

The Doctrine of the Church In These Times

By

Chester E. Tulga, D.D.

1953

CONSERVATIVE BAPTIST FELLOWSHIP

Illinois

Chapter 7

THE DEVELOPING CATHOLICISM OF LIBERAL ECUMENICITY

"We must not overrate the position and importance of the Church. It is only too possible to do this. But it will mean spiritual loss and disaster. If we exalt the Church we are likely to forget CHRIST. High views of the Church often mean low views of CHRIST. If we emphasize the Church as the depository of Grace between the sinner and the Saviour we may easily shut CHRIST out of the sinner's view. But if we exalt CHRIST the Church finds her proper place. If we honor CHRIST, we shall value the Church aright." W. H. Griffith-Thomas, (*The Catholic Faith*, p. 128)

"The moment form takes precedence over content religious faith begins to expire. And if preoccupation with form becomes so complete that it results in form being mistaken for content, then faith is already dead. This happened on a wide scale in Europe during the latter part of the fifteenth century, and produced the Protestant Reformation. It is happening on a wide scale now." Francis P. Miller (*The Church Against the World*, by Niebuhr, Pauck and Miller, p. 80).

"Another suggestion, innocent enough and even valuable as a subsidiary measure, is that we need an 'enriched ritual' of public worship. But if it be supposed that the one great need of our Protestant Christianity is to have a more aesthetic service of worship, there hardly could be a greater mistake. What is needed is new life and motivation from within, rather than the putting on of an artificial show of piety and zealous devotion. Let the typical, spiritually anaemic Church of today paint her cadaverous countenance with the rouge of an 'enriched ritual'; she will scarcely for all that hide from the world or from herself, not to speak of hiding from GOD, the melancholy fact that through her own folly she has lost her health and vigor, that she is in a serious state of decline, and that if her malady be not arrested, her sickness may indeed prove to be unto death. The mask of an 'enriched ritual' will not be enough." Douglas Clyde Macintosh (*Personal Religion*, pp. 239, 240).

"Feeling its way, and lacking in precise terminology, the Amsterdam Assembly defined these different viewpoints as the 'Catholic' and 'protestant': Those at the Assembly and many since have expressed their dissatisfaction with these terms, but for want of better ones they must be used. They are meant to indicate not two distinct Churches, nor in a wholly precise fashion even two groups of Churches. They are rather meant to indicate two typical, coherent ways of looking at the Christian faith, which are roughly adopted by different groups of Churches." (Robert S. Billheimer (*The Quest for Christian Unity*, p. 66).

"A Protestantism which survives as a pale and broken shadow of Catholicism has lost its reason for existence. For a while it will go on with its pious liturgies, dishonest 'orthodoxy', vague and inane moralism, and its ludicrous bid for power in society. Then, it will either become truly Catholic or die in disgrace." Joseph Haroutunian (*Wisdom and Folly in Religion*, p.22).

"The opinion that the institutional Church is the incarnation, that is, the 'concretely historical form, the form of a servant in which JESUS CHRIST is historically manifest, amounts to nothing less than a denial that the apostolic *Ecclesia* is a real fact of history. The New Testament writings with their picture of the *Ecclesia* shows that the Lord created for himself a body which was certainly not a Church, but a spiritual communion of persons. The opinion that to take seriously the incarnation requires that one should vindicate ecclesiasticism and allow the historical Church to be the necessary embodiment of the exalted Lord, overlooks the fact that He was truly embodied in the *Ecclesia*, but that this embodiment, the *Ecclesia*, had not the character which it later assumed: the character of an institution." Emil Brunner (*Misunderstanding the Church*, pp. 85, 86).

"The Church, as we have conceived it, includes all men. Men do not come into it, because they are in it. The possession of humanity is possession of redeemed humanity, in an age of redemption, in a redeemed world." (p. 62) ". . . For two thousand years now it has been recognized that the whole world has been redeemed. Any other idea with its ensuing conduct is out of date." (p. 63) ". . . There is a Church because all mankind is newly created. This new folk is the Church. 'Christians' are merely those who recognize the new mankind. Jews and Pagans belong to it, but their subjective participation is defective. They are belated and premature." (p. 65, 66) Clifford 1. Stanley (*Christian Faith and Social Action*, Edited by John A. Hutchinson).

"The ecumenical movement is like a team of wild horses: motion is assured, the problem being which direction it will take." Robert S. Billheimer (*The Quest for Christian Unity*, p. 103)

Liberalism, formerly indifferent to the Church and, forgetting the dangers to the Christian faith and to the human spirit from an organized Catholicism, is now steadily moving toward a Catholic, ritualistic, sacramental, hierarchical Churchism, with a minimal doctrinal position-liberal Catholicism.

This liberal Catholicism is a synthetic unity of human opinions, rather than a unity based upon the acceptance of all the truths of divine revelation. It is inclusive, not the inclusivism of a common faith, but an inclusivism based upon the premise that all truth is relative, and without final authority. It is based upon the new idea that differences concerning the interpretation of the Christian faith, formerly considered vital and exclusive, are not vital and should not exclude.

Liberal Catholicism is developing a Catholic doctrine of the Church which will give it an authority over the human spirit based upon a sanctity which it does not actually possess. It is a false sanctity because a worldly, compromising, half-believing Church cannot be the medium of grace and the voice of GOD to the human spirit.

1. The body of CHRIST is now said by many to be the universal, visible Church with all its doctrinal and moral impurities - a nonethical conception of the Church. Gustaf Aulen of the Lutheran Church of Sweden says, "When the Church is called the body of CHRIST, that means

first of all that CHRIST and the Church belong together as an inseparable unity. Where CHRIST is, there is also His Church: and where the Church is, there CHRIST is found also . . . CHRIST is incarnate in His Church." (*Man's Disorder and GOD's Design*: Amsterdam Report, p. 19).

An American liberal, Charles Clayton Morrison (*What is Christianity*, p. 156) presents the same idea, which he erroneously attributes to Paul. "Paul's conception of the incarnation as the body of CHRIST is thoroughgoing. He completely identifies CHRIST with the Church, the Church with CHRIST. He knows no Church apart from CHRIST and no CHRIST apart from the Church." The New Testament teaches no such thing, Morrison and all others, notwithstanding! Such a high view of the Church, and consequently, a low view of the CHRIST, is spiritually pernicious and socially harmful as history attests. In pulling the Church up to the level of CHRIST, CHRIST is reduced to the level of the Church!

2. The new Catholicism would make the experience of being "in CHRIST" a Church relationship rather than a covenant relationship between CHRIST and the individual. Paul undoubtedly thought and taught that the phrase "in CHRIST" was descriptive of an individual experience received directly and not mediated through a sacramental Church or "redemptive fellowship." This was certainly true in his case. To him being "in CHRIST" described an individual relationship between the believing individual and His redeeming Saviour. Liberal Catholicism would have it otherwise. J. Robert Nelson (*Realm of Redemption*, p. 86) commenting on this development of ecclesiastical thought, says, "Instead of a union between the individual and CHRIST, we now see the individual in relation to the community, which is the body of CHRIST. In short, Paul's phrase '**in Christ**' is said by many to be equivalent of 'in the Church.'" But the new liberal Catholicism marches on!

3. The new Catholicism makes the Church "the extension of the Incarnation." John A. F. Gregg (*Man's Disorder and GOD's Design*, p. 59) says, "The Church is the extension in time and space of the Incarnate Word of GOD, crucified, ascended, glorified, operating among men through the indwelling in them of His HOLY SPIRIT." J. S. Whale asserts that the "Church is rightly known by all Christians as an extension of the Incarnation." (*Christian Doctrine*, p. 140).

Karl Barth was reported as warning delegates at Amsterdam to "fear such phrases as the Church 'the continuation of the Incarnation.' We must ever distinguish between CHRIST on high and our Christian ecclesiastical life." (*Southern Presbyterian Journal*, 9-15-1948) Yet a Southern Baptist scholar (W. O. Carver in *The Nature of the Church*, Edited by R. N. Flew. p. 293) says, "As a rule we do not think of the Church as a local 'continuation of the Incarnation.' Nor do most Baptists conceive of the Church (the entire body of believers) as the 'continuation of the Incarnation.' But it is the conviction of an increasing number of us that this is a thoroughly scriptural and highly important way of conceiving the Church." Here is an illustration of the drift toward Catholic views of the Church among liberal Baptists.

There are objections to this view of the Church, even among the liberals. As Karl Barth expresses this relationship, JESUS CHRIST is the heavenly Head of the Church; but the Church is, "as His earthly body, bound to Him as such, and yet as such distinct from Him, who possess the Church in Himself, but not the Church Him in herself, between whom and her there is no reversible, interchangeable relationship, as certainly as the relationship between master and servant is not reversible." (*The Doctrine of the Word of GOD*, p. 113)

J. Robert Nelson says, "As Head of the Body, then CHRIST is both distinct from the Body and inseparable from it. He unites the body in Himself, and is yet not to be identified with it. His Spirit gives the Church life and direction, but He is not the soul of the Church. Again the paradoxical relationship of CHRIST to the Church, the Head to the Body, becomes manifest." Again he says, "However much CHRIST may need the Church as the instrument of His redemptive work in the world, therefore, it remains subordinate to Him in nature, drawing whatever meaning and value it has from its relation to Him. The Body lives only because it draws power from the Head, but it is not identical with the Head." (*The Realm of Redemption*, pp. 93, 95) The concept of the Church as the "extension of the Incarnation" leads back to Rome!

4. The new Catholicism defined. Walter M. Horton, (*Realistic Theology*, pp. 142, 143) who thinks his theology is realistic (whatever that means) says of the Church, "All that we have said of the work of CHRIST applies, therefore, to the work of the Church except that the Church can have only one founder, one 'chief corner-stone':"

(1) The Church continues CHRIST's work of mediation between God and man; it makes the life of GOD more and more immanent and actual in human life.

(2) The Church continues the work which was so important a part of his Galilean ministry, that of bringing new power and forgiveness to individuals who are bound in fetters of evil habit.

(3) The Church continues the work which led him to the Cross, that of defying and breaking the power of evil social customs and institutions.

One might go on, indeed, to note that all theological concepts which apply to CHRIST, so also apply to the Church. If GOD becomes manifest and incarnate in CHRIST, so also in the Church; if CHRIST has two natures, divine and human, so has the Church, if he has power to forgive sin, make atonement, and bestow saving grace, so has the Church. For the Church is the body of which he is the head, the organism through which he continues to live and act, '*even unto the end of the world.*' The view just defined undoubtedly has more affinity with medieval Catholic realism than with Protestant individualism and nominalism." This is a strange doctrine for those who trace their ancestry back to the Reformation.

Again, a professor in a Baptist Seminary (of all places) voices the Catholic view of the Church. C. G. Rutenber, professor of the Philosophy of Religion, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, says, "To remind ourselves that the Church is the present body of CHRIST His continuing body in history, is inevitably to invite comparison between His then-body and His now-body.

The same divine love and life and wisdom which became flesh in the biological body of JESUS CHRIST is now flesh in His present body, the Church. The Church as the body of CHRIST is the continuation of the incarnation, and of the atonement and of the resurrection. Its life and love and mind are CHRIST's life and love and mind.

The resurrection and ascension of CHRIST does not mean that He has abandoned the world. Rather through His body, the Church, He is reaching out to mend and heal and save. The love that redeems (the atoning event) must be love which is seen and revealed anew through His present body, the Church (imitating and reenacting community)." (*The Dagger and the Cross*, p.

61) Here is the new Catholicism, not from the pen of a Roman priest as the words might indicate, but from the pen of a Baptist professor in a Baptist seminary. The drift toward Catholicism is on in all liberal groups.

5. The new Catholicism tends to make the Church the medium through which the gift of the HOLY SPIRIT is received. Herbert W. Schneider (*Religion in Twentieth Century America*, pp. 150-155) calls attention to the growth of liturgy and ritualism in Protestant Churches. He refers to the liberal Catholic trend in theology, "which implies an acceptance of modernism in the field of historical criticism and ritualism in the art of worship," a trend which is very noticeable in those Churches which seem to be moving into the new Catholicism. Speaking of the Episcopalians, he says, "In their Catholic zeal some of the Episcopalians have exceeded the Roman Catholics in championing the 'corporate' channels of grace or sacraments." He quotes Theodore Wedel (*The Coming Great Church*, p. 60) as saying, "The HOLY SPIRIT is henceforth a corporate, not individual possession. Church and HOLY SPIRIT are from this point on inseparable. . . . Apart from the corporate community, there is no gift of the HOLY SPIRIT."

Men who call themselves "evangelicals" among liberals, are becoming Catholic rather than evangelical, for these tendencies will destroy the evangelical faith unless checked. Christendom is well on its way to the great apostasy, embracing the heresies of Romanism, while rejecting its orthodoxy. A cold, high-Churchism threatens Protestantism, as sterile as all high-Churchisms have been in the past. The New Testament doctrine of the Church stands in deadly peril in the house of its professed friends.

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