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Acts 17:22-31

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THE MAKING AND REMAKING OF MAN

Sometime ago I read of a woman who, in a theatre, was told that she had won a prize and was asked if she would come down to the stage and receive it. She was, of course, very excited at her good fortune. She got up from her seat in the balcony and rushed downstairs. On the way her heel caught and she fell. When she finally got to the stage, minus the heel of her shoe, her stockings ruined, her emotions all upset, the spotlight turned upon her, she received her prize-- a 49 cent ash tray.

The story is a commentary on much of our life as we live it in the 20th century. So many of us are desperately looking for something for nothing; are trying to find happiness the easy way; are concerned over power, prestige and position; know the price of almost everything and the value of almost nothing; spending our lives on trifles. More and more our society is becoming a valueless society, an amoral society, a society in which worth is dependent almost solely on ability to satisfy physical desires. It is in this kind of society that power always tends to accumulate in the hands of those who promise the most. Ours more and more, therefore becomes a cultureless society.

T. S. Eliot, in his Notes Toward the Definition of Culture, insisted that culture is not a matter of museums and artistic values, but rather that whole complex of imagination, sentiment, artistic achievement and elevation of character which distinguishes the civilized man from the brute.

In our society we have too many who neglect that latter and most important element, "elevation of character", without which there can be no true culture. Such people seem to think that all that is necessary for a community to be a highly cultured one are beautiful buildings, more art museums, bigger libraries, theatres, concerts and lectures. This is not culture, for it does not of itself elevate the character. As most of us know, much of what often passes for art in our day is completely lacking in any aspect of the beautiful, and in no way contributes to the development of the highest and noblest values. Quite the contrary is often the case. It may indeed express what is in the artist, but it reveals that what is in the artist is something other than beauty and character.

You will find upon an examination of history that dictators and totalitarian governments of all kinds usually offer their subjects a rich variety of the arts. These become the modern equivalent of the Roman games and circuses. Gerald Heard has explained the psychology behind it:

"They (the omnipotent governments) offer a fuller life; for a false conclusion satisfies a man better than none, and he will prefer a purpose, however dangerous and delusory, to a life that is free but without any aim greater than private satisfaction."

II

Far too much of our national life has today become divorced from morality, and my thesis this morning is that without religion there can be no morality worthy of the name.

In the days before Harvard College began to contribute to the divorce of morality from religion, its first president of this century, Charles William Eliot, wrote:

"Nobody knows how to teach morality effectively without religion. Exclude religion from education and you have no foundation upon which to build character."

Before I comment directly upon this, let me quote other wise and prudent men who have agreed with President Eliot.

Thomas Jefferson: "Religion is the alpha and omega of the moral law."

Woodrow Wilson: "There are great problems before the American people. I would be afraid to go forward if I did not believe that there lay at the foundation of our schooling and all our thoughts the incomparable and unimpeachable word of God."

Daniel Webster: "To preserve the government, we must preserve morals. Morality rests on religion."

Abraham Lincoln: "In regard to the great Book, I have only to say that it is the best gift which God has given man. But for it, we could not know right from wrong."

Now, let us return to Charles Eliot, who said it most plainly: "Exclude religion from education, and you have no foundation upon which to build character." What is he really saying? He is saying that in that home where children have no exposure to religion, those children will likely grow up without character. He is saying that in any society where religion is carefully kept divorced from the educational process, you will likely raise a generation of young men and young women who are seriously lacking in the fundamental principles of good character.

A number of times I have been a participant in F.T.A. panel discussions on the general theme "Moral and Spiritual Values in the Public School". Each time I hold to the same conviction I hold today--you cannot have more than a mere modicum of spiritual value in any school system where religion is specifically outlawed. If you cannot have spiritual values, you can teach very little concerning moral values.

You will always have a residue of moral and spiritual value in an educational system, in spite of Supreme Court decisions to be sure, as long as you have leadership in that system that has itself been inculcated with religious values. You cannot outlaw it completely, any more than you can completely outlaw alcoholic beverages. But you will keep it to a minimum in an age when the maximum is not too much.

Now, in spite of what it may sound like, I am not this morning advocating religious exercises in the public schools, nor Bible readings at the beginning of each school day. I am merely making an observation which I believe an historical perspective establishes as a fact--"Exclude religion from education, and you have no foundation upon which to build character."

III

I want to relate all this to the church in general and to our church in particular.

It will do us no good to complain that the world in which we live is not what we would like. We have to live in the world as it is, not some ideal world of our

The Making and Remaking of Man - page 3

dreams and visions. The world in which the church finds itself today is one in which the task of the church is as relevant and vital as it has ever been for at least one thousand years. That I sincerely believe.

Without lamenting or arguing the matter, we must face the fact that religion has for the most part been divorced from almost every segment of our public life. Where it survives, it is primarily a mere form and not a vital force.

If character and morality are therefore dependent on religion, then the church has a terribly important task to fulfill, for it is the only source of religious instruction outside of the home--and one also has reason to question its strength there. If what I am saying is true, therefore, if my case this morning is a valid one, then the morality and character of this entire nation rests primarily upon the church. That is no small weight of responsibility.

We are here this morning presumably because we are religiously oriented. We have, or would like to have, a meaningful relationship with the God who created us and breathed into us the breath of life. God did make us. But the Biblical story of the "fall of man" is an allegory which also enshrines a fundamental truth. Man does fall, and because he falls he needs remaking. It is religion, preserved and promulgated by the church, that has the task of remaking man.

A medieval saint, Bernard of Clairvaux, wrote something which, when I read it, always causes me a good deal of reflection. He points out that the making of man is not nearly as difficult and wonderful as the remaking of man. These are his words:

"It was far easier to make than to redeem; for God had but to speak the word and all things were created. But he that made me by a word, and made me once for all, spent on the task of my remaking many words and many marvelous deeds and suffered grievous and humiliating wrongs."

Bernard of Clairvaux was absolutely right, and I am not suggesting this morning that the church, or you and I who are religious can remake man. Only God can remake a man, but God does it by using other men, by using the church, by using us. That is why what you and I do as a part of this congregation is of such vital and enduring importance. God wants to use us for the remaking of man, and the only way he can use us adequately and fully is for us to be adequately and fully dedicated to Him.

Will you not agree that what America needs more than it needs anything else today is men and women with character? "Exclude religion from education, and you have no foundation upon which to build character." This makes your job and mine tremendously important, and tremendously difficult. But we in the church face this task with one thing no other people have--the knowledge that what we do is not the work of man; it is the work and the will of God.