

Carnegie Hall to Madison Square Garden

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About a year ago when we were getting ready to attend the Carnegie Hall meetings, it was my privilege to speak in one of the Long Island churches to my fellow-Congregationalists about the message and mission of Reverend Sun Myung Moon. This morning my topic is a little different but no less important—to speak to my fellow-Unification Church members about the general religious situation in the Christian churches today. Dr. Marcus Bach, the authority on the exciting fringe movements at the growing edge of the American religious world, used to be famous for a lecture on "Church Street, L.S.A." That is our theme: the present state of the Christian faith, especially in this country.

Reverend Sun Myung Moon at Madison Square Garden rightly compared our situation to that of Jesus and his disciples in first century Palestine. We are now where they were then. At Madison Square Garden the Communists parading out front were quite comparable to the Zealot revolutionaries of Jesus' time. Out back were the raving Fundamentalist Christians who parallel the fanatical Jewish sectarians who prepared the Dead Sea scrolls. But one fact should not be overlooked. The Christians most comparable to the Pharisees and Sadducees of the ancient world were nowhere to be seen at Madison Square Garden. The regular clergy and mainline denominations were not parading against us out front or denouncing us as heretics from out back.

The American religious establishment was not inside clapping or outside jeering. The Methodists, American Baptists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, United Church of Christ and Congregationalists have not come out against us -- nor have they come out for us. Yet these people represent the backbone of American Protestantism. They are the religious power roughly comparable to the Pharisees and Sadducees of New Testament times.

Until we meet them face to face as friends (or as foes) we have not confronted today's Christians. Those ranters out back are a fringe group with neither power nor prestige in the contemporary church world. Fundamentalists are the hillbillies of American Protestantism with plenty to say but nothing with which to back it up. They bark but cannot bite. American Protestantism has many different kinds of churches and a variety of theologies but there is also a general consensus of opinion which they share. Outsiders may be so conscious of the differences among churchmen that they overlook the similarities. If you attended a ministerial meeting in Washington or Baltimore or Boston you would not be able to distinguish a Methodist from a Presbyterian, an Episcopalian from a Disciple of Christ, by how they looked or what they said in most cases.

For over fifty years mainline denominations have been primarily interested in three basic issues: 1. ecumenical cooperation or inter-denominational friendship, 2. a social gospel about God's kingdom on earth, 3. an up-to-date Christianity. First of all, the major Protestant denominations have been distressed about the scandal of Christian division and divisiveness. In my theological seminary days after World War II we used to say we need one Church for one world.

How can a divided Church heal a divided world? It's more important to be a Christian than to be a Methodist or Baptist, a Mennonite or Unitarian, we declared. That battle for spiritual ecumenicity has been largely won.

Attached to it but separable from it was another plea, the desire to reunite Christians in one all-inclusive Church. While some are still very much committed to interdenominational and institutional amalgamation, the drive for one great Church has got stuck in a ditch these past few years. Church union has stalled. Southern Presbyterians may talk about reuniting with northern Presbyterians but mergers across family lines have lost their appeal. Nobody believes the black National Baptists will merge with the Polish National Catholics. No one considers a union of the Pentecostals and the Episcopalians. Very few, in fact, believe the National Council of Churches or the World Council of Churches can produce a unified super-church in the near future. If anyone had such a dream, it has gone up in smoke.

Secondly, the Protestant churches have long been concerned with social problems. How do we transform

our world into the Kingdom of God? This is an exceedingly complex matter where simplistic solutions come a dime a dozen and are worth no more. By and large American Protestants at the bureaucratic level has decided to ally the Church with liberal and leftwing secularism. As the neo-orthodox used to say, "We must move to the right theologically and to the left politically."

However, the laymen who pay the church bills with voluntary offerings had a very different idea. They expected their church to become theologically more liberal and politically more conservative. As a result, the gap widened between the ecclesiastical planners and the paying public, so that many of the mainline denominations are facing an acute lack of cash to pay for their expensive national programs.

Thirdly, since 1900 the respectable Churches have been seriously trying to update their explanation of what Christianity is all about. It is impossible to expect success by using 19th century methods in a 21st century world. Why has the youth of today abandoned the Church? Because while the world worries about the resignation of President Nixon, the Church, so to speak, is still talking about the administration of President McKinley. Just reciting old words which meant something to a little old lady named Grandma Moses is not enough. We must translate the grand affirmations of Christian faith into a contemporary idiom.

With barely an exception, the major theologians since 1900 have addressed themselves to that question. Tillich, Bultmann, Niebuhr, Moltmann, Harvey Cox, all of them each in his special way, has labored to update religion. But do not ignore the underlying significance of their work. Behind all this theological discussion is an earnest quest for a new revelation from God appropriate for our unique time. Mainline Protestantism is seeking a contemporary prophet for a New Age Christianity.

This fact provides us with a challenge, an opportunity and a responsibility. The Church longs for a contemporary Christ. A quick sketch of the general Roman Catholic position in America is necessary to give an over-all picture. Before World War II, Roman Catholicism here was largely a church for immigrants -- Irish, Italians, Polish, French Canadians, Mexicans, and others.

By and large the hierarchy was Irish and that made it unique. As the popular saying went, the Irish make great cops and reliable bishops. After World War II and particularly after the pontificate of Pope John, the situation changed greatly. American Catholicism had come of age. In the person of John F. Kennedy it gave us our first Catholic President and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen became as famous a TV star as Milton Berle. Nor should one forget Cardinal Spellman, a powerful prince of the Church and very much the symbol of a Catholicism now quite rare. Nobody was more staunchly patriotic or more safely conservative.

Catholicism has recently experienced a crisis of incalculable significance. Pope John opened the windows of the Vatican to let in a bit of fresh air and it turned out to be a hurricane. From a regular and careful reading of several American Catholic journals, it is fair to conclude that in spite of the efforts of Pop.: Paul to calm the furor, the traditionalists have been generally routed and the progressives are more or less in control. The differences between the old Catholicism and the new is the difference between Cardinal Spellman and the Berrigan brothers. The first was an exceptional spokesman for the historic Western way of life and the latter have been equally dynamic super-duper dissenters.

Roman Catholicism has several special problems--a significant number of priests and nuns who have decided to give up the clerical life, the financial crisis over parochial education, a widespread revolt of laymen against church supervision over their faith and morals, and the scholarly protests against archaic explanations of Christian doctrine.

At the same time, Catholic cooperation with Protestants has greatly increased and seems to be a normal part of Church life today. Also, Catholic scholars have far greater influence in the Protestant world than was true only a few decades ago. The Catholic version of the ghetto mentality seems to be gone forever, but with this new openness to the wider world has come a noticeable decline in political power. The Catholic vote even on such a clear-cue issue as the abortion question has probably become a negligible factor in American politics.

Eastern Orthodoxy, the third great Christian family, has come into its own only since World War II. Like Roman Catholicism, only more so, it has been a fairly recent transplant from the Old World. Unlike Catholicism, it has until very recent times been badly split along national lines -- Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, Syrian, etc.

These divisions are gradually being healed, but the process seems to be slow and often painful. Eastern Orthodox, however, have taken part in the ecumenical movement from the beginning and have served especially well as a means for greater Protestant -- Catholic cooperation.

Eastern Orthodoxy too should be remembered for the way it stood up to atheistic Communism. The Orthodox had to face Stalin in all his fury. Far more than Protestants or Catholics, the Eastern Churches

provided a glorious list of martyrs who gave up their lives rather than give up their faith. For that distinction, if for no other, they deserve special recognition and praise.

Let me conclude with a single comment about Reverend Sun Myung Moon and the Unification Church in the light of the crisis situation in the Christian world as a whole. Before Carnegie Hall last year when some of my fellow Congregationalists asked what my reaction was to your movement, I said that the best description of you could be found in a sentence from St. Paul as Dr. Goodspeed translates it: "You are like stars in a dark world offering to men the message of life." (Phil. 2:15) An exciting year has passed from the Carnegie Hall meetings to the Madison Square Garden speech, and my considered judgment remains what it was then.

When one looks carefully at the state of the Christian world, you truly shine like stars in a black sky.