

Returning to the Church: The Supreme Challenge

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"Returning to the Church - The Supreme Challenge " is the title of my talk and it's on the important topic of leavening our religious heritage. My guess is that it will be most relevant to people who have read the whole Urantia Book - but perhaps not.

I'd like to start out by reading a few statements Jesus made at the end of his human life and during his final days on earth in morontia form. The 7th and final service bestowal of our Universe Sovereign, Michael of Nebadon, incarnated as a mortal man named Jesus, to bring man closer to God and God closer to man through the technique of experience, was nearly complete. For thirty five thousand years, since the default of Adam and Eve, anticipation had been building throughout the Universe. All eyes were on our small and honoured planet - the bestowal choice of 10 million inhabited spheres. Obviously time now was at a premium. Jesus had to instruct his followers clearly and repeatedly on their responsibilities once he left them. Please listen carefully to what Jesus said because I want to ask you a question when I'm finished.

To 50 of his trusted followers the night before his betrayal, Jesus said:

"Remember that you are commissioned to preach this gospel of the kingdom the supreme desire to do the Father's will coupled with the supreme joy of the faith realization of sonship with God - and you must not allow anything to divert your devotion to this one duty. Let all mankind benefit from the overflow of your loving spiritual ministry, enlightening g intellectual communion, and uplifting social service; but none of these humanitarian labors, nor all of them, should be permitted to take the place of proclaiming the gospel." P.1931

On Mount Olivet Jesus prays for unity among his followers then and now.

"And now, my Father, I would pray not only for these eleven men but also for all others who now believe, or who may hereafter believe the gospel of the kingdom through the word of their future ministry. I want them all to be one, even as you and I are one. You are in me and I am in you, and I desire that these believers likewise be in us; that both of our spirits indwell them. If my children are one as we are one, and if they love one another as I have loved them, all men will then believe that I came forth from you and be willing to receive the revelation of truth and glory which I have made." P.1964

During his second morontia appearance to the apostles at John Mark's home, Jesus said:

"Again I tell you: As the Father sent me into the world, so send I you....you will make known the love and the mercy of God to all mankind....Your mission to the world is founded on the fact that I lived' a God-revealing life among you; on the truth that you and all other men are the sons of God; and it shall consist in the life which you will live among men - the actual and living experience of loving men and serving them, even as I have loved and served you." P.2043

Appearing to Rodan and 80 other believers in Alexandria, Jesus said:

"That which my father sent me into the world to establish belongs not to a race, a nation, nor to any special group of teachers or preachers. This gospel of the kingdom belongs to both Jew and gentile, to rich and poor, to free and bond, to male and female, even to the little children. And you are all to proclaim this gospel of love and truth by the lives which you live in the flesh. You shall love one another with a new and startling affection, even as I have loved you. You will serve mankind with a new and amazing devotion, even as I have served you. And when men see you so love them, and when they behold how fervently you serve them, they will perceive that you have become faith-fellows of the kingdom of heaven, and they will follow after the Spirit of Truth which they see in your lives, to the finding of eternal salvation....As the Father sent me into the world, even so now I send you. You are all called to carry the good news to those who sit in darkness..." P. 2044

To the women's corps and their associates, the apostles and 50 leading disciples, Jesus said:

"I admonish you ever to remember that your mission among men is to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom - the reality of the Fatherhood of God and the truth of sonship of man. Proclaim the whole truth of the good news, not just a part of the saving gospel. Your message is not changed by my resurrection experience. Sonship with God, by faith, is still the saving truth of the gospel of the kingdom. You are to go forth preaching the love of God and the service of man. That which the world needs most to know is: Men are the sons of God, and through faith they can actually realize, and daily experience, this ennobling truth....Therefore, go you now into all the world preaching this gospel of the kingdom of heaven to all men. Love all men as I have loved you; serve your fellow mortals as I have served you. Freely you have received, freely give." P. 2052 - 3

To Nalda and about 75 Samaritan believers near Jacob's well, Jesus said:

"The gospel of the kingdom has taught you that all men are the sons of God. And this good news concerning the love of the heavenly Father for his children on earth must be carried to all the world...." P. 2053

To a meeting of believers in Tyre, he said:

My Father sent me into the world to proclaim salvation of sonship with all men. And so I send you abroad to preach this salvation of sonship....And when you go abroad to tell all nations the good news of this gospel, I will go before you, and my Spirit of Truth shall abide in your hearts..." P. 2054

And Jesus final words on Urantia were said to the apostles who knelt around him,

"Love men with the love wherewith I have loved you and serve your fellow mortals even as I have served you. By the spirit fruits of your lives impel souls to believe the truth that man is a son of God, and that all men are brethren. Remember all I have taught you and the life I have lived among you. My love overshadows you, my spirit will dwell with you, and my peace shall abide upon you. Farewell." P.2057

Now I don't want to put anyone here on the spot, but I put the question out to you. What do you hear Jesus instructing his followers to do

Jesus loved and served men as an exclusive spiritual teacher, not as a social reformer. And how did he do this He taught truth by becoming personally and intimately involved with people in the religious culture of his day. His gospel of sonship with God and loving service to the human family was a transforming truth and it changed people's lives in a very noticeable way. First he taught his own Jewish brethren and soon his teaching found acceptance among non Jews. That's when his message became universal and it's that message with its universal appeal, that he asked his followers to carry to all the nations of the world - in essence to all other religious cultures.

We know that Jesus' gospel was a simple spiritual appeal that would probably have been welcomed by all religions. Had his followers obeyed his instructions, this gospel would have uplifted and spiritually charged our world with unity - resulting in tremendous social consequences and benefits! But, that did not happen. The followers of Jesus unintentionally started a new religion about Jesus rather than his gospel Christianity, which 2,000 years later, now is in crisis.

Buried in all the accumulated centuries of Christian rhetoric about Jesus today, is the truth of his love and service to the world. To its eternal credit, the Christian church has inspired many of its believers to love and serve humanity unselfishly, for Christ and to the glory of God. That is the main reason it has survived.

But this Christianity has created a lot of the problems of omission for our world - it has not seriously promoted love as law or unity as method. A historic evaluation of the triumphs and tragedies of the Christian church is beyond the scope of this morning's talk, but let it suffice to say, that what Jesus wanted his followers to do - proclaim the gospel, love and serve humanity as he did, in spiritual unity, has not been accomplished. In fact what we appear to have today is quite the opposite. We appear to have a church divided into sects, some of which are reminiscent

of the old Hebrews', priest-ridden and tradition-bound, and others which are so plagued by scandal, hypocrisy, meaningless ritual, dogma which insults the intelligence, and pre-occupation with social reform, that the popular support of large masses of people, especially youth, has just dwindled away. Today, huge vacuums exist in the Christian church, as each sect endeavours to come to grips with the grim realities of its own degree of spiritual bankruptcy.

I think these vacuums should be considered carefully by sincere Urantia Book readers. A vacuum is an exhausted or empty space which doesn't stay empty for long. Something, good or bad, always rushes in to fill the void. Some of the finest opportunities come from vacuums - but, when the vacant sign is out, it isn't out for long. For people who know and love and want to share the truth, these fleeting vacuums in the Christian church are really marvelous truth-injecting opportunities, here now, but maybe not for long.

I can think of 5 opportunities here in Canada. I'm sure if you thought about it, you could think of more.

(1) Perhaps some of you know of Tom Harpur. He's an Anglican priest and a professor at the Toronto School of Theology. He writes a syndicated column for the Toronto Star on religion and hosts a television series called Harpur's Heaven and Hell. In his most recent book For Christ's Sake he argues that the historical Jesus was not a "Christian" rather he came to proclaim the good news about God's Kingdom, but founding a "new religion" was not his intention. He writes:

"There is not a shred of evidence in the New Testament that Jesus ever intended to found an institution such as the highly structured, terribly divided Christian church has become. He was out to reform the Judaism of his day by radically refocusing its life and vision on the living God... Jesus said nothing about bishops, priests, deacons, elders, or any other church functionary of the present. He said nothing about a pope; in fact, he was pointedly against the notion of calling any man "father" - which is what "pope" means. He said nothing either about magnificent church buildings, cathedrals, or elaborate rituals of worship. The first Christians worshiped in people's homes or out of doors when the synagogues became closed to them..." He goes on to say "The truth of the matter is that Jesus came, in a very radical sense, to abolish religion and all the ritualistic paraphernalia it puts in the way of knowing God... Reflecting on Jesus' life and teaching, I can't help but conclude that most of the apparatus of institutionalized religion is a contradiction of his central mission. He came talking not about religion but about life, not dividing up reality but affirming its essential unity, calling us not to power and prestige but to lowly servanthood."

I know this kind of critical examination of the church which starts to distinguish man-made religious culture from the actual spiritual teachings of Jesus is long overdue, but at least today, it's happening. Furthermore, I think it's indicative of a lot of intelligent Christian reflection going on here in Canada. However, a vacuum of insecurity is created when people begin to challenge the familiar and time honoured traditions with substantial arguments, especially when others at

the same time are losing interest and withdrawing their financial support. What an opportunity exists here for truth service - to step in with encouragement and positive assurances right while the evolutionary struggle is taking place!

(2) The division of Christian churches has long been a source of remorse among sincere religionists. As church attendance declines, the *raison d'être* of the church is under severe examination. Vision 2001 is a response to this very critical self-examination. It is a first-of-its-kind Canadian evangelical initiative, and the largest of any such mission in the history of Canada involving 50 different Christian denominations and parachurch organizations, which have put their doctrinal differences aside, in order to use the last 10 years of this century to engage in their version of the ultimate ministry of Christians - namely carrying the Gospel to those who have not heard it. What a noble goal! But will this movement be the true voice of Jesus reaching out to a spiritually impoverished nation? Is this not the opportunity of a lifetime to be a truth-giver - to step in and be part of this movement, clarifying, simplifying and reinforcing the true gospel of Jesus?

(3) We know that the reception of the gospel of Jesus has an immediate effect on uplifting the family - promoting the commitment of equal partnership between man and woman and elevating the role of parenting to higher levels of human responsibility. The scandalous distortion of sex and the abuse of women and children are a deep and smearing shame on the Christian church. Sexual perversion and deprivation, chauvinistic prejudice and lust for power have oppressed the women, children and the family as a whole. In largely Catholic Quebec, 1 in 7 women are beaten by their men. The Canadian Catholic Church recognizes that this is an intolerable social crisis and is pointing the finger at "institutional patriarchy" or the principle of male dominance in both the church and society.

However, not all is easy for progressives in the Catholic Church. The Second Vatican Council's attempt to update the Catholic Church in the mid '60's has been rolled back by the present authoritarian patriarchal Pope. Last year a new oath of fidelity was created, intended for bishops, priests, theologians and teachers around the world. The oath has so far been rejected by the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops, but because bishops are appointed by the Pope and not democratically elected, his choice of rigid conservatives is now being felt throughout this organization. This 1989 oath makes a binding promise to deliver "religious submission of will and intellect to all "authentic" decisions of the Pope, even if they are "not definitive". This oath would place all official papal statements beyond the reach of authoritative criticism or dissent. If embraced by all bishops, this oath would ensure the Vatican's totalitarian power.

In Canada the Coalition of Concerned Catholics and 26 other such groups across the country have formed a liberal faction in defense of greater power for the laity and some favour the ordination of women and the freedom of priests to marry. (In the US, 19,000 priests have left the ministry and married in defiance of the Catholic Church's law on priestly celibacy - that's 40% of

the entire US priesthood.) These tensions having to do with authority in the Catholic church are creating huge vacuums among those wishing to be loyal to the church but also loyal to the spiritual freedom that conscience dictates. I believe extraordinary opportunities for the reception of the true gospel of Jesus and his instructions to love and serve as he loved and served lie like open doors in today's Catholic Church.

(4) Violence as a technique for resolving conflict is unacceptable to a true follower of Jesus. The teachings of Jesus are unambiguously non-violent. However, 1,000 delegates, among them many Canadians, at the World Council of Churches in Seoul last year, voted to support popular liberation movements throughout the world - both violent and peaceful. Church of England's Archbishop John Habgood's amendment to support only organizations using non-violent means was defeated. What a betrayal of Jesus! But is this not an opportunity to clarify the true gospel that teaches the love of God and the love of man and the courage of conviction

(5) Sociologist, Reginald Bibby in his book *Fragmented Gods* says, even though people in Canada may not attend church in the next generation, they will not leave it because they are consumers of church services. His research shows the following:

- * 93% of people between the ages of 15-24 from Catholic homes still identify themselves as Catholics

- * 90% of adults and 80% of young people identify with the church of their parents and grandparents

- * 70% of Canadian youth will look to the church to baptize their children

- * 85% will want the church to marry them

- * 85% will want the church to bury them

Yes the majority of Canadians will likely continue to look to the church for rites of passage services. Why Because it is part of our culture and Canadians find some rituals comforting and uplifting. Perhaps some of us might think they have outgrown the need for ritual, but culturally it is ingrained to a degree in all of us.

In *The Religions of Man*, Huston Smith says ritual is nonsense, a waste of time - at least from a narrowly rational or utilitarian point of view.

But look again. Ritual, he says, plays a part in life which nothing else can fill, a part which is by no means confined to religion. For one thing ritual eases us over tense situations. Some of these are trivial - the matter of introductions for example, I am introduced to a stranger. Not knowing how she will respond, I may not know how I should approach her. What should I say What should I do Ritual covers my uncertainty. It tells me to extend my hand and say "How do you do

" And in so doing, it brings form out of chaos. It provides the moment I need in which to get my bearings. The awkwardness is over; I have recovered my balance and am ready for reason to take over and guide my actions.

If we need ritual to guide us through situations as inconsequential as a casual introduction, how much more when we find ourselves faced by a situation in which we are stunned by a sudden loss or bereavement. This is why death with its wakes, funerals and memorial services, is the most prescribed and ritualized event in all life. Ritual steps in to direct us. It channels our feelings at a time when solitary emotion falters, and sustains us until we are able to rely on our independent selves again....

>From the triviality of an introduction to the shock of death, ritual can smooth life's transition. But it also serves another function; it can intensify our appreciation and crown our human joy with celebration. For example, an anniversary, a marriage ceremony, the christening of a new family member, or maybe simply a family's evening meal. Ritual can hallow the occasion. Far from being dead weight, ritual on such an occasion is a celebration of life in its unspeakable goodness.

I think the church will be around one way or another because our culture will demand the comfort of its ritual and the hope of its message. Will not these rites of passage present untold opportunities to proclaim the true gospel and offer the real assurances of eternal life

You know you and I have one thing in common with the apostles and the first believers in Jesus that no others in the last 2,000 years have had. You and I are hearing Jesus' instructions to his followers with a clarity never possible before. Why don't we become exclusive spiritual teachers like Jesus asked us to be Why don't we proclaim the gospel and love and serve as Jesus loved and served Why don't we become personally and intimately involved with people in the religious cultures in which we find ourselves in our own communities - Think about it! Think what it would mean!

What would it mean

The midwayer commission thinks it would mean a "transcendent service".

"What a transcendent service if through this revelation, the Son of Man should be recovered from the tomb of traditional theology and be presented as the living Jesus to the church that bears his name, and to all other religions! Surely the Christian fellowship of believers will not hesitate to make such adjustments of faith and of practices of living as will enable it to "follow after" the Master in the demonstration of his real life of religious devotion to the doing of his Father's will and of consecration to the unselfish service of man." P.2090

What would this transcendent service entail

* I think it would mean devising a plan of ministry, an overall strategy for the rest of our lives. We have to begin by looking at our strengths, what we have to offer. Each one of us comes from some kind of social group with a special sensitivity to certain kinds of people. I think we have to begin our work with the people we understand the best. - that's not to say that's where we'll end up!

* I think it would mean being led to join a church, temple or synagogue in our community for which we have some respect. We have to be in close contact with people to love and serve them. We'd need the humble attitude of the servant expecting to meet people on their agenda, in their time, not our own. After all, their understanding of God is evolutionary our has been mostly revelatory - the onus is on us to be the patient ones!

* I think it would mean going public with our faith in God by identifying with an evolutionary religion even though we are all too aware of its imperfections and limitations, for precisely the purpose of lifting it up, hopefully unnoticeably, like a leaven.

* I think it would mean giving lots of our time and energy regularly to the process of group prayer, praise and worship.

* I think it would mean devoting ourselves to a group of people who may never care to know the real facts of Jesus' life and teachings but may have faith in him anyway. It would mean developing acute self-control in order to ignore error and its negative consequences and focus on and embellish the positive.

* I think it would mean commitment - taking on some real responsibility as an educator - remembering that the best teaching is often the one with the fewest words. It would mean becoming familiar with other religious texts, learning the language of faith others use, putting in time, because that's the only way people will know we're sincere and loyal - if we can communicate with them and withstand the test of time.

* I think it would mean learning how to let our faith shine, despite our intellectual differences. It would mean becoming experts in giving encouragement, trust and hope and developing new ways to show love and empower people.

* I think it would mean avoiding power struggles and petty politics - ours would be a spiritual mission, concentrating on the spiritual uplift of individuals and not on organizational concerns.

* I think it would mean taking initiative - consistently volunteering to speak gracious words of truth that build people up and seizing opportunities to serve people's needs - but, ever so quietly, patiently and unspectacularly because that's how God is most effective.

* I think it would mean believing in the best in people, despite appearances, believing that most people really do hunger for truth and righteousness - getting close to them, trusting them and confiding in them.

* I think it would mean being patient and sympathetic with people's need for form and ritual but also encouraging them to commune with God spontaneously and continuously by our own example.

* I think it would mean making this transcendent service our life's work but refusing to take ourselves too seriously - just being a spiritual catalyst who loves and serves as Jesus loved and served.

* I think it probably would mean feeling very awkward at first - even like a fish out of water, or like we've come from another planet, but if it is God's will that we be there to serve, we will soon feel the joy of loving others; we will soon feel the unity Jesus prayed for; we will soon feel a deep and profound satisfaction that we are indeed loyal to Jesus' instructions and we will surely know his peace.

Some of you may be thinking:

* "I could never return to the Catholic Church after what they did to me You don't know how manipulative they are! And what about their obsessions with sex and guilt and their oppression of women It's outrageous!"

I say forgive them, the people need Jesus more now than ever.

* You may be thinking "Return to the synagogue, are you crazy It's taken me my whole life to undo all that Jewish guilt, that hunger for recognition, that materialistic insecurity."

I say help give them a new value system that removes fear and gives them the assurance of eternal life.

* You may be thinking "You can't mean what you say! You can't know what it's like to sit through one of those retarded fire and brimstone sermons The Doctrine of Atonement is revolting - it actually makes me feel sick! And the Doctrine of Transfiguration Give me a break! This is 1990!"

I say you can go back and ignore error. You can do something positive like join or start a prayer group or a Bible study group with the spiritual hungry members of some church and support the Spirit of Truth already working in their lives.

* You may be thinking "I wouldn't be caught dead with those hypocrites! They thrive on error and they persecute innocent people. They're anti-Semitic and they are as far from what I believe as you can get! "

I say help teach them that all religions have truth, beauty and goodness by enlarging their experience ignorance is largely a result of inexperience.

* You may be thinking "Look I just want to deal with reasonable people. I don't want to deal with those fundamentalists - they're fanatics! How can any intelligent person actually believe that the Bible is infallible - it's idolatrous!"

I say logic will never win these souls to a higher reality, only "startling affection" and "amazing devotion" will capture their hearts and spur them on to new heights of tolerance and faith and service to mankind.

Look my friends, my dearest brothers and sisters, I really do believe that "in liaison with God, nothing, absolutely nothing is impossible". I really do think there are tremendous possibilities for service, (and more than I think of), out there in Christianity and other religions! I encourage all of us to return to our religious heritage in our little corner of the world and become deeply involved with the people who have not yet lost their faith in God to secularism. When we realize how much faith they have with such a relative poverty of knowledge, we will have enormous respect for them. When we do unselfish things for them, we will fall in love with them. Lets be there for them, consistently and supportively. In everything we do, let's pray to be like Jesus would be. The real good we do is unconscious and in the end it is the divinely inspired truth of our love and loyalty that will make the everlasting appeal to all human souls.

"Jesus does not require his disciples to believe in him but rather to believe with him, believe in the reality of the love of God and in full confidence accept the security of the assurance of sonship with the heavenly Father. The Master desires that all his followers should fully share his transcendent faith. Jesus most touchingly challenged his followers, not only to believe what he believed, but also to believe as he believed." P.2089