

"TWO GREAT MINORITIES"

The third in a Series of Sermons on the

CRISES OF MOTIVATION

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

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by

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The fact that the World Council of Churches General Assembly meets each seven years provides a possibility for readings on the specific gravity of history at the times of the successive meetings. At New Delhi, 1961, the cold war problems of East-West relations were the dominant pressures and world concerns of that year. At Uppsala in 1968, there were many new pressures, and among them one was as intense as anything in the past. This new danger of breakdown in understanding was in fact a hidden agenda at every meeting of the World Council of Churches in 1968: namely, the deterioration of relationship between two great minorities and the social order around them; these two are the youth and the racial minorities. Seven years ago the atmosphere within which these two great minorities lived was far different than it is today.

The dynamics of this difference posed one of the major confrontations of 1968 throughout the Western World in particular.

What has happened is that the old structures of relationship have been thrown away and new criteria have emerged. How has all of this taken place and what is, therefore, the new status of affairs? As I see it, two things have happened and are happening within the youth and racial minorities that have created the new shape of things in 1968.

(1) First of all these two great minorities discovered themselves as never before and this made the difference.

Take the American Negro for example. In a very few years he has gone against the tide of a century of enforced feelings of inferiority, and he has consciously made a strong case for his own unique worth. "Black is beautiful" is a tremendously significant achievement in that the argument for self identity has been made and has been sustained. This self discovery of the black American has struck a very deep note throughout the whole Negro community.

The young adult in modern society has discovered himself too; he

became aware of his special nature. It is the distinct nature of the young adult to be more critical and experimental than all other age groups. This twofold self discovery and the enthusiastic embrace of these gifts has constituted much of the motive of modern youth. A young adult tends to think in sweeping terms; he has fewer impediments, family obligations and vested interests to protect so that he dares to take ideological risks to a greater extent than his seniors. Not only that, but for the same reasons since he feels less responsibility for the present order, he is more merciless in his critique of all that disappoints him.

Another factor in the youth mystique is the natural inclination toward experimentation, a sampling instinct that is not restricted by the need to be consistent or to succeed in unifying the collection of ideas and causes. Let me give you an example. At Uppsala, the World Council of Churches delegates were housed in the University residence halls. All of the possessions and property of the students who ordinarily lived in the halls were left in the rooms. Naturally, therefore, I attempted to concretize the personality of the Swedish student whose room I had borrowed for two weeks and with only the possessions, books and art in his room to go by. The student who regularly occupied the room where I was assigned became a complex and intriguing challenge for me. From his books, I could tell he majored either in Russian or English literature. He also was interested in American jazz and had an extensive collection of records and books on the history of jazz. He had a complete collection of Charles Schultz' Peanuts, and along one whole shelf in special catalogued cartons was a collection he had titled "Amerikansk Historia," Vols. I, II, III, etc., and in these cartons was a four-year unbroken collection of Playboy Magazine. On the walls were several paintings: a Van Gogh landscape, a map of Russia, a medieval "Madonna and Child," a contemporary painting of "Christ and Mary Magdalene," a Chinese brush painting of a horse, and a color photograph of a model from the current issue of Playboy. What impressed me was precisely how very complicated it would be to construct a personality profile of this student from his possessions. His interests are wide and experimental, and it is hard to know where he has really landed. What instead is clear is that this student, like his generation as a whole, is thinking from within a very wide context of ideas and concepts. This is his greatness and his weakness, both at the same time. He may be a foot deep but at the same time a mile wide, whereas his parents may be just the reverse, a foot wide and a mile deep. Youth in large numbers has discovered these facts about themselves: the fearlessness and daring that their special position in the social order provides for them, the critical intensity that intelligence and education have made possible, and the ability to move tentatively in several directions, all at the same time because a local address, employment and family have not yet narrowed the field.

(2) Not only did these two minorities discover themselves, but add to this the discovery of the dynamics of power and the current situation comes more clearly into focus.

The civil rights movement really began when one Negro American refused to sit at the back of the bus; in so doing he precipitated a crisis, the confrontation of one power over against another, and in that

confrontation the dynamics of group power won rights for the American Negro that had been denied for one hundred years. Every one of us knows down deep in our hearts that had not such a proof of power been shown, the black American would not today be enjoying some of the rights that he has won in just three or four years. I remember a meeting our church session in Seattle had some six years ago. Our senior pastor had invited a brilliant young Negro banker from one of Seattle's premium banks to share with our session the unique problems that a Negro American faced in getting a job, a house, etc. This young man pointed up to us that banking in Seattle was effectively closed at that time to the black American and what was true of that profession was also true of medicine and many other desirable vocations. Today a change has taken place that received its urgent incentive from the racial minority that had learned how to make its voice heard.

Almost all great movements have historically possessed the same two components: the discovery of a strong fact, the idealistic principle, and secondly, the discovery of the dynamics of power. This was true of the Protestant Reformation with its mixture of dramatic ideological breakthrough and of workable means of public action. It was true of the American Revolution, the labor movement, etc. However, as with every dynamic movement, there are dangers that must be faced both by those who are at the heart of a particular movement and by the whole of society as well.

(1) The first and most obvious danger that these two minorities face as do all social movements, is the tendency toward infallibility that begins to show itself in every cause as it grows in strength. This inner cumulating force feeds upon itself and ends with several destructive results: (a) a dynamic movement may tend to reject all checks and balances in relation to its own purposes and methodology. Every criticism from outside is brushed aside with self-defeating logic: "I thought you would say that.....who are you to talk.....naturally, you can never understand the real facts," etc.

(b) The tendency toward infallibility causes the movement to become its own standard of truth with appropriate, locally-produced myths and formulae to solve every question and from that very provincial matrix it establishes its own ethics.

(c) Inevitably, infallible movements are finally haunted from within by either fanatic or opportunistic elements which gain power by seizing the slogans and forcing the whole cause into some particular dead-end street that suits the private purpose of the leader.

(2) The second very serious danger as I see it, is the problem of self-imposed isolation from the whole community. Some four years ago when the remarkable subculture phenomena along Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley was at full power with the strange slogans and flamboyant dress, we incorrectly concluded that these young adults were adopting the outrageous style of life of the hippie movement in order to draw attention to themselves from the rest of society but this was a superficial observation. The flamboyant dress, the earbreaking volume of youth music, the various shock symbols and four-letter words are in reality an effective means of isolation from the social whole with its cumbersome, middle class motifs. The goal is

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not the attention of bewildered middle class glances but solitude and unfortunately, it really works; only the most courageous person is able to break through the barriers that are now available to the individual or group that desires seclusion.

At the conclusion of a very important recent book on black power, Black Rage, is the following quotation:

"Malcom is an authentic hero, indeed the only universal black hero. In his unrelenting opposition to the viciousness in America, he fired the imagination of black men all over the world.....Feeding on his own strength, growing in response to his own commands, limited by no creed, he became a citizen of the world and an advocate of all oppressed people no matter their color or belief. Anticipating his death by an assassin, he distilled, in a book, the essence of his genius, his life. His autobiography thus is a legacy and, together with his speeches, illustrates the thrusting growth of the man -- his evolution, rapid, propulsive, toward the man he might have been had he lived.

"The essence of Malcom X was growth, change, and a seeking after truth.

"Alarmed white people saw him first as an eccentric and later as a dangerous radical--a revolutionary without troops who threatened to stir black people to riot and civil disobedience. Publicly, they treated him as a joke; privately, they were afraid of him.

"After his death he was recognized by black people as the 'black shining prince' and recordings of his speeches became treasured things. His autobiography was studied, his life marveled at. Out of this belated admiration came the philosophical basis for black activism and indeed, the thrust of Black Power itself, away from integration and civil rights and into the 'black bag.'....

"....Black Power activism -- thrust by default temporarily at the head of a powerful movement -- is a conception that contributes in a significant way to the strength and unity of that movement but is unable to provide the mature vision for the mighty works ahead. It will pass and leave black people in this country prouder, stronger, more determined, but in need of grander princes with clearer vision.

"We believe that the black masses will rise with a simple and eloquent demand to which new leaders must give tongue. They will say to America simply:

"GET OFF OUR BACKS!"

"The problem will be so simply defined.

"What is the problem?

"The white man has crushed all but the life from blacks from the time they came to these shores to this very day."

"What is the solution?"

"Get off their backs."

"How?"

"By simply doing it -- now."

"This is no oversimplification. Greater changes than this in the relations of peoples have taken place before. The nation would benefit tremendously. Such a change might bring about a closer examination of our relations with foreign countries, a reconsideration of economic policies, and a re-examination, if not a re-definition, of nationhood. It might in fact be the only change which can prevent a degenerative decline from a powerful nation to a feeble, third-class, ex-colonialist country existing at the indulgence of stronger powers."

The isolationist solution offered by these writers to the present breakdown in confidence between the black minority and white majority of American society is here clearly and definitely prescribed.

"Black Rage" is, in fact, offering a solution to very complicated, community-wide issues, what in effect is a fixed, agreed upon rift in the community. Many youth have also assumed an apartheid world view regarding their relationship to the older and younger generations.

Self-imposed isolation from other human beings is not original with these two important groups of people. For a long time Western society has been polishing the art of isolation. Think about this fact for a moment, and it will surprise you. In direct proportion to our increase in affluence we have been intensifying the isolation of ourselves from other people, from our families, from strangers, from God. We have the private club, the weekend exodus, the very busy and preoccupied father, the TV, the isolated retirement villages, and the diminishing everyday, run-of-the-mill ordinary encounters with our children, our neighbors, with strangers. How ironic everything has turned out for our generation. We have so little ordinary, day in and day out time to spend with our children when they want it and need it, and now they have grown up without their parents and have decided to settle for that state of affairs, even to prefer it. My wife told me of a discussion she had a year ago with some of our Union Church high school senior girls. The subject they were discussing was the communication and absence of communication that they had with their mothers. It came out in the discussion that if your mother drove you to school you usually had a better relationship with her. These girls discovered to their own amazement that they had their best relationships with their mothers in the ordinary, run-of-the-mill moments. And yet there seemed to be so few of these moments left. What we have sown to the wind, we have reaped in the whirlwind.

In the First Century the Corinthian Church had come almost to the breaking point because of the separate groups within the Church, each of which was dynamic within its own right but at the same moment hostile toward the other groups of the community. Paul had this to say to them:

"I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree that there be no dissensions among you but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brethren. What I mean is that each one of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius; lest any one should say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanus, Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any one else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."

1 Cor. 1:10-17

The great Apostle has given to us in this paragraph a principle that is timely for our generation. He does not deny the value of what one group of Corinthians has learned from Apollo, another from Peter, a third group from himself. But Paul argues that wherever we find a great truth, it should and must exist to serve others as well as ourselves. And when our particular discoveries are enabled to become part of a greater whole, then each one will benefit from the other so that my growth in self-awareness results in the enrichment of the whole community. At the same moment Paul argues with blunt eloquence that there is no single truth or realization that a man can make which can equal the gift of God in Christ made to all. "Did I, Paul, die for you?"

Black power and youth power have a tremendously important responsibility in the new look of our time. If they and the society at large can refuse the bad temptation toward arrogance and isolation, then I believe the whole family of man will be greatly deepened in the discovery of what it means to be truly human.

The Christian, like all men, belongs inevitably to parts of the whole in the human journey: because of age, race, culture, economic status, etc., each of us shares in the special interests, concerns and frustrations of a group in the midst of the whole. But as a Christian I belong to the Lord and that central loyalty integrates all the rest.