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## YOUNG WOMEN'S MUTUAL IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

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**ELDER ALBERT E. BOWEN**

*Of the Council of the Twelve Apostles*

Recently I picked up a national magazine in which a contributor, after noting the muddled state of thought about the needs of the near future of the world, asserts:

Our need, of course, if we are to have peace after the war, is a passion for humanity and for the interests of humanity as predominant over all lesser interests whatsoever.

Very naturally he proceeds from that premise to this conclusion:

## RELIGION A POTENT FACTOR IN WORLD PEACE

It should be obvious, after what we saw in the last war and what we are already seeing in this war, that peace can never come out of war itself. If it comes at all, it must be in spite of the war and not because of it, and from a source altogether remote from its influence. I find no such source except in religion itself. For religion has this passion of which I speak.

That statement might not be so arresting if it stood alone. But it does not. It is merely typical of assertions coming to be of almost daily occurrence. Scarcely do we pick up a reputable magazine nowadays that we do not find in it somewhere declaration of the view that in the precepts of religion are to be found the principles and in religion itself is to be found the spirit upon the adoption and practice and influence of which alone the hope of the world for peace and order must depend.

This poses for religion a tremendous task and the question at once arises how this task is to be accomplished. It means that somehow religion must come to have a dominating influence in shaping the policies

and practices of governments, for, of course, it is the civil governments which control in the waging of war and the fashioning of peace. How is religion to get in?

There is another manifest implication in the premise, namely, that religion has not been performing its rightful office, or the conditions which call for its intervention would not obtain. Does it have the power to do what is suggested and, if so, why has that power not been exercised?

I shall have in mind the Christian religion as I proceed to consider these questions.

In the first place, if religion is to be a potent factor in shaping the conditions of peace, it must have a medium through which it expresses itself—a mechanism of implementation. Of itself it is a spiritual ideal. But as a passive ideal, religion is of little value. It must carry its message; it must get itself accepted, for it comes to fruition only as its precepts come to dominate the lives and actions of men individually and in their collective relationships. To be effective it must incorporate itself into an organized body. That body is the Church. That is the medium through which religion has implemented itself in any civilization. And may I add in passing that so far as I know, no civilization has ever developed that did not rear itself upon the religion of the people.

If then, the influence of religion is, as postulated, the only source of hope for a world of peace, and if religion is made effective through the organized body called the Church, then it would seem that there is indicated for the Church a place of transcendent importance in the shaping of the future of the nations. This would seem to demonstrate the folly of saying that the Church has no concern with the civil institutions of the day. If it is not concerned with them, then it cannot carry into them the influence which it is its business to foster. Furthermore, the Church lives and operates within the domain of civil governments and to a degree under their control. Its members are so controlled. People and institutions, too, are always influenced and modified and more or less molded by the thought and feeling which dominate the society in which they live, particularly the prescriptions of governments. We are caught up and held in the web of their practices and habits. With such powerful agencies in the shaping of our lives and affecting its own destiny, the Church must be concerned. I am not unmindful of the fact that many people profess the conviction that no Church is necessary; that religion is a thing of the spirit affecting the inner life of the individual; and that it has nothing to do with the affairs of the political society commonly spoken of as the state.

#### DEMOCRACY A THING OF THE SPIRIT

That objection is not so formidable as it sounds. So is democracy a thing of the spirit. It does not consist in frameworks such as constitutions and presidents and legislatures and statutes and judicial bodies and enforcement officers. You may have all these completely democratic in form and not have a democracy at all. But no one would argue from this that you could have a living democracy without them. The essence

of democracy—its spirit—is by itself an intangible ideal, inert and unfruitful, even though it burn in the hearts of individual men. Put that flaming spirit, that throbbing, pulsating ideal into a mechanical organization comprising a constitution which defines the limitations on the powers of government; write into it a bill of rights which protects the individual against invasion of his guaranteed privileges by governmental authority; let it provide for the making of laws to which all agree to render obedience; give it an executive authority to carry those laws into effect; set up a tribunal to interpret the laws and resolve disputes between man and man and between citizen and government, and it will carry a nation triumphant from a narrow fringe on the seashore across six thousand miles of continent, plant towns and cities by the way, set up in them local governments by consent, establish schools, rear industries, subdue the earth and give to one hundred million people more of creature comfort, more of individual self-respect, more of the recognition of human dignity, more independence of action and consequent self-reliance, more liberty of thought and freedom of action than were ever before known to any people during the period of recorded history.

As the political framework is to the spirit which is democracy, so the Church is to religion.

So much for the means by which religion is to get itself into governments. Please notice that I have not said, nor do I believe, that the Church should try to manage the government.

#### POWER OF CHURCH WIELDED IN WORLD HISTORY

I am now prepared, purely for convenience, to use the word church interchangeably with the term religion as I proceed to ask: Does religion have in it the power to do what it is suggested that it alone must do?

The best answer I know to that question is that in times past it has already done it. Given the same conditions there is no reason to assume that it cannot do it again. It must, of course, be at once admitted that the Church, as the agency through which religion makes itself effective, is greatly weakened for its task by lack of unity within itself.

Jesus, the fountain source of the religion of which we speak, selected some disciples and taught them His message. Then He told them to go out and spread it everywhere. Shortly after He left them, on one day, through the zeal and fervor of their conviction, they added to their body by baptism three thousand souls. Ignoring the commands of the chief rulers, they continued their teaching, filling Jerusalem, so it was charged, with their doctrine. To all interdictions Peter answered, "We ought to obey God rather than men."

In defiance of the proscriptions of the emperors, the Church projected itself into the very heart of the empire, and by the third century had raised itself from a position of despised ignominy to the position where its worship had been accepted by the majority of the people of the empire, and it had won for its members religious toleration, the right to hold public office, and for itself the restoration of its previously confiscated property. It was ever in the forefront of the struggle against tyranny

and oppression. Through the long black night of the Dark Ages, the Christian Church kept the flickering torch lighted and fought the long, hard battle for the rights of man. The Christian religion, embodied in a physical organization, led certain dissenters to Holland; it took them across the Atlantic and gave strong leadership in fashioning the institutions that here grew up. What we have lately heard so much talked of as the American system could not possibly have been conceived in materialism. It was the solution of the problem of the age and was born of the travail of the spirit fostered and kept animate by the Christian Church.

#### CAUSES FOR WANING OF RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE

We are now prepared to ask why the Church has lost its former position of influence and leadership. It would require a volume to answer that question. I have neither the time nor the sweep of learning needed for the task. I can venture only a conclusion which, to my comfort, I find to be fortified by the opinions of others, more capable than I, who have given consideration to the subject. The limits of time compel me to an over-simplification.

The conclusion is that the teachers of religion, the Church itself, have weakened in their own conviction of the ultimate truth of the doctrines their creeds professed. Being without conviction, they have not taught with the voice of authority, and their following has floundered in uncertainty. The causes are many and complex, among them, no doubt, being the profound changes that have resulted from the extending of the frontiers of learning and consequent changes in habits of living and measures of value. In external settings there has probably been a greater transformation in one generation than in a thousand or two years preceding. It was brought about largely by the tremendous strides in the physical sciences giving man such undreamed-of mastery over nature. It paved the way for the glamorous industrial age, the age of invention and mechanization and production, which has literally revolutionized the conditions of physical existence. Tools and gadgets and mechanisms assumed a dominant place in the life of the nation, and we came to regard them as of first consequence to our welfare. We came to be so obsessed with the importance of material acquisitions that our vision of spiritual values was almost completely obscured. Man himself became inflated out of all proportion in his assumptions of self-sufficiency. He looked at the work of his own hands, and he called it good. He believed that he held the key to the mastery of the world, and that by his own power he could create a state of being according to his own heart's desire. Bigger and better and greater and more were the goals of his ambition. Through the discoveries of science and its methods of investigation, many ancient notions were found to be untenable; old errors were revealed, theories exploded; and it was believed that anything which laid claim to intellectual respectability must be able to meet the test of the scientific method. Science and industry deal with objects and materials. Their fruits are materialistic, and the idealistic, intangible things of the spirit fell to

low esteem. Religious teachers forgetting the teaching of the Master that life is "... more than meat, and the body than raiment" (Matt. 6:25); forgetting that their mission was to discern and preserve spiritual values; tried to accommodate their teachings to the mood of the time and to give them validity by submitting them not only to the scientific test, but, more basely, to the test of the habits and practices and likes of their adherents. They developed or tried to develop what might be called a theology of the flesh instead of the spirit. Thus science and the practice of the market place prescribed the conditions of religious teachings and the teachers themselves instead of being inspired interpreters of spiritual values became the mere echoes of the men of science and of their industrial contemporaries. As an editorial writer has phrased it:

The Christian leadership has passed from the hands of the Church to the hands of the active and practical laity—the statesmen and educators, the columnists and pundits, the scientists and great men of action. And this is only another way of saying that there is no true Christian leadership at all.

And as a parting warning he declares:

So far as the record goes, the American people would do as well by their souls to follow the advice of the industrial leaders as to follow the advice of the spiritual leaders.

Thus the flock is leading the Shepherd. \* \* \* So long as the Church pretends, or assumes to preach absolute values, but actually preaches relative and secondary values, it will merely hasten the process of disintegration. We are asked to turn to the Church for our enlightenment, but when we do so we find that the voice of the Church is not inspired. The voice of the Church today, we find, is the echo of our own voices. And the result of this experience is disillusionment. . . . This is a profound and absolute spiritual disillusionment, arising from the fact that when we consult the Church we hear only what we ourselves have said. The effect of this experience upon the present generation has been profound. It is the effect of a vicious spiral, like that the economists talk about that leads into depressions. But in this spiral there is at stake, not merely prosperity but civilization.

There is only one way out of the spiral. The way out is the sound of a voice, not our voice, but a voice coming from something not ourselves, in the existence of which we cannot disbelieve. It is the earthly task of the pastors to hear his voice, to cause us to hear it, and to tell us what it says. If they cannot hear it, or if they fail to tell us, we as laymen, are utterly lost. Without it we are no more capable of saving the world than we were capable of creating it in the first place.

This is a scorching indictment. But the words are not mine. They are the words of one profoundly moved by the confusion and bewilderment of the times, and crying aloud for help, one who recognizes that the Church must not follow and relay what others say, be they high or low, but must lead by declaring the voice of God. I have not used these words for the purpose of bringing under rebuke any church or any teacher of religion. Neither has anything that I have said been with that intent. It will be clear to you that I have used the term Church in its all-inclusive sense and not in reference to any particular church. Nor has my purpose been to raise any quarrel with or to depreciate the value of the glorious discoveries of science, or the industrial benefits that have been born of them.

Indeed science itself has become rather humble, if it has not always been so. Its great exponents seem rather generally to recognize, as Mr. Longmuir's recent broadcast to the American Academy for the Advancement of Science shows, that in the field of human behavior, which is, after all, the chief factor in government, science has very narrow limitations. For guidance in that we must look elsewhere.

I do not say that the Church could have prevented the wave of self-sufficiency and arrogant pride and gross materialism that has swept over the land. I think that probably arose from forces beyond its control. But the mistake of the church lay in its abandonment of its own convictions and its docile acquiescence in the flouting of spiritual realities and in its failure to hold fast to its faith in the reality of a living God, the well-spring of all religion, and without whom there can be no religion.

We have tried getting along without God and religion, and we see where it has brought us to. We have tried following more or less blindly the scholars, the writers, the men of affairs, and the political leaders, and we view with consternation the sorry plight to which they have brought us. The universal cry for spiritual regeneration gives the Church another chance to save the world and humanity, and offers a basis for hope.

#### TRUE FAITH THE WAY OF PEACE

The early Church made its phenomenal advancement and attained its great influence because those who bore its message believed devoutly in it. My purpose in speaking of these matters is to urge upon you who are gathered here—the members of our own faith—the leaders in your respective stations, to teach without wavering implicit faith in the living God who shapes the course and destinies of nations and who has revealed and does reveal the way of life which alone can lead to peace on earth and good will among men. There will be no enduring peace unless and until men accept the way of the Lawgiver of the universe. It is for us to try by every power of persuasion we possess to get men and nations to adopt that way and to stand resolutely against every influence and power which tends to lead away from it. I yield to no man in love of country and devotion to it. I have spent much of my life studying its history and its institutions. And I say that the demands of patriotism never require us to endorse what is not morally right.

It is for us not to be deceived by slogans and smart sayings but to put the teachings of the Savior of the world above all other teachings and make them the standard by which we measure all acts and plans for action, that His righteousness might be made fruitful in the earth.

May God grant us the power and the wisdom to do it, I pray, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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A vocal solo, "Teach Me to Pray," was sung by Harper Stoneman.