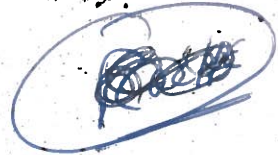


Warning "The Remnant Religion The Remnant"

Reflections on Ministry

By Robert McAfee Brown



I remember a number of years ago taking a ride on a railroad train (remember railroad trains?). As the conductor came down the aisle punching tickets, looking rather sad and exhausted, I remember contemplating him with pity, for he was clearly working for a doomed outfit: railroads were on the way out and this particular railroad had a life expectancy that could be measured in months rather than years. At the completion of the journey I mentioned my pity for the conductor to a friend of mine, who responded that he had exactly the same feeling of pity for people who were vocationally entrapped by the church. From his perspective the church also had a limited survival expectancy and he expressed commiseration for people who were dependent on it for a livelihood. He could not understand why people would want to be part of an organization whose days on earth were numbered.

It is probably the case that many people agree with the assessment my friend made on that occasion. The church, they feel, whatever its past, clearly has no real future. It may survive in vestigial form as a vehicle of consolation to the dispirited and aged, but surely no thinking person would expect it to play a significant role in the complex decades that lie ahead. I must admit that there have been times when I have been tempted to accept the analysis, but those temptations have been resisted, and as I now look at the future of the Church, and the role of ministry within it, I feel a strange new kind of excitement. I feel that there may be a unique role ahead for the church, within our lifetimes, and that one of the most important and demanding places to be positioned for one's own future could be in the ministry of that church. How can one possibly be led to such an assessment?

Let me back into my answer. As I look at the world today, I can only see a world that is going to get more threatening and more complex and more perplexing in the decades ahead. It is a world in which the operative terms are going to be terms like "exploitation" and "oppression." In a world that can no longer afford the luxury of nationalism, there will be ever more frantic efforts to shape up nationalistic dreams and defenses. In a world that cannot endure extreme divisions between rich and poor, the rich will attempt to hold on tenaciously to what they have and to deny the legitimate outcry of the poor for at least a minimal share of the world's resources. We will have continual abuses of power, most egregiously manifested by those who already have most of the power—that is to say, the white nations and the white groups within the predominately white nations.

In the face of that grim and relentless scenario, the most imperative need, the only effective counter-force, is the genuine reality of some embodiment of global community. Anything less than that will only be more divisive and counter-productive and disruptive and destructive. There is no possible way to face our own future apart from a radically global perspective.

It is as I wrestle with that ineluctable conclusion, and as I look at the world around me from that perspective, that I am increasingly persuaded that there is no outfit on the human scene that can even begin to come close to embodying that global perspective except the church.

As I look for present tokens of global community, I immediately think, for example, of the United Nations. It is crucial that we continue to work through this one political vehicle that begins to transcend nationalistic boundaries, but we must be aware that even here the very definition of membership is nationalistic before it is global. One is a member of the UN by virtue of being a nation, one is a delegate to the UN by virtue of citizenship in a given nation, so that from the very start the defining terms are national rather than international.

There was a time when I felt that the University could provide the model for global community, and while it is true that a university can embody diversified student backgrounds and examine ideas that are international in their origin and import, it is nevertheless also true that the university is more and more locked into nationalistic perspectives and structures. Inordinate amounts of university budgets come either from Defense Department contracts, dedicated to keeping America militarily able to destroy the human family, or from state legislatures that ride herd on ideas that seem to be the least ^{bit} big "un-American." Private donors, multi-millionaire David Packard has recently warned, should not be given to universities that might be hospitable to radical ideas.

The other symbol of global perspective, the multinational corporation, is actually the most disturbing and divisive symbol of all, since multinational corporations become further extensions of the conviction that the very rich can continue to ravish the very poor without accountability to anyone. The multinational corporations are increasingly becoming laws unto themselves, unable to be controlled by ordinary legal devices and extending empires responsible only to the law of the highest possible profit with the least possible regard for human betterment.

It is in the inadequacy of these pseudo-answers to the need for a global perspective that I turn again to the church, that weak and often divisive institution that seems so feebly to reflect what it ought to be. And yet more and more I see the church representing in embryo the kind of global network that is essential for the future survival not only of the church itself, but of the entire human family it is here to serve. It is the one group in terms of which membership is never defined by one's nationality or one's race or one's social class, or any of the other usual criteria for defining community. The church, in this perspective, is defined simply as the fellowship of the needful, and this is a qualification that every single human being

can meet. Whenever the church begins to create barriers to membership that are defined racially or nationalistically or geographically or socially, it is repudiating its very nature.

It may be objected that this is a highly subjective not to mention ^{romantic} ~~romantic~~ view of the church. So let it be clear that I am not talking fundamentally about an organizational structure. I am talking about something much more fundamental than an organizational structure. I am talking about a network - about a fellowship that tangibly exists whenever two or three find themselves gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ, wherever they are. I have had the good fortune of experiencing this in global terms on enough scattered occasions ^{so} that they have become normative for me in my present understanding of the meaning of the church. The reality is most tellingly demonstrated in liturgy, as handfuls of Christians from extraordinarily diverse backgrounds gather around a common table in acknowledgment of their need for the nourishment that they discover can come only from the one who is Lord at that table. I have experienced this in seminary chapels cutting across denominational and racial lines; with German P.O.W's on an American naval base in time of war; in the middle of the Pacific Ocean on the fantail of a troop transport; in East Berlin at a Eucharist celebrated together by East and West Germans, French and Scots, Americans and Poles; in Rome with Protestant observers from all branches of Christendom sharing a common cup together in a Waldensian church; ~~and~~ in St. Peters; where, although we were only "observers" at Mass, there was an increasing sense as time went on that we somehow were almost participants as well; and with unutterable poignancy in South Africa, ~~participating~~ ^{shared} in a Eucharist in which white and black together a common cup and a common loaf—a reality denied to them at every other point of their existence.

But it is not only in the symbolic oneness around the Lord's Table that the global network is alive, but also in the things that those who gather around that table do together elsewhere, whether it is thinking together or working together ^{about} in ways in which the talents and goods from one part of the world ^{can be} are made available to those in other parts of the world who are deprived of them. The same reality has been present in America on many occasions when an issue of racial injustice or protest against an immoral war has drawn human beings together across confessional, racial and class lines to make a common witness of protest and outrage.

This is the stuff out of which the global vision for the future is right now being built. It is this which desperately needs to be nurtured in our own land—particularly in our own land which has such an inordinate share of the world's goods and power, and abuses those goods and that power in ways that are unutterably destructive for the rest of the human family. More than at any other spot on earth, the witness of the global community is needed in the United States, for we have been the most outrageous ^{deniers} ~~deniers~~ of that community by our imperialism ^{and} our subtle colonialism, not to mention our outright destructiveness with bombs and diplomacy. Those abuses can be countered only from a perspective that does not accept the premise ^{lying} ~~lying~~ behind the abuses, namely the unquestioned assumption that "America must remain Number One," or that "we must at all costs protect our investments overseas," or whatever is the reigning shibboleth of the movement.

So what is needed, particularly on the American scene, is the intrusion of a new perspective, the global perspective which at least a remnant of the church already embodies. It would be wonderful if we could assume that the institutional structures that are our denominations might embody the very ^{threatening} ~~dangerous~~ empathetic stance of global perspective that is the sine qua non of the church's future. But I believe it is not only realistic but right

to appeal for the creation within those denominations of a remnant that will not only challenge our nation in its arrogance but will also challenge the church itself in its irrelevance or its acquiescence to our nation's arrogance.

The church itself is already a remnant in our culture and it will need the creation of its own inner remnant. ^{Thus it} It seems to that the task of seminary education today is to create "a remnant within the remnant," and that strikes me as an extraordinarily exciting prospect.

Jurgen Moltmann has said that too often the church's theology has been a "fossil theology" doing nothing but preserving unchanged an image from the past. In reaction to that, he goes on, many contemporary churches have adopted what he calls a "chameleon theology," i.e., a theology that simply blends into the culture around it in such a way as to be virtually indistinguishable from it. What Professor Moltmann says we need in our day is an "anti"-chameleon theology ^{i.e.} that a theology that will speak in sharp challenge to the background against which it is set. This is simply another way of describing the remnant posture, which in its turn is only another way of pleading for a global perspective in an era when that perspective will be increasingly challenged by the self-interest of all involved.

Is it anything but sheer utopian folly to ask for this? It is at least clear that this does represent the vision of what the church has always been meant to be - that community in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, black nor white, rich nor poor, since all are one in Christ Jesus. It is at least clear that the church is the only community in human history that need not have success built into its self-definition.

(Christopher Fry has defined the Christian as "one who can afford to fail.") A company, a corporation, a university, a nation - all these must "succeed" in order to provide a convincing rationale for their existence. It is not the case that the church must succeed on those kinds of terms, not as long as it

takes seriously the imagery that was present in its beginnings, and has been too often forgotten in its subsequent history—the imagery of the servant community, present not for its own enhancement but for the giving of succor to those around it; and also the imagery of the pilgrim people, that group whose task is not to "arrive" but always to be on the march, never secure in, or vindicated by, ^{its} own structures, but always willing to strike those structures down and venture forth again in brand new ways when occasion - or the will of its Lord—may demand.

In sum, it is in such terms as these that I see the exciting challenge of vocation within the church today. But there is one further thing to be said, implicit in all that has been said so far, but in need of being made explicit, least it seem as though the church is being "reduced" to simply another kind of social service agency to keep bandaging a bleeding world. Once again, I must back into the point I want to make. The major task of the church is not "to bind up a bleeding world," though it may need to continue doing that simply because there is ongoing need. The task is the much more revolutionary one of being the vehicle for the creation of the new kinds of structures that will make it unnecessary for people to render one another bloody in the first place. This can be called salvation (health or "wholeness" is what the word means) or liberation or "reconciliation" or any one of a number of familiar ~~words~~ ^{words}. What it will involve is ministering to the whole person and the whole society. Piecemeal approaches will no longer do. Even to begin to do this, the church will need to be on the revolutionary forefront, and this will be another test of the sincerity of its global vision, since for those of us who live in the comfortable sheltered atmosphere of white North America, it is clear that our cues are going to have to come from our Christian brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who are wrestling at first hand with the issues of oppression and starvation and poverty. They

are the ones who must forge the new agenda for the church of the future; and it will be a measure of our own commitment to the global community to realize that however much the leadership in that community may have emanated from us in the past, it will not do so in the future. We must now become the ones who listen, and who respond with as much openness and creativity as possible, when we are presented with a picture of the world that is very threatening to us since it will imply the need for drastic changes if that world is to become a tolerable dwelling place for the vast majority of the human family. To put the matter very directly, I believe that the insights coming from the Third World, and, particularly from Latin America, are showing us what must be the shape of both the Christian community and the entire human community in the future. This will involve rethinking our own priorities, and a radical challenge to our standard of life and our assumptions about America's role in the world, and the real test of our commitment to the global vision of the church will be our willingness to let the leadership come from elsewhere, and to adopt the role of listener, questioner, critic and finally participant in movements that will lead us in new and sometimes threatening but ultimately liberating directions.

How will this come about? It will come about in part as we engage in a new kind of social analysis, a new kind of look at our world in the light of the gospel, particularly the Biblical message of the liberation that ~~god~~ ^{God} brings to the oppressed, but it will also come about to the degree that ~~that~~ ^{that same} ~~some~~ gospel gives us the fresh resources that enable us to cope with the kinds of changes that are initially so threatening to everything that has sustained us in the past. This will be the church's true gift to us. We need to rediscover that ^{the} meal we share around a common table is not simply a symbol of human fellowship, but the profound expression of the reality of the divine-human fellowship through which we can be strengthened to look in directions we have heretofore feared to look, and to walk in ways

we have heretofore feared to walk. We need to rediscover that the scenario ^{for the future} is too threatening to entertain unless the future can also be seen as God's future, unless those who venture into it can re-discover that they do not go alone but that there is already a Companion along that path. We need to re-discover that the daily resources of forgiveness and mercy from God are essential ingredients for the task of struggling for human justice against odds that without such help would seem impossible to overcome.

No church worthy of survival will need to waste time over ^{the} false dichotomy between individual and social transformation. It will become increasingly apparent that there can be no significant individual transformation that does not involve also the creating of a more just social order for all human beings, and likewise that there can be no just social order without transformed human beings. It will be to the credit of those who risk the seminary experience in the months and years ahead, that they refuse to get bogged down in that kind of argument, and set themselves instead to the task of inculcating the vision of a global community grounded in the conviction that God is the God of all men, and that he has sent his Son so that all may have life and have it more abundantly—no one excepted, no one ^{unaccepted.} ~~unexcepted~~. Then perhaps we may begin to know truly for the first time what St. Paul meant when he said about Jesus Christ that "in him all things hold together." (Col. 1:17)