

THE CONFESSIONS OF A WOULD-BE CHANGE AGENT

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The president of our seminary has no need to suffer from job insecurity because of me. Admittedly he is probably not losing any sleep over the possibility. He is savvy enough about the denominational scene to be aware that I would be a dark horse with astronomical odds against nosing him out in any contest between us.

But to tell the truth, I have no stomach for administration, absolutely would not be president of anything, and, were I offered such a job, would need only the second required to say “No” to settle the matter. I say this with the full awareness that administrators are worth about twice as much in the denominational economy as professors.

The time was when professors might expect to attain high places in denominational affairs. For various reasons that is no longer true. But I do not chafe under present conditions. I doubt we professors would excel the pastor-administrators in running things.

No, it is not the mention of the W. A. Criswells, the Herschel Hobbs, the James Sullivans, or the Duke McCalls that creates within me that inner sense of frustration, discontent, and hostility aroused by a vision of achievement to which one aspires and which causes him to feel cheated because he has not attained it.

I have a confession to make—one that I have not made heretofore. It is when I hear of the Ralph Naders, the Saul Alinskis, the Martin Luther Kings—those voices of the oppressed, those contemporary Don Quixotes who break their lances against the callous arrogance of General Motors, entrenched political power structures, and racial and class prejudice—that I sense a welling up on irresistible discontent with my role in life, a feeling that I have really missed it.

Oh, to have had a black face—and soul! To have been the heir of three hundred years of slavery and injustice! To have felt the impact of Jesus and Gandhi as only a child of oppression could! To have been thrust on the stage of history in the dramatic decades just past! And, to have had the charisma to raise the spirits and hopes of a legion of people who had been denied the chance to satisfy basic human needs! To have been able to make them believe that the impossible was theirs for the grasping, if they had the courage to turn dreams into reality!

I heard Martin Luther King’s speech which he delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. I heard it as I sat alone in my living room. The cadence of the preacher was born in cotton fields and developed as the instrument to sustain the apocalyptic hopes of black slaves who would have their mansion in the sky bye-and-bye. But now it was being used to arouse the descendants of those slaves to claim their birthright from a society that had unjustly denied it to them.

My God, what a preacher! “I have a dream,” he said. And you had to believe him. “I have a dream.” And with each rhythmic repetition the tension arose until I felt that it would overpower me. “Let freedom ring.” He was using our own vocabulary, the vocabulary learned by all little

white children in their segregated schools. “Let freedom ring.” The phrase haunted and mocked and judged. And then came the last climactic sentence. “And when this happens, we will speed the day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last, free at last, Thank God almighty, we’re free at last.””

And all that I could do was sit in a room in New Orleans and weep. I wept because it was such a beautiful dream. I wept because there was so much distance between the stark reality of the moment and that dream. But I think I also wept because *he* made a difference. Things were happening where he was. He was one of those eschatological figures who mark the end of an old age and the beginning of a new. The world would never be the same. And nothing was happening in that room where I was. Nobody even knew that I was crying.

An Age of Innocence

I must confess that I have not always had this secret desire to be a catalyst of change. In fact, for many years I hardly recognized that there was anything in my culture that needed changing. Oh, there was a sense of a world out there where paganism and evil reigned. There was a frontier of mission in distant, unreal places like Africa, Asia, South America, where people needed to accept Jesus so that they could rise to the level of American culture and advantage. I was just as smug as anyone else in my assurance that all our “progress” was due to our God-fearing ancestors who had laid our culture on the foundations of biblical principles.

Also there were people around me in America who were lost and who need to get right with God so that they could go to heaven. I expected them to quit drinking and swearing, to be better family people, to read their Bibles, to attend church, to give their money. I baptized them by the hundreds—they and their prejudices and hostilities. Many of them did not even quit drinking and swearing.

I look back on that age of innocence which preceded 1954 with incredulity. How could we have been so naïve? How could we have missed the meaning of the gospel for our times so completely? Dietrich Bonhoeffer visited this country in the thirties and returned to Germany struck by our unawareness of the social implications of the gospel. Of course, his awareness had been sharpened by the rise of a demonic, swaggering Nazism that preached the inherent superiority of the Aryan race. All pretense was gone in his country. Racism had become avowed national policy. At least we still paid lip service to the idea that “all men are created equal.” We still preached that God loved everybody, “red and yellow, black and white.” We said we believe that all men would live in heaven together—a position that had been the target of the biting sarcasm of Mark Twain in an earlier day.

My contemporaries and I had gone into the ministry with no doubts or misgivings about the church or the simple gospel of salvation. Nor did we have any doubts about the country. We had no reservations about entering the armed forces to fight in World War II. Many of us who were ministers and were classified 4-D decided to forego that protection and volunteered to fight by the side of young men who were not ministers.

Everything was so simple. We were the good guys, and the fellows on the other side were the bad guys. War might be evil, but it was a necessary evil. You had to stop the bad guys and their evil philosophy by killing them. When you were on God's side, you could justify the snuffing out of human life. Of course, when the other guys killed, that was simply the greatest proof of their evil.

Being Christian had no bearing on the choice of weapons for the battle against evil. Turn the other cheek? No, shoot him before he shoots you. The Sermon on the Mount? God does not expect us to take that seriously out here. Somehow the whole message of the cross escaped us. *He* had taken it so seriously!

We came back from the war, eager to get back into our studies, to become pastors of churches, to begin the climb up the ladder of denominational achievement.

My first church after the war was in cotton country. It was not long before I learned that some land owners kept their workers in virtual economic slavery. They called them "hands," which is very revealing. How can hands be people? At the end of the year the sharecroppers had never made enough to pay the landlord for the goods sold to them on credit out of the plantation store. Of course, the accounts were often rigged and the interest charges exorbitant.

People told me also about how blacks were treated in the parish (county) jail. They were beaten and sometimes killed. And no one raised a voice in protest. All the while I preached my little sermons that revolved mainly around accepting Jesus or the need for prayer, Bible study, going to church, and tithing. All the while I was unconscious of how little I was dealing with the real message of the New Testament.

As I look back on those days, it seems in a way that the person I am describing is a complete stranger to me. What do we have in common? And yet I know that the naïve young preacher and I are one and the same.

The thought of that young preacher has come to my mind often in recent years—especially at those times that I get impatient with the brand of Christianity still preached and practiced far too often. How can people be so blind to the gospel? How indeed? And then I think of the young preacher and recognize that their sin is my sin. No doubt mine is the greater, for the people who heard me preach trusted me. They thought that I was telling them the gospel. Are they to blame for living by the message that I preached to them?

The Age of Disillusionment

Everybody agrees that the 1954 Brown vs. School Board decision of the Supreme Court was of vital significance to the society in which we live. It was also one of those eschatological moments of history—the end of an age. American society would never be the same again. Neither would the churches, which are such an integral part of society, ever be the same again. The whole context for preaching had suddenly changes. Being a preacher in this country has been infinitely more agonizing and difficult since 1954. This is especially true if one has tendencies toward being a prophet.

My family and I were not in the States at the time, for we spent the years of 1952-60 in Brazil. When we returned to our country and I began to teach in the seminary, the climate of our society was totally different. We had moved out of the age of innocence, and it was a traumatic experience. This situation was intensified during the sixties by the Vietnam War.

The sixties were a terrible decade of confusion, doubt, tension, disillusionment, and despair. Questions were raised that had not been raised in such intense fashion before, at least not in this country and not in the South.

In the midst of it all the validity of American Christianity was seriously challenged. Many people came to believe not only that the church was an irrelevant anachronism but that it was essentially evil and demonic.

You could not follow Jesus in the churches, they said. The traditional religious structures were suffocating, repressive, retrogressive.

Out into the streets! That was the cry. Into the ghetto! Leave the shelter of the cloister and the study. Theology is beside the point. What is needed is action, not dry, dull, pointless sermons. The church is the anti-Christ. Its ministers are priests of the status quo, neo-pagan officiants at the altar of national, racial, and class ego, pray-ers at football games, invokers of ritual blessings on countless rotary meetings. Enough talk about pearly gates and pie-in-the-sky-by-and-bye. What is needed is food now, shelter now, dignity now, justice now.

I heard that call. How I heard it! My agony of doubt about the church was compounded by a sense of guilt. Friends of mine, pastors of churches, were being crucified by reactionaries, while I was safe behind institutional walls. A professor could talk about gospel and race, criticize Vietnam madness, and not lose his job.

I wanted to be crucified, too. I wanted to experience the agony and the ecstasy of martyrdom. I wanted it—but I suppose that I did not want it enough.

I was really hostile to the church, but not hostile enough to quit taking the monthly checks. I struggled with my guilt by expressing my hostility in talks to college groups, in the seminary classroom, in denominational meetings. I had an ideal picture of the church as the coming together of all peoples in the name of Jesus Christ to accept and help one another in love and mutual understanding. It offended me that there was no concrete expression of that ideal in the society in which I lived.

As a result of my position, I made a few church members angry, received a few nasty letters as the result of some published articles, and was the target of plaintive criticism by a B.S.U. director who resented my talk. He believed that it drove a wedge between his young people and the church.

There were moments in that decade of the sixties which I had trouble believing in God. I remember one particular moment when I walked out of the seminary chapel after listening to a

particularly obscene sermon by a particularly despicable representative of the ministry. I was sick to the stomach and felt the initial onslaught of a migraine headache. For the moment I did not want to hear the word God anymore. It was a bad word. The speaker had painted a picture of God that was indecent: a God of the status quo who was content with the contemporary injustices. Apparently nothing was more pleasing to his God than to see the countless spires of church buildings reincarnating colonial architecture that sprouted across Southern Baptist landscapes. His God did not care about matters of justice, peace, and human welfare. In fact, he appeared to be somewhat incensed when people attempted to relate religion to the deep problems of the times.

A few moments were needed for me to come to myself and recognize that it was *his* God that I rejected. And his God bore little resemblance to the God of the prophets who cried out for justice and mercy in his name. Nor did he have much relation to the God represented by Jesus who talked about a glass of cold water for the thirsty, food for the hungry, clothing for the naked, and visits to prisons.

A New Commitment

I must confess to you that the fires of hostility and resentment and the empty ache of disillusionment have diminished in recent years. I would not presume to be able to explain this dogmatically. Perhaps it is because there are no more marches or sit-ins to arouse the conscience. Perhaps it is because there is a dearth of prophets in the land. Perhaps it is because Vietnam is no longer the issue that it was. Perhaps it is because I am less idealistic and more realistic and pragmatic. Perhaps it is because I am older and my nerve has atrophied along with the muscles of a flabbier body. Then it may be that I am thinking more about retirement now and am interested in some modicum of security for my wife should she live to require it.

You may come to all these conclusions and more, and I shall not resent you for it. But there is another side of this about which I would like to make a few remarks.

First, I have made peace with the church. I am not talking about that ideal of the church that does not exist in any of our communities. I am talking about the church as represented by the groups of people who meet in buildings on Sunday morning, sing “The Old Rugged Cross,” talk about Jesus loving all people, and do not come to grips with their own personal hang-ups. I am talking specifically about Southern Baptist churches, for traditionally and emotionally, as well as practically, they are “church” for me.

I have committed myself to working within the traditional structures of Southern Baptist life. This is the “briar patch” in which I was “born and bred.” These are my people. They taught me to love Jesus, to pray, and to read my Bible. They educated me and have supported me across these years.

I have come to see that to deny them would be to deny myself, for I am in large measure what I am because of what they are. Moreover, to deny them would be an expression of ingratitude. And surely ingratitude is one of the basest of all sins—as bad as prejudice.

I shall have to live with my ambivalence. But it is the same ambivalence that I feel toward my parents. What kind of a son would I be to deny them because they march by an understanding of the gospel that prevailed across the cotton fields of the South sixty years ago? There are some insights which I wish they shared with me, but I cannot desert them because they do not.

I have committed myself to living and working with the people in our churches for another reason. They claim to believe in Jesus and to take the Bible seriously. They claim that the Bible is the basis of their faith and practice.

Others may find the arena of politics or social activity divorced from the churches more congenial. Still others may be more at home in the atmosphere of humanism. But I am not one of them.

I too believe in Jesus. There are more sophisticated ways of saying it, I know. But I wanted to say it this way. That is the way that the lady who meant so much to me in my first pastorate would say it. She does not have much education or sophistication. But she may be the best Christian I have known. I believe in Jesus much in the same way that she does. I simply do not have the capacity to live by faith that she does.

There is great reason in some cases to question whether many of the professed believers understand the implications of their confession. But this basic confession gives me something to work with. Starting with their fundamental presupposition, I can challenge my brothers to examine what it means to believe in a Jesus who is for people and in a Bible which teaches that God's ultimate purpose for humanity is reconciliation.

There will, of course, be those prophets who challenge the structures from without. I would not presume to dictate to another how he should work for change. But I shall attempt to get a hearing for my message within the structures. Southern Baptists do not listen to people on the outside. A few of them may listen to me.

I am committed to the church because I have come to believe in grace in a radical way. For a long time all that I could think about was the demand of the gospel. But there is another element. God loves us when we do not deserve to be loved. He loves us more than we love other people. That is the hope and power of the gospel.

We can form little groups of like-minded people and point our fingers self-righteously at those prejudiced people in the institutions. But I have come to confess that I do not have the right to do that. There are people toward whom I also do not have a Christian attitude. If there is no grace for other prejudiced people, there is also none for me.

I have not yet found the place where the millennium has come, where all is sweetness and light, openness and acceptance, trust and love. If there is any place in Southern Baptist life where these should be a reality, it would be the seminary. There we exegete and illustrate agape (love) by the hour. The only problem is the living of it. If knowing what the gospel says was the key, then the teachers should be the best Christians of all. But all you have to do is stay on one of our

campuses for a while to see that we can be just as little, just as paranoid, just as selfish as any group in the world.

I have come to see that there is no place to hide. That is what the cross is all about. There are no safe walls to get behind. The Christian commitment has to face the world with its hate and selfishness. And you don't get away from your essential mission as a Christian by running into the church building. You are going to find the same problems there.

The sins of the church are my sins. The problems of the church are my problems. The great truth of the gospel is that God loves and accepts them. And me. And the more we take this into our being, the more loving and accepting we are enabled to become.

Furthermore, I am committed to the church because I do not believe that things will stay as they are. I believe that the gospel is the power of God with a forward thrust into salvation. God is working in our lives to make us conform "to the image of his Son."

Jesus looked at Simon and called him "Rock." How could he do that? How could he call this unstable, uncertain, undependable person "Rock"? It was because he looked beyond the moment. He saw not only what Simon was but also what he could be by God's grace.

So we can look at the church and be completely turned off by what we see. At what a snail's pace it moves! When will it move into the liberty of the Promised Land out of the slavery of prejudice, petty ambition, and idolatry of the secular? When will people become more important than buildings?

The spies have gone out, and they have returned with discouraging news. There are giants in the Promised Land that God wants to give us. The majority have apparently hearkened to their voice and resent it if anyone disagrees.

But there are a few who know that we shall enter the land. We may yet wander in the wilderness for 40 years. But we shall enter. God has willed that it be so.

I shall not achieve my secret ambition and become the kind of change agent who is perceptive enough to be the first to see God's *kairos* (moment of opportunity) and who leads the way in seizing it. I shall not be one of the great prophets of the times. I say this with sadness. But I promise that I will listen to the prophets and try to take my cue from them about what the gospel says to me and my people. And I shall attempt to speak that word to my brothers with confidence in the Lord that they will hear it and be changed by it.

Maybe ours is the day of dreaming the dream. But today's dreams have a way of becoming tomorrow's realities.

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