives of the black minority have been most instrumental in putting white churchmen on the moral defensive.

Anyone moved by this understanding of divine judgment and by these imperatives cannot avoid becoming political in the broad sense of the word. When these concerns are brought into churches, they disturb the peace and comfort of the congregations.

An event in Washington, D.C., illustrates the contrast between the perception of Christian faith as judgment and religion as the sanction for present uses of power. At a prayer breakfast in January, 1973, attended by hundreds of notables, including Presi-



Christianity and Crisis
A Christian Journal of Opinion
537 West 121st Street / New York / New York 10027

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Credits:

cover and design by Emily Vio's
cartoons by Doug Marietta, courtesy of The Charlotte Observer
printed by Sowers Printing Company

Christianity and Crisis, Vol. 33, No. 9, May 28, 1973
Pub. shed bi-monthly for 24 consecutive issues, beginning the third Monday in September, by Christianity and Crisis, Inc., 537 West 121st St., New York, N.Y. 10027. Subscription price: Canada and U.S., \$9.00, and \$1.00 for foreign postage; students \$7.00. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing offices. Please send POST Form 3579 to Christianity and Crisis, 537 W. 121st St., New York, N.Y. 10027.
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simply is not enough real experience or diversity of perspectives.

There is an extraordinary global populism implied in the Christian view of God in the very fact that God identifies himself with humanity in Christ. The God whom we praise in church is the God of all the poor and hungry of the world. He speaks through Jeremiah to one of the corrupt sons of the good King Josiah and to us: "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages." And then Jeremiah underscores the unity of these two aspects of our faith: "Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord" (22:13-16). Our very knowledge of the God we praise in church cannot be separated from issues of justice. This belongs to the center of our Christian faith and not to some marginal element called "social action."

And of course all this touches on our understanding of Jesus the Christ. In the past fifty years there have been startling shifts in the way in which Jesus' teaching, life and death as concrete historical events have been regarded. For the Social Gospel this history of identification with real people was the heart of the Christian revelation. It was later pushed aside, partly because of historical skepticism and partly because of preoccupation with the *kerygma*, or the Gospel about Christ's death and resurrection. One of those remarkable and almost unconscious changes in theology came about as theologians began to realize that the death and resurrection of a Christ about whom not much was known meant very little. Far stronger is the belief in significant affirmations about his life and mind and deeds as an historical person.

Recently the argument has begun again as to whether Jesus was a revolutionary. Perhaps it can be seen more surely than was the case twenty-five years ago that, though Jesus was probably not a political revolutionary, he does call his followers to social revolutions which in many situations today must have political implications. One of the theologians who seemed to support the neglect of the historical Jesus, Karl Barth, drew more radical social implications from Jesus and his message than most so-called liberal Christians.

I refer to Karl Barth because he in so many ways has been at the opposite pole from the Social Gospel. The following statement is characteristic of his radicalism:

God always takes His stand unconditionally and passionately on this side [the side of the poor and oppressed] and on this side alone; against the lofty and in behalf of the lowly; against those who

already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied it (*Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II, Part 1, p. 360).

Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio* puts this Christian responsibility in a global context. He speaks more cautiously, but the implications are far-reaching: "We must repeat once more that the superfluous wealth of rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations. The rule which up to now held good for the benefit of those nearest to us, must today be applied to all the needy of this world." Then he adds: "Besides, the rich will be the first to benefit as a result. Otherwise their continued greed will certainly call down upon them the judgment of God and the wrath of the poor, with consequences no one can foretell." The Pope is not the first to link the judgment of God with the wrath of the poor, but when he relates it to the contrast between rich and poor nations, he is saying something we urgently need to hear, especially as it applies to relations between the United States and Latin America.

Jesus' parable about Dives and Lazarus assumes fresh meaning when we recognize the dominantly white nations as Dives and the majority of the human race as Lazarus. It also makes a vast difference if we understand that in the loved story of the last judgment in Matthew 25 the hungry and thirsty, the strangers (refugees), the naked, the sick and the imprisoned with whom Christ identifies himself are not a marginal assortment of individuals but represent more than a billion people in the world, including thirty million in our own country.

All this should be obvious, but why has there been such a widespread tendency to obscure this radical side of Christian teaching? And why, when the obvious is set forth in the churches, is there such divisive controversy? There are at least three answers. The first is the manysidedness of Christianity to which I have referred. People become Christians or members of churches for so many reasons in their most impressionable years, and they do not readily change their emphasis on those aspects of Christianity they have found most satisfying.

A second answer is that there is usually no unequivocal Christian teaching that settles questions relating to *specific* social policies or issues. This gives an excuse to avoid the larger social imperative itself. I believe that Christian teaching should help to establish parameters within which policies should be sought. Also, it should throw light on the human consequences of existing policies and institutions, creating an awareness that forces us out of ruts and helps us see that situations with which we have lived complacently are intolerable.

A third answer, and probably the most important,

has to do with our place in the world. One of the ironies of Christian history is that aspects of Christianity proved to be dynamic forces of Western civilization; thus members of churches ended up on top of the wealthiest and most powerful nations of the world. This was the result of no evil conspiracy, but arose from the very success of some Christian influences. This very success helped to create the distortions from which we now suffer. Churches have less influence than in the heyday of "Christendom," but in Western, predominantly white nations they have not recovered from the tendency to see the world as it is viewed from the centers of power and privilege. This tendency is being overcome in considerable measure at the ecumenical level, but it still limits the vision of most white congregations, Protestant and Catholic, in the United States. I cannot accept the assumption that there is little hope of enabling people, especially the younger generation, to see how judgment and grace belong together. Nor do I doubt the power of the more comprehensive biblical message and of the experience of the larger units of the church to invade the local churches, which will in any case be shaken by events that reveal the one-sidedness of much they have taken for granted.

In contemplating the two emphases on the affirmative and supportive aspects of the faith and on judgment and prophetic illumination, I see the need to take one more step. This step starts, in a sense, from the opposite point. If we take judgment and prophetic challenge seriously for more than a short period of commitment to a particular cause, we are likely to find that we need religious support, even comfort. Enthusiasm for a cause is not enough. There is a phase in a particular struggle when the cause may simplify one's life, make decisions clear, enable one to know with whom to stand. But complexities finally overtake such simplifications. One discovers there are no total solutions, that even successes create new and unanticipated problems, that actual alternatives call for new and troublesome decisions. Those who have been most political and activist often find the people with whom they have worked split away over strategies and develop a shocking hostility toward one another. This has been a common and disillusioning experience in the struggle for racial justice and for peace in Indochina.

Many sensitive people are tempted to abandon political efforts, to conclude there is nothing to be done within what they call "the system." While they might support a "revolution" against the system, they generally discover that there are not the cadres to make revolution plausible in this country. In the end, they hope to have some leverage for change, or else escape from politics, as many are doing, and seek private forms of fulfillment.

It may be helpful to suggest that there have been darker times, times of far more oppression and far less resistance to it, times when intimidation of dissent was far more effective, as was the case as recently as the early 1950's. Also, there have been many periods in the life of the church when there was less hope than now of the emergence within it of countervailing minorities. There may not be many revolutionaries prepared to challenge the system, but the system includes elements of the press that have proved their courage in recent months, courts and Congress that have sometimes defied the power of an administration which, as we now know, is obsessed with what it calls "national security."

The general acknowledgement of failure in Vietnam may prevent other ideological interventions and free many nations from American pressure to preserve the *status quo*. The absolute enmity of the cold war has begun to dissolve, and new possibilities now appear for peaceful relations between East and West. There are still enormous global problems, especially those connected with nuclear armaments, pollution, world poverty and the limits of resources, but these may cause lines to be drawn differently and modify some of the hardened divisions between people, driving a new generation to think quite new thoughts. Indeed there is hope in the fact that, while the spectacular student revolts have subsided, there seems to be among students, more pervasive than the revolts themselves, a humane spirit, freedom from nationalistic illusions, concern about racial injustice and about poverty, a disbelief in the doctrines of economic individualism and disenchantment with material success as life's goal. I mention these factors not to encourage complacency but to offer solid reasons against despair.

Prophetic challenge may produce a paralyzing sense of guilt in some and a harsh self-righteousness in others. It may lead to an uncritical identification of Christian faith or the Kingdom of God with particular movements for liberation or revolutionary change. Those who stand on the side that stresses prophetic challenge will need to see themselves under judgment and mercy. They may need fresh sources of morale when they face baffling complexity or frustration. It will not suffice the needs of hope to calculate the secular forces which are on this side or that. The challengers need gospel as well as challenge. They need to be grasped by the reality of God's presence regardless of which way the tides currently flow; to be inspired and healed by the vision of God's ultimate rule without allowing that vision to undercut the sense of urgency in battling particular wrongs in order to achieve proximate goals; to see life, if only intermittently, under the signs of both cross and resurrection. Struggle for political ends can become a deeply personal pilgrimage.