

# STYLES IN CHURCHMANSHIP

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.....the visible *style* of the church's life will become a much more significant element in the communication of the gospel. This does not mean a return to an arid ritualism. It means that the church itself may become the *verbum visibilum*, the visual enactment of the message it bears, in a newly important way. That is why present discussion of the 'shape' of the church is so significant. In a culture increasingly dependent on visual parables and signs for its orientation to the world, the conduct of the Christian community, its visible behavior, will become a much more significant 'word' than the pronouncements of the pulpit.<sup>1</sup>

In these words Harvey Cox points to an important, but neglected truth — the church is continually saying something in its modes of worship, in its educational programs, in its forms of pastoral care, in its methods of decision-making, in its handling of conflict, in its approaches to personal and social problems. Our purpose in this article is to explore various dimensions of the relation of *message* to *styles in churchmanship*.

The assumption has long been held that the church's message is best communicated through the spoken and written word. One need not minimize the importance of the spoken and written word in making the point that message is implicit in style. And sometimes the style belies what is said or written. Persons in a visually-oriented culture are likely to find new meaning in the old adage that what you are speaks so loudly I cannot hear what you say.

In his recent book *Style In History* Peter Gay argues that an historian's style not only reveals his bias and belief, it also provides an invaluable clue to the historian's *insight*. In similar vein might it not be argued that a church's style not only reveals something of its actual belief-system, but the visions and values by which it is informed? If the church really does have important light to throw on "ultimate concerns" that fact ought to be revealed in its style or styles of existing as church. If the Word truly does become incarnate in a person, is it not reasonable to expect that it might also become incarnate in a fel-

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<sup>1</sup>Cox, Harvey, *On Not Leaving It To The Snake*, Macmillan, N.Y., 1967, p. 28.

lowship? Integrity in churchmanship involves the quest for consistency in message and style.

It is interesting to contemplate what images of the church's *reason for being* are projected on the basis of what is seen of the church's modes of operation. What do a church's priorities in terms of the expenditure of time, money, and human resources say about that church's self-understanding and basic concerns?

It is interesting to contemplate what impressions of a church's real beliefs about God, the human situation and hope are communicated through a church's worship, teaching, and treatment of persons.

It is interesting to contemplate what the church is really all about as indicated by what happens to persons as they participate in the life of the church. Are faith, hope and love nurtured? Is sensitivity increased? Are perspectives enlarged and concerns deepened? Does participation in the life of the church issue in greater curiosity, openness to new understandings, empathic feeling, a willingness to communicate with persons of different perspectives? Does participation in the life of the church tend to emancipate persons from provincialism of outlook to more holistic views of life? Does it help emancipate persons from infantile dependencies toward more mature life orientations? Or is something quite different the case?

To be sure, a distinction needs to be drawn between observer and participant. What participation in the church comes to mean to the participant cannot always be discerned by the external observer. But that observer can discern *some things* and he is almost certain to discern some kind of message in what he sees.

And then it is interesting to contemplate what message comes through when a church's style of being church is measured against its verbal and written pronouncements. Is the church which speaks of love actually a loving community? Is the church which speaks of reconciliation actually a reconciling community? Is the church which speaks of hope actually a company of the hopeful or the hoping? Is the church which speaks of grace actually a mediator of grace? Message is implicit in style.

Styles in churchmanship reveal honest differences of opinion within the Christian community. These differences have to do with doctrinal matters, with understandings of the church and the Christian life. The perceptive observer will be aware of this. At the moment we are concerned primarily with the point that message is implicit in style. The church speaks not only in the spoken and written word but in its manner of being church.

One of the most revealing dimensions of a church's style has to do

with the church's continuing need for re-formation and renewal. A church, like an individual Christian, is an earthen vessel. It can do some things and it can do some things well. But it is subject to human limitations and frailties. One of the important elements in a church's style has to do with its self-evaluation and self-criticism. A church which is continually struggling for a more authentic witness, which is ready to acknowledge its own shortcomings, which is truly open to re-formation and renewal is a church which is saying something important in its endeavors to be more truly a community of the faithful. Style reveals a church's direction of aspiration.

By way of pursuing these matters let us now call to mind some particular church in some particular community. Let us reflect on its style or styles of being church. And then let us ask what that style or those styles may be saying about four questions:

What Is The Good News?

For Whom Is The Good News?

What Is The Christian Life?

How Is The Church's Good News Communicated?

## II

### WHAT IS THE GOOD NEWS?

Presumably a church regarding itself as being in the Judaic-Christian tradition is concerned with the communication of gospel or good news. But what is the good news?

Some churches seem to be long on analysis and short on proclamation. In such churches it is difficult to ascertain what the good news is held to be. There is little place for affirmation or proclamation in the church's style.

Other churches hold out promises or particular assurances or goods without necessarily probing deeply into the profounder meanings of life itself. It is doubtless reassuring to many persons to be told "I'm OK, You're OK," or "You are accepted," or "You can participate in an ecstatic/peak/intense experience," or "You can achieve inner serenity," or "You can mentally escape from the frustrations and responsibilities of the present world and become oriented toward an idealized past or an apocalyptic future," or "You can find a sense of security and approval in the fellowship of like-minded persons." These and many other promises are being offered in many places (including some churches) as good news. Indeed, judging by the styles of some churches one might even suppose that some of these promise's are believed to express the heart of what the Christian church has to say.

If the church does have something more to say, how is it being said - and what is the message?

The church exists to deal with ultimately important issues. It exists to help persons find the ultimate grounds of morale and meaning and motivation. How tragic it is when the church becomes the tool for a trivialization of life, a watering down of the enduring elements in the Christian message, a preoccupation with matters of secondary importance.

The question of salvation is asked in many ways. The ultimate dilemmas of existence present themselves in changing forms. The very notion of salvation suggests salvation or deliverance *from* something, *to* something, *by means* of something. Sin, suffering, ignorance and death have all been regarded at various times as the ultimate evils from which deliverance is to be sought. Orthodox Christianity has spoken of salvation primarily in relation to sin and death. By virtue of the grace of God in Christ sin and death need not be and are not the final arbiters in the story of mankind, according to historic Christian faith.

In our own time the question of *meaning in existence* has become for many persons the pivotal issue around which the salvation question is asked. *In a world in which pain and suffering and death and poverty and war and alienation are facts — is human existence potentially meaningful?* Is there the possibility of deliverance from empty, futile, meaningless existence to a life of meaning?

Gibson Winter has formulated his perception of the situation in these words:

People are asking about their salvation; they would not phrase the question this way . . . The question is asked today in terms of the meaning of life. It asks what future there may be which gives meaning and form to our present decisions and existence. It asks for the ultimate meaning which shapes the penultimate sacrifice. It asks about history and the depth of its commitments and sacrifices. This is the question of salvation in a secularized world.<sup>2</sup>

When the question of meaning is asked within a religious frame of orientation, the potential meaningfulness of our natural, bodily, earthly, historical existence becomes a matter of crucial importance. Of what importance, if any, are time and nature and history to God and to the meaningful life? Gnosticism has interesting ways of reappearing. Spirituality is sometimes interpreted as being something quite un-

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<sup>2</sup>Winter, Gibson, *The New Creation As Metropolis*, Macmillan, N.Y., 1965, p. 97f.

related to our bodily experience. Any formulation of gospel or good news which speaks to the human situation must reckon with the questions here being raised.

The temptation is ever with us to deny, distort or endeavor to escape from the more difficult aspects of our natural existence. The temptation is ever with us to seek a good news which assures us that these matters are not theologically important. There are churches whose styles of being church reveal that they have succumbed to that temptation. In worship, preaching, teaching, ritual the message comes through that creation and redemption are *not* inextricably interwoven, that God's involvement in the structures and processes of nature and history is not significantly related to the *saving* reality of God. There is need for more churches whose styles communicate a profounder message.

John Calvin once observed that "A Christian man ought to be so disposed and prepared as to reflect that he has to do with God every moment of his life." Having to do with God every moment of one's life involves seeing all experience as potential for meaning. God, in Christian understanding, both creates and redeems. The doctrine of creation affirms the basic goodness and significance of creation, the gift-character of life itself. The doctrine of redemption affirms that God is the integrity which underlies creation and human existence. God is the "burning oneness binding everything," as Kenneth Boulding has put it. God is the reality making for wholeness. By virtue of the reality of God, operational in the basic structures and processes of existence, present in the varied seasons, chapters, and experiences of life, present in the wondrous and mysterious inter-play of life and death, *the varied dimensions of the life-death cycle are potential for meaning.*

A life style inspired by the vision of God making for wholeness is a life style which discerns sanctity in existence, which seeks to lift the varied chapters and seasons and experiences of life to the level of worship, which seeks new patterns of meaning and wholeness where there has been loss, destruction, and fragmentation. Such a life style calls for the spirit of the artist who brings his vision to bear on the materials at hand, and whose will it is to bring forth something of integrity from those raw materials. Artistry in living involves vision; it also involves the readiness to seek meaning in and through the varied chapters and seasons and experiences of life.

In his book *Realms of Meaning* Philip Phenix has argued that "the distinctive goal of human existence is the realization of *meaning*." He goes on to affirm "If this is accepted, then the good life consists in the

realization of meanings, in all realms . . . (coordinating) these meanings into an integrated vision and commitment.”<sup>3</sup> In another book he relates this perception to the religious orientation:

To know the world profoundly, in its origins, actualities, possibilities, and promises, is to know God, and to live in the world with unconditional concern for the realization of its manifold and multiform excellences is to worship him in spirit and in truth.<sup>4</sup>

In my book *A Whole Person In A Whole World*<sup>5</sup> I have endeavored to develop a perspective similar to that suggested by Phenix, perceiving the human person as a meaning-seeking creature. If our natural, bodily, historical existence is potential for meaning, and if it is truly significant in the divine order, then the experience of God is not limited to life’s “peak” experiences. God is experientiable in ordinary days, in dark nights of the soul, in human relationships, in the decision-making experiences of life, in sickness and in health, in death and dying, in the varied season and chapters of our experience. God is the reality making for wholeness — and life is holy in its wholeness.

It is indeed good news that our historical existence can yield meaning. It is indeed good news that life can be more than an exploitive rat race or a meaningless routine. It is good news that human personhood involves dimensions of spirit which grow through our natural existence.

It is good news that meaning in existence is not imposed arbitrarily from without. Meaning emerges out of the inter-play of events as persons bring their will-for-meaning to bear on events. It is good news that meaning involves intrinsically significant experiences. It involves growth-in-personhood-in-community. It involves participation in self-transcending goods and goals and purposes. The great use of a life, said William James, is to spend it for something that outlasts it.

It is good news that hopes for a more humane world and the ideals which spring from those hopes are not without support in the nature of reality. It is good news that there is an integrity which upholds persons and groups in their quest for integrity. It is good news that there is a Sacred Reality which is sometimes experienced as a persuasive lure, calling men and nations into new ways, new visions, new ways of relating, new hopes for what might be. It is good news

<sup>3</sup>Phenix, Philip, *Realms Of Meaning*, McGraw-Hill, N.Y. 1964, p. 232.

<sup>4</sup>Phenix, Philip, *Education And The Worship Of God*, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1966, p. 28f.

<sup>5</sup>Potthoff, Harvey, *A Whole Person In A Whole World*, Tidings, Nashville, 1972.

that the Sacred Reality, worthy of our deepest trust and devotion, is present in our historical existence, so that with J.A.T. Robinson we can affirm that "we need not fear flux: God is in the rapids as much as in the rocks, and as Christians we are free to swim and not merely to cling."<sup>6</sup>

It is good news that faith and hope and love mark the quality of life most appropriate for the human creature, undergirded by what is deepest in the nature of things. It is good news that God and man are linked in the processes which make for wholeness; grace and human responsibility belong together. Thus, it is good news that life and death can be lifted to the level of celebration and life can be lived to the glory of God.

It is good news that there are and have been persons whose styles of being in the world make this good news credible. It is good news that there are fellowships which in their styles of being in the world declare the wonder and the joy of faith and hope and love. They, too, make the good news credible.

As we think, then, of some particular church in some particular community, what can we say of the good news it is proclaiming through its worship, in its use of language and art and symbol, in its rituals, in its care for persons, in its decision-making, in its dealing with conflict, in its approach to personal and social problems? Message is implicit in style.

### III

#### FOR WHOM IS THE GOOD NEWS?

A new vision is breaking upon the peoples of the earth. It is a vision which perceives the inter-relatedness of all things and persons. It perceives the inter-play of individual things and their environment, of parts and wholes. It perceives that there is just *one* human species and that persons of all nations and races and cultures share a common humanity. It perceives what Archibald MacLeish perceived as our astronauts were speeding around the moon, seeing planet Earth in a perspective from which it had never been seen before:

To see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold - brothers who know now that they are truly brothers.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Robinson, J.A.T., *Christian Morals Today*, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1964, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup>*New York Times*, December 25, 1968.

This new vision calls human beings to reassess their place in the universe as a whole. Such reassessment calls at the same time for a sense of humility and a sense of responsibility. Harlow Shapley wrote:

the anthropocentric religions and philosophies . . . have in these present days an opportunity for aggrandizement through incorporating a sensibility of the newly revealed cosmos. . . A one-planet deity has for me little appeal. . . The new knowledge from many sources . . . make(s) obsolete many of the earlier world views. The new discoveries and developments contribute to the unfolding of a magnificent universe; to be a participant is in itself a glory. With our confreres on distant planets; with our fellow animals and plants of land, air and sea; with the rocks and waters of all planetary crusts, and the photons and atoms that make up the stars — with all these we are associated in an existence and an evolution that inspires respect and deep reverence. We cannot escape humility.<sup>8</sup>

A contemporary reassessment of man's role in the cosmic processes also recognizes his increasing role as decision-maker. Human beings must now make decisions pertaining to life and death control. Human beings increasingly have the power to direct the course of evolution itself. Human beings can share in creating a world community. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote, "... in the great game that is being played, we are the players as well as being the cards and the stakes . . . . we are evolution."<sup>9</sup> A significant study dealing with *Man's Control Over Birth And Death*" includes this statement:

Recent discoveries in biology and genetics have given man far greater control over life than ever before. . .

Science has given man power to alter his environment, to modify his physical health, to eliminate some of his genetic defects, to lengthen his life, to free himself from want — if he will — and, at the same time, to threaten the very survival of his species through nuclear war, environmental pollution, and overpopulation.

The impact of scientific knowledge on human life has created a new urgency and an inescapable obligation to weigh very carefully the choices we make from now on, the priorities

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<sup>8</sup>Shapley, Harlow, *Of Stars And Men: Human Response To An Expanding Universe*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1958, p. 148f.

<sup>9</sup>Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, *The Phenomenon Of Man*, Harper, N.Y., 1959, pp. 229, 231.



we set for the use of our powers and our resources. Indeed, if man is to have a future at all, we are *forced* to think of the choices open to us. These are difficult and painful, for they affect not only the beginning and the end of human life but the quality of life in all the years that lie between.<sup>10</sup>

It is in the context of the newer views of the universe and man's place in it that the church must give answer to the question, "For whom is the good news?" The answer to that question is given most clearly in the church's style or styles of being church. With whom is the church actually endeavoring to be in touch and in communication? What is the range of the church's actual concern as that concern is measured by the church's way of life?

The styles of some churches suggest that the good news is being addressed primarily to persons in the fellowship of faith and to potential members of the fellowship of faith. The good news is proclaimed to individuals coping with their individual problems. In addition, missionary efforts may be directed to individuals at a distance who hopefully, upon hearing the good news, will make commitments of faith and to the institutional church. From this point of view the church exists primarily to serve individuals on an individual basis. That this is an important part of the church's ministry few persons would deny. Hopefully more and more churches will be increasingly effective in identifying the deep religious needs of individuals and ministering to them.

But in our time the question rises with new force as to whether this fully defines Christian ministry. On a planet where the very continuation of human life as well as the quality of human life are at stake, where decisions of the most crucial importance are being made, where families and groups and communities and institutions and nations are experiencing unprecedented strain and testing, what does the church's good news have to contribute to the wider and more inclusive dimensions of the human scene? And if that good news *does* have relevance to the social scene, is the church prepared to affirm that fact and act accordingly?

How effectively is the church you know best ministering to the deep human needs for morale, meaning, motivation, ethical guidance? How is its concern for the lonely, the hungry, the oppressed, the sick, the rejected being expressed? Is it reaching out to persons estranged from society? Is it proving to be a resource for persons exercising

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<sup>10</sup>*Who Shall Live?* (A report prepared for the American Friends Service Committee), Hill and Wang, N.Y. 1970, xiv.

power and who wish to exercise that power responsibly? Is it saying important things to persons who are seeking a living faith but who find themselves to be honest doubters? As you reflect on some church you know well, what is its style of being church saying about its concern for individuals? Is the good news which it affirms really for *all* individuals?

Then, in reflecting on the style or styles of some church you know well, what is to be said of its concern for persons as they are being influenced by environmental conditions, by the institutions of society, by laws, by political and economic forces? It is a strange logic which insists that Christian ministry is concerned with the individual sufferer, but unconcerned about the conditions which cause the suffering.

There is need in our time for churches which recognize in style as well as in word that the good news is for all mankind — even though persons vary in their capacity to appropriate that good news. There is need for churches which communicate the vision of God in history — creatively and redemptively present in the affairs of mankind. There is need for churches which in speaking of God speak also of what man might become as a creature of God. The glory of God, said Irenaeus, is man fully alive. There is need for churches which in worship, ritual, teaching and action lift up a vision of whole persons in a whole world.

Such churches recognize that even as they are called to minister to individuals in their personal needs, they are also called to prepare those individuals for a Christian presence in the world. If the church is to be a binding influence in society, serving a bridge-function, breaking down class, race and ethnic barriers, functioning as a judging-creating-healing-reconciling leaven, it must do more than talk — it must provide knowledges and skills and motivations for laymen who would bear witness to their faith in the processes and structures of society.

A church which believes that the good news is for all persons is a church which seeks to facilitate communication among persons of goodwill within a community. In some instances this may involve providing forums in which persons representing different segments of society can talk about the kinds of communities they hope for — and how they might cooperate. In some instances this will involve bringing together persons from various disciplines in the quest for a deeper understanding of what makes life truly human, and a deeper understanding of how that more human quality of life can be nurtured. The church is now in a position to facilitate communication among persons of goodwill — provided it really believes that the good news is for all

persons and that our historical experience can indeed be redeemed for meaning.<sup>11</sup>

A church's style clearly reveals whether it is primarily concerned with itself and in its own inner life, or whether it has caught the vision of the God who wills whole persons in a whole world.

A local congregation can be a fellowship which affirms the sacred in the secular, which affirms the human enterprise in its dignity and potentialities, which glories in the wonder and possibilities of the human spirit, which brings a critique of culture — not for the sake of being negative but for the sake of pointing toward higher levels of fulfillment, which affirms that life is of God and in God all mankind is united, which affirms life and calls persons into more significant living, which affirms that we *can* do something about our problems, which continues to hold forth the ideal of a cooperative and caring family of man, which in varied ways continues to place its stamp of faith and hope and love upon persons and communities. Such a fellowship is *good news*. It is the *leaven of grace* in the larger loaf of society. Its message is implicit in its style.

#### IV

#### WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN LIFE?

In its style of being a church every local congregation is saying something about its perception of the Christian life. Some image or images of the Christian life is being projected.

Two of the most revealing clues to what is perceived to be the Christian life are to be found in what is *celebrated* and what is *nurtured* in a congregation. The church at worship and the church in its varied forms of nurturing (through education and through relationships) speaks explicitly or implicitly of the Christian life. The celebrating and nurturing roles of the church are carried on in varied times and places and ways.

In his book *Religious Behavior: Where Sociology and Religion Meet* Oliver Read Whitley endeavors to view the church in both sociological and theological perspective. Having considered the par-

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<sup>11</sup>In his book *The Noise Of Solemn Assemblies* (Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y. 1961, pp. 149ff.) Peter Berger speaks of "Christian dialogue" as "the attempt to engage the Christian faith in conversation with the world." He believes such conversation to offer "one of the best possibilities for social engagement and relevance in our own situation." He goes on to say, "It is startling to reflect how few places there are in our society where people can come together and talk about the human problems of their social situations in an atmosphere of freedom, not as negotiators or propagandists or scientific researchers into these problems, but simply as human beings facing up to the moral reality of their lives. The 'Academy movement' has regarded it as a Christian service to society to provide such places."

ticular concerns of the sociologist in relation to the church as organization, he goes on to speak of theologians who perceive the church as a community of remembering and reliving, a community of rejoicing, and as a redeeming community.<sup>12</sup>

Using this analysis, it is interesting to ask what is revealed about a given congregation by its styles in remembering and reliving, in rejoicing, and in its participation in what theologically is called "redemption." What is *remembered, called to mind*, in worship, in sermons, in teaching, in ritual, in symbolism? What events and experiences and persons are recalled as having *disclosing* or *revealing* significance — pointing beyond themselves to that which is ultimately meaningful and important?

In what does the church *rejoice* — in its worship, in its festive occasions, in its marking of the varied chapters and seasons and experiences of life?

In what sense or senses does the congregation perceive itself to be participating in *the redemptive reality and work of God* — both as recipient of God's redemptive grace and as agent or instrument or mediator of that grace? How is the redemptive concern acted out?

In asking these questions about a given congregation we may begin to get answers to the question of what that congregation perceives the Christian life to be. Is it primarily a matter of holding certain correct beliefs, is it primarily a matter of obeying certain rules, or having certain specified experiences? Is it a matter of withdrawing from the world or being an agent of social transformation? Is it primarily a matter of institutional loyalty? Or *is it a way or ways of being in the world — with styles manifesting life affirmation and the belief that the materials and experiences of life can indeed be redeemed for meaning?* Is the Christian life marked by a quality of aliveness, manifesting faith and hope and love and joy?

Both the content and style of *worship* reveal some image of the Christian life. Both the content and style of *teaching* reveal some image of the Christian life. The *ways in which decisions are made* and *conflicts dealt with* reveal some image of the Christian life. The quality of relationships which are nurtured in shared experiences of study and service reveals some image of the Christian life. In its remembering, rejoicing and serving a congregation speaks eloquently of some image or images of the Christian life. A fellowship which is truly a redeeming community gets that said in word and deed and style.

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<sup>12</sup>Whitley, Oliver R., *Religious Behavior: Where Sociology And Religion Meet*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1964, pp. 59ff.

If some persons in our time are “turned off” by the institutional church, it may sometimes be because they simply are not interested in *the way of life* or *the quality of life* which is celebrated and nurtured in at least some local congregations. If there is remembering, it is the remembering of a dead past rather than a reliving and celebration of a revealing and creative heritage. If there is rejoicing, it is over institutional gains or matters of quite secondary importance. If there is an avowed concern for “redemption” it is sometimes a redemption which has little to do with what is happening in and to persons as they experience victory and defeat, joy and sorrow, work and play, love and loneliness. It has little to do with the conviction that our historical existence can be redeemed for meaning, and that persons can participate in the coming of a more humane world.

The church ideally is a fellowship seeking significance in response to the vision of God. It is a fellowship which in its style of life affirms the goodness of creation, the possibility of meaning *in and through* the events and experiences of life. It is a fellowship which in response to the vision of God perceives human life as an art, a stewardship, a summons into the not-yet-but-might-be. It is a fellowship which incorporates values and norms and ideals in its ways of life — values and norms and ideals which reflect a response to the creating and redeeming and whole-making God. Such a fellowship is marked by oneness of purpose rather than concensus of opinion. It is a fellowship free enough to welcome “creative inter-change.” It is a fellowship which both supports and calls to account. It is a fellowship seeking to identify with individuals and a better world coming to be. It is a “community of memory and of hope.”

## V

### HOW IS THE CHURCH'S GOOD NEWS COMMUNICATED?

“All real living is meeting.”

So spoke Martin Buber. Real living, he reminds us, is meaningful living and meaning is experienced relationally — with other persons, with things and causes and events and possibilities about which we care.

It is possible to attend meetings in which no one really meets; at best some contacts are experienced. True meeting involves entering into, reciprocal relationships, giving and receiving, communication. Communication on the inter-personal level, according to Reuel Howe,

“Occurs whenever there is a meeting of meaning between two or more persons.”<sup>13</sup>

If the church does, indeed, affirm the good news that our historical existence can issue in meaning, then “real meeting” and “communication” become crucial in the church’s concern. A vital congregation is a communicating congregation. Through creative inter-change horizons are being widened and sensitivities deepened.

A congregation’s *implicit theology* is strikingly revealed in the communication or lack of communication which is facilitated in the on-going life of the church. If God in some sense is a communicating God, if the God-Man relationship as well as the Man-Man relationship involves communication, we find important clues to a congregation’s real life through a study of the relationships and communications which are nurtured. The church exists to make God real to persons in the living of their lives — and God is known relationally. If God is a relational God, and persons seek to become God-like, the arena of relationships becomes crucial in the religious quest. Styles in relating within the church are theologically revealing.

These considerations are relevant to one of the deepest spiritual problems of our time — that of loneliness. Loneliness involves the feeling of not being meaningfully related. To be truly isolated from meaningful relations, to be out of touch with that which confers significance, to be out of communication is to experience a non-human existence; it is to be in hell. Salvation, in the sense we are using the term, means being made whole — and that involves true meeting, meaningful relationships, communication.

How is the Church’s Good News Communicated? By way of getting at this question let us consider (1) Contexts for meaningful communication in the church; (2) Images of communication in the church; (3) Languages through which meaningful communication takes place.

(1) *Contexts For Meaningful Communication In The Church.* It is frequently said that ideally the church is a fellowship or community. But what identifies or distinguishes *the church* as fellowship or community? The suggestion has been made earlier in this article that the church is a fellowship responding to the vision of God. It is not a vague and generalized response but a response in such specific things as worship, ritual, study, care of persons, the devotional life, witness and service in the world.

Communication about significant matters is a mark of the vital

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<sup>13</sup>Howe, Reuel, *The Miracle Of Dialogue*, Seabury, Greenwich, Conn., 1963, p. 22f.

church. That communication takes place as persons share in significant enterprises. It is as persons creatively relate and communicate in worship, ritual, study, the care of persons, the devotional life, witness and service in the world that *meaning is experienced*. A church's style in these matters says much about how God's creating and redeeming reality is perceived.

An acid test of a church's ministry is found in the way persons are treated in the on-going life of the congregation. This involves much more than giving persons a friendly greeting at the door. It involves how persons are treated on a day by day basis; how they are treated as they experience grief and guilt; how they are treated in loneliness and under pressure of great demands; how they are treated in the midst of decision-making in congregational life; how they are treated in conflict situations. How persons are treated in these situations, the nature of the relationships and communications which are nurtured under these circumstances says much about the church's *real* vision of God and God's agency in the world. Message is implicit in style.

(2) *Images of Communication In The Church*. Preaching is one of the extremely important functions of the church's ministry, especially in the Protestant tradition. An analysis of various theories of communication-through-preaching throws light on the more inclusive matter of communication in the congregation.

Some preachers perceive the preaching situation primarily in terms of *encounter* — the listener is encountered by the preached Word of God and he is called to make response. In its more extreme forms this approach may hold that "the gospel is a stone thrown at the world," and preaching is a means of throwing the stone. A second view of communication-through-preaching is suggested by Tillich's "method of correlation." In this perspective preaching involves the attempt to correlate the Christian message with questions of ultimate concern which rise out of the human situation; the message is derived from Biblical sources, according to Tillich, and not from the matrix of events out of which the questions emerge. Preaching under these circumstances, involves questions and answers — and the preacher is to show how the Biblical symbols speak to the existential questions. A third view of preaching is more holistic or organismic in its orientation. The sermon situation in the context of worship is seen as one of several relational experiences in which preacher-pastor-people share. The Word of God is perceived not so much as something external "thrown at" or "presented to" the people — as the gracious reality which emerges as a living presence where two or three or more are

gathered together in significant searching, sharing, relating, communicating. Scripture, tradition, experience, reason all provide input in the preaching event — as all participants play real roles in bringing forth the sermon, bearing witness to the living Word.

Something of this same analysis is applicable to other dimensions of the church's ministries. Relations may be perceived primarily in terms of encounter, correlation or creative inter-change. From the point of view expressed in this article styles of communication which are participatory and response-inducing are to be preferred to alternative styles. This has far-reaching implications for teaching, decision-making, and every other aspect of the church's life. If, as Henry Nelson Wieman has long insisted, God is discerned in *creative inter-change* the presence or lack of creative inter-change in a church's life has something important to say about its implicit theology.

(3) *Languages Through Which Meaningful Communication Takes Place.* Many languages are operational in the life of a congregation. Some are verbal, some non-verbal. There are the languages of worship, preaching, ritual, art, myth, conversation, personal example, symbolic expression in many forms, action. Unfortunately, many persons do not hear or understand these languages; hence there is the need for continuing interpretation. Unfortunately, also, is the fact that some languages block rather than facilitate communication. Again this calls for a continuing interpretation of the languages. It also calls for a basic integrity in the use of language. Languages sometimes *seem* to say one thing when something else is really intended. There is a morality of language to be respected.

The quality of care which is brought to the church's various languages is itself a form of communication. In matters pertaining to the worship and service of God there is an immorality in being satisfied with anything badly done — whether that be the performance of ritual, the preaching of a sermon, the care of persons in need, the upkeep of the church building. Carelessness and mediocrity in these matters say that it doesn't matter very much. The quest for excellence is a major part of the worship of God.

It is especially depressing when something is badly done in the name of God: shabby ritual, a disheveled school, a sloppy church supper. All of these things communicate something to people. If only Christians could learn from the Buddhists the value of doing small things well. Anything that lifts life — even the way tea is served — becomes ritual because it



does honor to God in enhancing the world that God has made.<sup>14</sup>

Human beings need languages of depth and profundity and sensitivity and meaning. A major function of the church is to give persons languages in which the profounder questions, feelings, concerns, questions and aspirations can be expressed in the context of an historical community of faith and concern. Through such languages (often the languages of myth, rite, scripture, poetry, music and other forms of art) persons are enabled to come alive to meaningful dimensions of reality, to enter into worlds of meaning missed by many, to communicate with those of kindred spirit. Every congregation continually needs to be asking what languages are operational and what communications are being facilitated in the life of the church. Persons become more human through appropriate language. Language is the handmaid of meaning. A church which affirms the possibility of meaning is a communicating congregation.

## VI

In this article the attempt has been made to say that in the life of the church *message is implicit in style*. As Harvey Cox put it, "the church itself may become the visual enactment of the message it bears."

If there is validity in this thesis local congregations are called upon to study and evaluate their styles of life, not simply from the point of view of pragmatic efficiency, but from the point of view of what is being said about the good news itself.

In a world hungry for hope and hungry for redeeming visions and hungry for caring, the church is called to be in ministry — in word and deed and style. The church is called to be a faithful, hoping, caring presence in the world.

In an English chapel this inscription is found:

IN THE YEAR 1653  
WHEN ALL THINGS SACRED WERE  
THROUGHOUT THE NATION  
EITHER DEMOLISHED OR PROFANED  
SIR ROBERT SHIRLEY BARONET

---

<sup>14</sup>Edward Fischer in an article "Ritual As Communication" in *The Roots Of Ritual*, edited by James Shaughnessy, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1973, p. 174.

FOUNDED THIS CHURCH:  
WHOSE SINGULAR PRAISE IT IS  
TO HAVE DONE THE BEST THINGS  
IN THE WORST TIMES  
AND  
HOPED THEM IN THE MOST CALAMITOUS

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