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Another Way to Unity?

Challenge and Response

D JACOB DAVIES



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The drawing on the front cover is an impression by Donald Dunkley of the buildings of the University College of Swansea, where the 1965 Annual Meetings of the Unitarian General Assembly were held.

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Another Way to Unity?

Challenge and Response

The Sermon preached by Rev D Jacob Davies at the
Anniversary Service held during the Annual Meetings of the
General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches
at Swansea in April 1965



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Meditation

THE CHURCH OF TOMORROW will not strive to save men from the world ; it will save men in the world.

The church will seek to serve the whole man and the whole community ; from it will come the hopes and ideals for a better world.

From the church will come the challenge of free minds to the evils of every age. It will fight all men and all groups who prey on their fellows.

There will be the mother come with her infant and there will the child be introduced to his world ;

There will he learn to weigh the meaning of his days, to gather into his mind the wisdom of his ancestors, to know why men call one thing right and another wrong, and to treasure beauty, mercy, and justice in the deep places of his being.

Such will be the church when it is free from the magic and the darkness of the centuries.

It will be the hub, the centre of our life together, weaving the strands of our business into a pattern, a design, a meaning—uniting us with our companions of the journey, helping us in our pilgrimage along the road between the cities of birth and death.

Kenneth L Patton

WE DESIRE TO LIVE TOGETHER in such affection as will not allow us to feel threatened by our differences.

We aspire to be catholic and to take into account all men.

We dare not fence the spirit, nor close off the sincerity of conversation with which souls must meet in religious association.

As others have their ways of religion, so do we have this faith ; and, in honest difference, we order our lives together.

Wallace W Robbins

(From *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*)

Challenge and Response

Matthew 20, verses 22-23 :

“Are you able to drink out of the cup from which I am about to drink ?”

“We are able”, they replied.

“You shall drink”, he said.

I WAS TOLD once that you can get anywhere by means of ‘ Push ’—except through a door marked ‘ Pull ’. Zebedee’s wife in this story gives us one of the early examples of the art of canvassing for a job, and she used both ‘ push ’ and ‘ pull ’. She led the deputation on behalf of her sons and as a good mother would, she applied for a top executive position for both of them—one on the right hand and one on the left in the Kingdom. They must have been top jobs because she definitely stipulated that they should sit.

They were given one of the shortest interviews on record—just one question : “are you able ?” They answered : “we are able”, and Jesus said : “You shall . . .” They applied ; they got the job and were told to get on with it. There were certain modifications though : they wanted to sit down, but in effect they were told to stand up for something ; they desired the best place, but were allocated a useful place ; they wanted to be leaders but they were told to be servants. They were given the biggest challenge of their lives and, fair play to them, they responded in a worthy manner.

Toynbee, the historian, presents the rise and fall of civilizations as a matter of challenge and response. Civilizations, nations, movements and men thrive or decay, succeed or decline according to the response they have made to the challenge presented to them. Civilizations wither or survive in relation to their ability to repel disintegrating influences ; nations thrive only when they can combat the attacks of alien or evil forces ; movements prosper if there is sufficient life in them to adapt themselves with vigour to new and overbearing circumstances ; disease presents a challenge to the human body

and we survive only to the extent that the resources of the body respond to our defence. Through and through it is a matter of challenge and response :

Once to every man and nation
 Comes the moment to decide,
 In the strife of Truth with Falsehood
 For the good or evil side :
 Some great cause, God's new Messiah,
 Offers each the bloom or blight,
 And the choice goes by forever
 Twixt that darkness and that light.

And to us as Unitarians, this is the moment of choice. This is our moment. A movement, insofar as it retains its entity and identity, makes an assertion of ability ; to be is to claim that we are able to do, and as a Movement we have made certain claims. In no uncertain manner we have claimed that we are the church of the future ; broad enough to encompass the expanding truth of science ; tolerant enough to embrace the humanist, universalist and deist standpoints. "We are the church for the new world and the new man." In effect we have presented testimonials like the sons of Zebedee stating that "we are able". There's no doubt about it that we have our eye on the top table, and I am confident that this very age and situation is presenting us with a vibrant challenge : *you shall !* Here is the cup, take it ! We want the top of the ladder, and all that stands between us and the top is the ladder. Are we able to climb and climb quickly ? Are we able to serve and serve abundantly ? The challenge is here and our very existence depends on our response :

Then it is the brave man chooses
 While the coward stands aside . . .

Dare we stand aside for another generation ? Dare we ignore this categorical command, "You shall !", or are we brave enough to make the explosive, once-and-for-all response to the crying needs of the new society throbbing around us ?

A Challenging Leadership

THESE NEEDS ARE MANY, but some of them are basic and fundamental. First of all our church could provide a CHALLENGING LEADERSHIP.

I believe with Professor W J Gruffydd that "the church is the instrument of that part of creation which activates through man". It is the salt of the earth. It is not the whole earth or the sum total of humanity. That it cannot be. It suffices in small pinches, but the chemistry of its actions and reactions has a tremendous catalytic impact. Small as it may be, it aims at the purity of the whole. Here lies its specific scope of leadership, and our unwritten doctrine of the dignity of man is the Unitarian emphasis within that sphere of influence.

If I rightly understand our ethos as a movement we have always differed on this point from Christian Orthodoxy. While the main-stream believes that it has the task of preparing man for a static destiny, we have set out to prepare an expanding destiny for the growing man. Richard Baxter, the great divine, used to claim that he preached "as a dying man to dying men"; we preach as living men to growing souls. This leadership in emphasis is perfectly attuned to the upsurging and outreaching human society of our day and age. Modern industry has only recently discovered the science of ergonomics, which is the study of how best to suit conditions of work and environment to the needs and comfort of human beings to the end of higher material productivity. Our involvement with reform could well be called social ergonomics, for it is geared to elicit the highest human spiritual productivity possible.

But the question is, are we able to present this in a tangible form to the young people, who, in the penetrating words of Bob Dylan, the American ballad singer, "can see the hard rain comin'", and are looking for the answer which is "blowing in the wind"? Are we able to unshackle man from a religion which is nothing more than an emotional pastime and a theological drama serving only to shield him from the realities of life? Are we able to draw him out of the vacuous pagan existence which denigrates his dignity to the level of a manipulated puppet?

We have done this in the past by going forth into the thick of injustice and tackling intolerance and tyranny with all our might. Our fathers brought all the power and the glory of an unfettered faith into action against the domains of darkness and the principalities of evil which threatened the sovereignty of the soul.

Rev James Reeb gave his life in Selma, Alabama in one glorious sacrifice for the cause of civil rights. Had he married Richard Burton and Liz Taylor he would have been called a 'Unitarian minister', but because there was dignity to his deed he was cloaked as a 'clergyman' in the mass media. He was accompanied by two other Unitarian ministers who were also brutally assaulted. This courageous response to a challenging situation was not an accident; this brave and selfless deed was done because it had the backing of a rich faith—our faith in humanity and its future. He wanted a better destiny for our coloured brother.

When I was interviewed as a candidate for the Unitarian ministry at Swansea many years ago, Rosalind Lee had only one question for me: "Are you able to stand on your hind legs, young man?" Our church today needs men and women who are prepared to stand on their hind legs to defend the crushed and the bruised and pay the price; this country needs a leadership which will cry halt to the return of barbarity.

This minority movement of ours, this pinch of salt, has the potential power to provide that challenging leadership, worthy of the most mature mind and the most dedicated soul, and if we respond to the call, we shall give it.

A Comforting Companionship

SECONDLY, our church, in common with the church universal at its noblest, when it is faithful to the teaching of Jesus offers a COMFORTING COMPANIONSHIP beyond compare.

Not always on the mount may we
 Rapt in the heavenly vision be,
 The shores of thought and feeling know
 The spirit's tidal ebb and flow.

As our Commission reminds us, "our concern with world issues will never shield us from the often more pressing problems that face our own community". To these people, broken-hearted and distressed, "the wretched masses of our teeming shore", we must give a comforting companionship. And as we have made our claims, so let us make our confessions too. In this, along with so many other denominations, we have failed miserably. We have not cultivated the deep sense of belonging to one another and the spiritual duty of caring for each other with tender compassion. Prophetic pronouncements and profound philosophy will not fuse the confluence of souls. Nothing but the divine, warm touch of eternity upon our lives can strike that chord of compassion on the human heart. We have made the motions but we have lacked the throb.

For 25 years I have made other people listen to me ; for the last half year of daily despair I've had to listen to myself. Out of the depth of adversity I cry to you that the ordinary human being looks not for arguments that Unitarians or Methodism is right, but for spiritual support in his never ending strife with adverse circumstances. There are no sects in a speeding ambulance ; there is no division of humanity in a hospital ward at the dead of night. Where is this agonising need faced in our literature and reports ? Many of them seem to be written for the superhuman and detached stoic. Let us not forget our social crusading and our advance campaigns and commissions, but let us remember too that it is a mortal sin to allow our fellow human beings to lie naked in the wind. We are not always crusading heroes and oftentimes we are but ' trembling seekers ' faced with a desolate loneliness.

Historians sometimes refer to an old foundation as the ' Mother Church.' I would like to see every church of ours becoming so loving in its touch that it might deserve that title— possessive of its children ; vigilant of their welfare ; tender and kind in sorrow and despair. This vision breaks through from so many streams of the Christian church that one is astounded by the fact that it finds so little room in the cardinal creeds of Christendom.

John Wesley found room for it even though his fervour was for souls :

Do all the good you can
By all the means you can
In all the ways you can
At all the times you can
To all the people you can
As long as ever you can.

And some years ago an old age pensioner from Scotland sent me a little poem for our paper in Wales, and to me it describes the 'Mother Church', my church, and its comforting companionship :

Give me a house by the side of the road
Where the race of men go by—
The men who are good, the men who are bad,
As good and as bad as I.
I would not sit in a scorner's seat
Or hurl a cynic's ban ;
Let me live in a house by the side of the road
And be a friend to man.

Under the cold threat of total destruction a bewildered humanity cries out for a mothering home, for a lamp-lit upper room where the bread of love is shared.

Are we able to provide this house of refuge and shelter ? If we presume to take the top table, if we desire the cup, then we must and we shall build a church that is ' warm and bright and good to all '. I need it now—you'll need it tomorrow.

A Tolerant Fellowship

AND LASTLY, and fundamentally basic to all spiritual priorities, we must provide a TOLERANT FELLOWSHIP. This is the primary challenge of our age, and this above all could be our singular contribution to the movement of Christian unity and beyond. I quote again from the Racovian Catechism, formulated by the Polish Unitarians under the leadership of Socinus in 1605 :

‘Although we form this catechism, we command no one to abide by it ; although we declare our opinion, we shall not persecute anyone who holds a different opinion. Let every man rejoice in the freedom of his own judgment in all religious matters.’ This is why I am proud to be a Socinian minister. From this stems our beginning ; to this flows our future.

This is why I have felt constrained to do verbal battle with the bigoted Bishop of St David’s in whose see both my people and myself are ‘put in the category of unrecognised but permitted vice’. His clergy are prohibited from entering our buildings or to associate in prayer and service with our ministers, and this he declares to be his contribution to Christian unity. He has a right to his opinion but he has no right to insult my people and the intelligence of his clergy. Let him take heed of the words of William Chillingworth : ‘ Human violence may make men counterfeit, but it cannot make them believe’, and the violation of the integrity of man’s mind is the most accursed violence of all. God forgive us if we ever descend to this trespass of arrogance.

The days of the Uniformitarian church are over, and if we have the courage to face the challenge, we are on the verge of a new beginning, and in that beginning there must be tolerance. This emergent force cannot be suppressed any longer, and at last we must declare with Sebastian Franck, who said in his *Chronica* of 1531 :

Nobody is master of my faith, and I desire to be the master of the faith of no one. I love any man I can help and I call him brother, whether he be Jew or Samaritan . . . I cannot belong to any separate church . . . but I hold as my brother and my neighbour, my flesh and blood, all men who belong to Christ among all sects, faiths and people scattered over the whole world.

And who does not belong to the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount and the Samaritan Road ?

This liberal spirit is what we have to offer, and I believe that it is vital that we today should accept this challenge before we

perish as a nation in the wasteful and vain pursuit of the preservation of petty opinions and properties. Let the old cry of the Cromwellian conglomerate church ring out again with a new meaning : ' In things essential, unity ; in things doubtful, liberty ; in all things, charity.'

This is no longer the declaration of a minority, for I am convinced that it is the voice of the unconnected and disaffected millions who have nonconformed themselves out of a constricted and out-dated organisation. I don't care whether the liberal and tolerant fellowship of believers can be authenticated by scripture or not, but I know that it exists as a triumph of truth—the truth that sets men free.

Its alleged that a schoolboy once wrote : ' False doctrine is when a doctor gives the wrong stuff to a patient.' This is the right stuff and the right moment, and we know it. And if we know it, we must ' go tell it on the mountains and set our people free ! ' This is advertising, you say, and Unitarians should not stoop to that. Well, I believe in the commercial break at peak hours ; I have to ! Sometimes I think we are like the old family grocer who kept the best goods, but nobody knew he had them. He would not advertise. The advertising agent pointed to the old parish church across the road, and said : ' That's been there for the best part of 800 years, but they still ring the bell ! '

I am asking you tonight to ring the Unitarian bell of tolerant fellowship between all faiths. ' Let every man rejoice in the freedom of his own judgment . . . ' Tell the world that its not necessary to change your pew every time you change your mind. Unity will never be gained by nibbling at old corroded creeds, but unity is there when men accept the simple fact that differences of opinion should be respected and appreciated rather than suppressed.

I stand unashamedly by the side of that much maligned, recalcitrant but brilliant fellow countryman of mine, Rev J M Lloyd Thomas, who failed in his quest for a Free Catholic, and I would add Universalist church. I know that he went wrong and I know that he caused us no end of trouble, but I know

too that he had the germ of a revolutionary idea, born of the inevitable logical conclusion of Unitarianism, a tolerant fellowship which combines togetherness with the all-essential spaces in between.

My colleague Colin Gibson wrote in *The Inquirer* some time ago saying that 'a creedless church is dangerous'. So is an empty one—and so is one divided within itself.

This is the challenge presented to us in our century and I ask you—are you able to face up to it? Are we able to attract young men and women into the ministry and lay-leadership of this liberating movement of ours? I say we are able, for the Unitarian ministry is the most glorious occupation a man or woman could ever desire. It encourages a man to be a man and no less.

Let us commit ourselves to the utmost for once, not that we may fill the churches with people but that we may fill our lives with meaning. The liberal church of the tolerant fellowship will be broader than our limits, but we are organised to make it possible.

To borrow the title of one of the institutions founded by our distinguished guest in this Assembly, Dr Kurt Hahn, we are 'Outward Bound' on the greatest adventure we have ever known; 'Outward Bound' to intensify the awareness that there is a more abundant life awaiting man.

Are we able to provide the spiritual nursery for that eternal power of growth? Are we able to establish the Church of the Challenging Leadership, the Comforting Companionship and the Tolerant Fellowship?

What say you? . . . We are able!

Then in the name of God, we shall!

Afterthought

WHO ARE THESE UNITARIANS ?

Love is the doctrine of their church,
The quest of truth is their sacrament,
and service is their prayer.

To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve mankind in fellowship,
To the end that all souls shall grow
into harmony with the Divine.

L G Williams

The Author

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Press Comments

THE ASSEMBLY SERMON was probably, for most delegates, the chief experience of the meetings . . . In many ways it was a *tour de force*, and showed the Welsh mastery of the art of preaching. There was humour as well as exaltation, historical allusion as well as contemporary reference . . .

The Inquirer

IT IS SELDOM one has the opportunity—or inclination—to clap a sermon, but the short speeches of welcome which followed last night's service gave such an opportunity, and it was taken spontaneously and vigorously.

The Assembly daily news sheet, *GA Seiat*