

# *The Inner City--The Church's Challenge*

RUSSELL S. WILLIAMS

**H**AVE you ever gone down a congested city street and seen a building which looked like a church building but which is now a warehouse or a restaurant, or a factory building? Have you wondered what happened to the congregation that used to worship there? Have you ever gone to visit a church on a Sunday morning and wondered why all of the vacant pews, when you passed by crowded terraces and apartment buildings, and had to hunt for a parking space? Surely, there were many people in the neighborhood. Why weren't they in church? These, and many other questions, point up Protestantism's most serious challenge — the challenge of the Inner City. Note that we recognize it as a challenge, rather than recognizing it as a problem.

To be sure, there are many problems connected with maintaining a Protestant witness in the Inner City, but our Protestant churches have usually recognized the need to evangelize lost souls as a challenge, or better as an opportunity, rather than as a problem. Protestant churches have always been quick to respond to the opportunity to witness for their Lord. They responded to the challenge of the expanding frontier. They responded to the opportunities for evangelism among the American slaves and among the American Indians. They responded to the opportunity for evangelism among the hordes of immigrants who came to our shores the first half of the twentieth century. Today, Protestantism must respond to the challenge of the Inner City.

This means that Protestantism must respond to the challenge of urban cul-

ture. Our Protestant churches are rural in orientation. This was good when our population was largely rural. Now, however, industrialization has meant the growth of urban areas, while farm mechanization has necessarily meant the decrease in rural population. All of our social institutions have been faced with a radical reorientation. Our Federal Government, for example, long dominated by "Farm Bloc" thinking, has found itself forced to face up to the well-nigh insoluble problems created by urban living. Municipal governments have found themselves swallowed up in metropolitan communities, and have literally been forced to organize along ever-expanding community lines in order to cope with the serious problems which arise out of metropolitan living. Often school boards have found themselves faced with "problem area" schools, where they have had to find imaginative ways of dealing with truancy, drop-outs, and other symptoms of the social ills which beset the particular school community. The church, then, is not immune to the forces of change which have been at work in our urban communities. By design or default, we have created an urban culture. The church must get to know this culture and must find some points of contact with it, if we are to reach people who are so much a part of the culture.

A study of American church history indicates, to me at least, that our churches were compatible with American rural culture, because the churches were conscious of their role as the New Israel, but as such, found a great affinity with Old Israel, the Agrarian Society, rather than Old Israel the Covenant Society. In other words, the people were so intrigued by the fact that Jesus was at home in rural settings, they were sure He was at home with them on the American rural scene. Perhaps it is this con-

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sciousness (or should I say, unconscious heritage?) which we contemporary Protestants have received from our fathers, which makes us quite sure that Jesus would be uncomfortable in our modern-day metropolis.

How much of the barrier of Protestantism in the Inner City can be traced to our own preconceived ideas that we will fail in the Inner City? In other words, do we flee the Inner City because we are convinced, deep down, that we have no business in the Inner City in the first place? Perhaps the very terms "pastor" and "shepherd" and others which we use in our congregational life carry such strong connotations of rural living that we are unable to see their relevance in urban settings. It may be that the church in an urban setting must begin to think in terms of Block Captains and spiritual assembly lines, and Steward and Foremen.

We have suggested that Protestantism must come to grips with urban culture, if it is to be a witness to the people in the Inner City. This means a thorough examination of the neighborhood in which the church seeks to plant or maintain its witness. Such an examination ought not—as we have already hinted—end on the threshold of the church; it ought to lead to a critical re-examination of the whole life of the church.

The failure of Protestantism in the Inner City is not entirely due to external factors, but relates to forces deep within the life of churches themselves. Perhaps the very successes of the suburban churches are the expression of the same forces which cause failure in the Inner City. This means that any critical appraisal of Protestantism might be done at the risk of becoming self-conscious about suburban success, (if not, indeed, to jeopardize that success). In other words, a thorough-going evaluation of Protestantism must mean a "shaking of the foundations," rather than a perfunctory setting things in order. The church

must be willing to lose its life in order to save it. This means that the real motive for our self-study is not to make successful Inner City churches, but to find out how better we may be faithful stewards of the Gospel in the Inner City. We must be willing to face the reality that one's own particular denomination—whatever it be—may be, and may remain, extinct in the Inner City. Yet the responsibility is ours in our denominations to support an Inner City ministry.

Financial support of the church's ministry to the Inner City must not be kept at subsistence level. At best, the Inner City churches will be years in building up a base of self-support. Most Inner City churches probably will never be able to exist without considerable financial subsidy from outside. Present practice, for the most part, is begrudgingly to give what we have left over, old clothes, old toys, and tired old dollars to the work of the Inner City. Is it no wonder then, that our Inner City churches give up the struggle and close up completely rather than constantly to fight the battle for survival? When the Inner City church has to compete with its suburban counterpart for personnel, equipment, building material, etc., obviously it is in no condition to maintain that competition. When the church turns its back on the people of the Inner City and moves out, it indicates that we have made the Gospel one of the many commodities of our economy. He who has the money to afford the Gospel, has it. He who cannot afford it, goes without.

At present, Protestant churches in the Inner City are kept open or closed mainly by virtue of whether or not financial support is forthcoming for the church. Although we must recognize the importance of a firm financial support for a Protestant witness in the Inner City, financial support must not be the factor which determines a Protestant strategy. We must develop standards by which we evaluate the effectiveness (note I did not say 'success') of Protestant work in

the Inner City. We must become able to determine when to begin a new Protestant work in the Inner City, or just as important, when to terminate a work which is in existence. Often, we suspect, financial support could be found for work which is totally unnecessary because of its ineffectiveness and irrelevance; while at the same time, a much needed and potentially effective work is discontinued or does not get started because of lack of financial support.

If we must not be swayed by dollars alone in determining the effectiveness of a Protestant witness in the Inner City, by the same token, we must not be convinced by numbers alone. The mere counting of noses is not a real indication of how many people are responding. When we allow statistics to determine our strategy in the Inner City, we engage in a popularity contest with the Gospel. When we count the number of people who come to church, all we have determined, really, is how many people

have come to church. We have not necessarily learned anything about how many people need the church, nor have we found out how many of those people who have come to church, have found in their coming, what they really need.

If neither noses nor nickles are criteria for determining the effectiveness of our Protestant witness in the Inner City, how do we evaluate what we are about? This is the frustrating part of Inner City work, and is why it becomes so difficult to make decisions concerning the retention or extension of church work in the Inner City. There is no neat formula. One must develop as deep an insight as one is capable of developing through the compilation of all of the sociological data available. One must approach the situation with as great degree of realism as it is possible to muster. And, finally, one must come to rely anew upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who will reveal to us God's will for his people in the Inner City.

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