

NEEDED: A REFORMATION WITHIN THE CHURCH

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The first look of the church is toward Christ, who is her Head, her Lord and her All.

After that she must be self-regarding and world-regarding, with a proper balance between the two.

By self-regarding I do not mean self-centered. I mean that the church must examine herself constantly to see if she be in the faith; she must engage in severe self-criticism with a cheerful readiness to make amends; she must live in a state of perpetual penitence, seeking God with her whole heart; she must constantly check her life and conduct against the Holy Scriptures and bring her life into line with the will of God.

By world-regarding I mean that the church must know why she is here on earth; that she must acknowledge her indebtedness to all mankind (Rom. 1:14, 15); that she must take seriously the words of her Lord, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" and "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

The task of the church is twofold: to spread Christianity throughout the world and to make sure that the Christianity she spreads is the pure New Testament kind.

Theoretically the seed, being the Word of God, should produce the same kind of fruit regardless of the spiritual condition of those who scatter it; but it does not work that way. The identical message preached to the heathen by men of differing degrees of godliness will produce different kinds of converts and result in a quality of Christianity varying according to the purity and power of those who preach it.

Christianity will always reproduce itself after its kind. A worldly-minded, unspiritual church, when she crosses the ocean to give her witness to peoples of other tongues and other cultures, is sure to bring forth on other shores a Christianity much like her own.

Not the naked Word only but the character of the witness determines the quality of the convert. The church can do no more than transplant herself. What she is in one land she will be in another. A crab apple does not become a Grimes Golden by being carried from one country to another. God has written His law deep into all life; everything must bring forth after its kind.

The popular notion that the first obligation of the church is to spread the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth is false. Her first obligation is to be spiritually worthy to spread it. Our Lord said "Go ye," but He also said "Tarry ye," and the tarrying had to come before the going. Had the disciples gone forth as missionaries before the day of Pentecost it would have been an overwhelming spiritual disaster, for they could have done no more than make converts after their own likeness, and this would have altered for the worse the whole history of the western world and had consequences throughout the ages to come.

To spread an effete, degenerate brand of Christianity to pagan lands is not to fulfill the commandment of Christ or to discharge our obligation to the heathen. These terrible words of Jesus haunt my soul: "Ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves."

To win men to Judaism from among the Gentile nations was altogether a good and right thing to do. Thousands of happy converts were won to the religion of Moses during the years of Israel's spiritual ascendancy; but at the time of Christ Judaism had sunk so low that her missionary effort wrought actual harm instead of good.

It would appear logical that a subnormal, powerless church would not engage in missionary activity, but again the facts contradict the theory. Christian groups that have long ago lost every trace of moral fire nevertheless continue to grow at home and reproduce themselves in other lands. Indeed there is scarcely a fringe sect or heretical cult these days but is enjoying amazing success among the backward peoples of the world.

The evangelical wing of the church has in recent years become world-regarding to a remarkable degree. Within the last twenty years evangelical missionary activity on foreign fields has been stepped up tremendously. But there is in the whole thing one dangerous weakness. That weakness is the naive assumption that we have only to reach the last tribe with our brand of Christianity and the world has been evangelized. This is an assumption that we dare not make.

Evangelical Christianity, at least in the United States, is now tragically below New Testament standard. Worldliness is an accepted part of our way of life. Our religious mood is social instead of spiritual. We have lost the art of worship. We are not producing saints. Our models are successful businessmen, celebrated athletes and theatrical personalities. We carry on our religious activities after the methods of the modern advertiser. Our homes have been turned into theaters. Our literature is shallow and our hymnody borders on sacrilege. And scarcely anyone appears to care.

We must have a better kind of Christian soon or within another half century we may have no true Christianity at all. Increased numbers of demi-Christians is not enough. We must have a reformation.