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The Dilemma of the Minister

Earl Clement Davis

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"The Plight Of The Thinking Minister" in the New Republic of August 3rd. raises a question with which many men, whether ministers or laymen, are struggling . The problem is not confined tothe minister, nor to this day of reaction,although its difficulties become more apparent and critical as the spirit of intolerance increases. The educator faces the same situation. The labor leader is not immune . The business man must submit or be forced to fight. Even politicians sometimes are compelled to bend the knee to the boss. The scientist , the philosopher, the social worker, and the journalist are faced with the same sort of a dilemma. It is grounded in the nature of things. Not only in affairs human, but in the order of nature does the variant from established order face the demands of conformity. Conform or get out. That is the order. Many are the variations that thrust out their ambitious projects beyond the confines of the established order , only to be crushed in the struggle for existance."Many are called but few are chosen," to misuse an ancient text. Each variation that appears must prove itself, and pay the price of being tested either for rejection or establishment. Each old and established form or value struggles to maintain its right under the sun with as much persistance and plug-ugly tenacity as a congressman clings to his patronage, or the ordinary human being clings to his prejudices and priviliges. Even the minister wishes to shoot out his variants, and still claim the support of respectability and conformity, his standing and privilege. It is possible that this situation ought not to exist, but it does It is a bit of realism that we have to recognize and contend with.

Even the most radical of persons does not entirely escape from the established and respectable values. Frequently he incorporates into his very radicalism some ancient concept that long since has lost its standing. In the above mentioned article there are at least two such survivals that can hardly stand the test of present day methods of thinking. One of these survivals is found in the use of the phrase, "The Church", as a sort of distinct entity with a unique power, authority, and significance in the world order. "The Church" bound together by common principles, practises, and doctrines does not exist, and never has existed. Even in the palmy days of the age of faith, so-called, "The Church" was but a pious theory, and never a fact. The assumption that "The Church" exists, possessing powers, qualities, and endowments different from other human organizations, has been and still is the source of incalculable confusion. Religious organizations, whether churches or not, have arisen in the natural course of events to meet the requirements of men and women in their efforts to understand the values of life, and to transmit their interpretations of those values. All this is very natural, human, and real. Differentiating characteristics are purely functional. These institutions, as they have arisen, have reflected in their thought and practises the prevailing spirit and customs of the age in which they arose. Subsequently they have either submitted to modifications to meet the requirements of the changing order, or they have slipped out of use into the discard of history. Such religious institutions, including churches, are subject to the same process of evolution, the same tests, and the same fate that industrial and political institutions meet. "The Church" does not exist, has never existed, and, unless natural laws change,

it does not seem possible that it ever will exist. Religious organizations, including churches, exist. Some are large and powerful. Some are weak and small. Some are conservative, autocratic, and reactionary. Others are liberal and progressive. Some are being tested out as new variations in religious thought and practise .Others are dropping by the wayside, having served their purpose. To speak of the possible collapse of "The Church" is to confuse the situation. Large portions of the Churches ought to collapse. We cannot get anywhere in this problem raised in"The Plight of the Thinking Minister" until we recognize that churches are natural institutions, subject to the same process of evaluation that other institutions are.

From this point of view we are hardly within the world of reality when we talk about "The Church" having failed in the great world war, or in the aftermath efforts of what is called re-construction. The churches are made up of the same men that fill our shops, places of business, and positions of public office. Whether men"go to church" or stay at home they make their contribution to the religious thought and practises of the Church. Coolidgeisms are the same whether they are uttered as from the Vice-President, or as from a supporter of a New England country town church. A church has just that moral and intellectual contribution to make to the common weal that the moral and intellectual capacity of its constituency permits it to make. "The Church Of The Holy Speculators " of Mark Twain's humor is not likely to support a minister who would be classed as a radical. No more would a church whose constituency is largely liberal be satisfied with a minister whose very breath of life is conservative. The churches are supported and cherished by the individual just in proportion as they

tend to strengthen and express the life values that he cherishes. He can hardly give allegience and support to a church that does not in the main give tangible expression to the values that he considers paramount. This statement applies to ministers as well as laymen. Hence the boycott of the churches,-- by people of all classes and interests. Some boycott churches for reasons that reflect credit on the churches. Others for reasons that are searching criticisms of churches. Religious institutions, including churches are dying out because they fail to meet the requirements of the times. Others are coming into existance just because they do meet requirements. The order is always changing.

Into such a changing set of institutions the minister enters, having chosen as a life work to become an educator a moral leader. Many are the requirements demanded of this chosen field of work, but the keystone in the arch of his equipment is that of moral and intellectual integrity. He may be conservative or liberal; he may be a great scholar or not ; he may be genial and a good mixer; or he may be reserved and diffident ; but he must be a man of integrity and courage. There can be no compromise at this point. Many find an institution , and environment whose tradition spirit, purpose,and standards fit his own intellectual and moral convictions. Many are not so fortunate. Limitations exist on one sort or another which hte minister has to meet. Then arises the question of adjustment, such as is raised in the article in question. When that question arises, the cards must be laid on the table. The church involved has its integrities at stake as well as the minister. The minister is not always right. He can hardly expect a church to sacrefice what it considers an important principle, any more than the church should expect him to side-step

the clear implications of his convictions. The understanding between a minister and the church with which he is associated should be clear and unmistakable. The relations may not always be free from ruffling disturbances, but there can be no playing fast and loose. The minister is clearly responsible for maintaining this standard of moral and intellectual integrity of relations. The subterfuge of boring from within is not only of doubtful value, but it is undoubtedly a violation of the moral implications involved in the relationship of contract between the minister and constituency. Unless such a clear and above-board understanding can obtain the minister is bound, both in obligation to himself and to social institutions, to follow the lead of his convictions whether churches collapse or not. In taking such a step due consideration should be given to the distinction between mere personal opinion, either of himself or laymen, and the fundamental principles of social contract. A price must be paid for nonconformity even in our tumultuous and facinating generation.

In the same article there appears another survival of an old concept no longer tenable. It is the assumption, or at least the implication, that the teaching of Jesus has some transcendent, not to say Magic significance ; that there is an objective norm in his teaching that is to be accepted as final and authoritative. Such an assumption is the source of a vast amount of confusion in religious thought at the present time. It is a survival of the belief that religion and religious teachings are a peculiar deposit of ideas, moral standards, and practises injected into this mundane world of ours by some sort of miraculous revelation. It is hardly necessary to say that it does not appeal to the temper of the modern-minded man to accept truth from any source upon such

grounds. Doubtless the teachings of Jesus are sound and valid, but the question at issue is not the acceptance or rejection of his teachings as such. The question is as to their merit and applicability in the adventures of life. In spite of lapses, the evils of propaganda, the intolerance of reaction, and the storms of stress and passion, we have made some headway in establishing the scientific method of dealing with problems of life, both historical and prophetic. The method of impartial and painstaking investigation, of the correlation of facts, and an unprejudiced interpreation of the facts is winning it way. Coercion and dogmatic utterance may win battles here and there, but, unless the whole advance of modern history is to be swept into the discard, they cannot win the age long conflict betwwen the principles of freedom and authority. The teachings of Jesus stand upon the same claims as any other teachings. His claims to contribution in present problems rest not upon any kind of moral or intellectual infallibility, but rather upon his intellectual and moral integrity. He dealt honestly with the facts as he saw them. It adds confusion unto confusion even to imply that the teachings of Jesus possess a peculiar and compelling validity. They stand on their merits and workability, subject to investigation and judgement. In spite of the ugly facts to the contrary the undercurrents of modern life indicate that we are by no means losing sight of the truth that coercion of opinion is a tragic blunder, and that the free interchange of ideas , the comparison of institutions and values as a method of progress is the greatest discovery that mankind has made.

Here is the dilemma of the minister into whose life the spirit of the modernnw world has entered. Is he associated with a church that is functioning , or can be made to function upon

this basis ? Or can he share with men and women of a community in bringing into existance such a church ? Neither task is easy. It demands broad-minded tolerance, hard work, patient and thorough study as well as intellectual integrity and moral courage. But such churches have been developed. Many , perhaps more than we realize , are functioning to-day with a reasonable degree of efficiency, making real contributions to the intellectual and moral growth of individuals and communities. For the modern-minded minister the task is not to save "The Church" from collapse, not to be a propagandist of a cult, not even to salvage the visions of Jesus from a collapsing institution. His task is to lead in maintaining, or creating an institution where faith in truth holds sway ; where people may breath the atmosphere of integrity and come to understand that men may have standards of conduct beyond the reach of expediency; where honest opinions may be exchanged with frankness and candor ; where there is a broad generous tolerance; where the whole nature of man may reach out without fear into the vast mysteries of life's meaning and values. In such an atmosphere the spirit of faith in the worth of men and life will re-appear.

But "The Church" will not accomplish this task for the minister. The radical minister is a variant from the established and accepted. His ideas are variants from the normal. It is incumbant upon him to demonstrate his worth and the worth of his ideas. He cannot expect any large body, group of churches, denomination, or, least of all, that fiction, "The Church" to come to his rescue. If he chooses to blaze a trail in the wilderness, he cannot expect to find department stores, hospitals, and gasoline stations conveniently located along the way. Yet in religious

thought and practise we are at the end of an era. The entire field awaits just that adventerous courageous variant to investigate, to interpret, and to live. That is the foundation upon which faith in life's values may be established.

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Lancaster, Penn'a.

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"The Plight Of The Thinking Minister"[1] in the *New Republic* of August 3rd raises a question with which many men, whether ministers or laymen, are struggling. The problem is not confined to the minister, nor to this day of reaction, although its difficulties become more apparent and critical as the spirit of intolerance increases. The educator faces the same situation. The labor leader is not immune. The busines man must submit or be forced to fight. Even politicians sometimes are compelled to bend the knee to the boss. The scientist, the philosopher, the social worker, and the journalist are faced with the same sort of dilemma. It is grounded in the nature of things. Not only in affairs human, but in the order of nature does the variant from established order face the demands of conformity. Conform or get out. That is the order. Many are the variations that thrust out their ambitious projects beyond the confines of the established order, only to be crushed in the struggle for existence. "Many are called but few are chosen," to misuse an ancient text. Each variation that appears must prove itself, and pay the price of being tested either for rejection or establishment. Each old and established form or value struggles to maintain its right under the sun with as much persistence and plug-ugly tenacity as a congressman clings to his patronage, or the ordinary human being clings to his prejudices and privileges. Even the minister wishes to shoot out his variants, and sti11 claim the support of respectability and conformity, his standing and privilege. It is possible that this situation ought not to exist, but it does. It is a bit of realism that we have to recognize and contend with.

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[1] Lowry, Lewis R. *New Republic,* Vol. 27, Issue 348, pp. 268-271, August 3, 1921. The article describes a minister who is merely a sincere man who wants to do some real good to humanity. Lessons learned by the minister; description of the views of the minister about life and problems; discussion of the ministers preaching about the main works of the Church