

2 *Communication* *in the History of the Church*

THE GOSPEL, THE MESSAGE OF GOD'S SALVATION AND JUDGMENT, of the coming Kingdom, entered into an indifferent and hostile world. As such, this is not at all startling or amazing. Human nature, and especially the spiritual structure of any human society, is conservative, requires conformity, and reacts, to a new phenomenon that does not seem immediately assimilable, with indifference, diffidence, and often with some kind of opposition to such an undesired intruder. Of course, only gradually the Roman-Greek world began to realize that this Christian Church with its message was not only a new thing, perhaps annoying, perhaps attractive, but was extremely dangerous to the heart of ancient civilization, and to the whole structure of the world as it existed in the form of the Roman Empire. Celsus, the first pagan polemicist of whom we have extensive knowledge, demonstrates this remarkable combination of aristocratic scorn of this, in his eyes, plebeian uncouth religion of uncouth people, with genuine fear of its flat contradiction of the fundamental bases of pagan society. This fear sometimes verges on imploring this annoying and disturbing power to be reasonable and conform at least to the myth of Caesar's divinity, which was the cornerstone of the Roman Empire.

However, as we know, the expression "indifferent and hostile world" needs some qualification. The world into which the gospel entered was in a mood hungry for salvation, conceived in various terms. It was a hunting field of competing mystery cults, promising and effecting salvation from the ills and evils of existence. In this atmosphere the Christian Church grew up in the first three centuries, and played, from the profane historical point of view, the role of the increasingly successful rival of the great mystery cults, just because it was the only one that was periodically persecuted and stood on the list for liquidation. So there existed "points of contact" in this whole atmosphere. The New Testament, especially the Pauline Epistles, bear evidence to this fact. In looking over the span of the first three centuries, it must be said that one of the main forms of communication has been a far-going attempt at adaptation, result of gradual growth, not of conscious planning and strategy. It is in this sense that in the atmosphere of competition the Christian Church assumed more and more the likeness and fashion of a mystery cult. It was essentially different, however, from the other mystery cults because it enshrined the Biblical religion of faith, with its prophetic, priestly, and pastoral character and genius.

Before we start on our journey through the history of the Church, stopping for lack of time and space only at certain stations to illustrate the vicissitudes of communication, this is the right place for some general remarks in regard to the first three centuries, when the Church was, generally speaking, under the cross. The great extension of the Church happened in the fifty or sixty years before the Diocletian Persecution, the last fierce attempt to oust the Church. The great adventure was that the Church had to communicate a message which in its real purport is "the foolishness of

God," which "destroys the wisdom of the wise" because wiser than men, and which is the "weakness of God, stronger than men"; and is at the same time the "desire of the nations." Therefore, in principle it is incommunicable, it cannot find an adequate translation in any human mode of speech and thought, and yet it touches the deepest aspirations and needs of men, so having in principle also at least a possibility of resonance, of vibration.

The little flock of Jesus entered and lived, however, in a given world, and so the message had to be expressed in terms apprehendable to this world. This obtains the more for Christianity, just because it is the religion of historical facts of salvation with a message concerned about the world and men as they are. In other words, the Church, by nature "the colony of heaven," the people expecting the Kingdom of God, and their Lord, who will come to end the historical drama by judging the quick and the dead, has on its pilgrimage to *establish* itself in the world and develop a structure, a style, a mode of existence. In this, fundamentally speaking, uncommunicable character of the message, which nevertheless is meant to be proclaimed loudly and gladly, and in this history-transcending character of the Church, which nevertheless has to take a body in this historical world, lies the perennial, insoluble tension in which the Church has to live. The deeper the consciousness of the tension and the urge to take this yoke upon itself are felt, the healthier the Church is. The more oblivious of this tension the Church is, the more well established and at home in this world it feels, the more it is in deadly danger of being the salt that has lost its savor.

This peculiar character of the Church, which is called to communication with the world and communication of the message, implies that both aspects of communication plunge

it, from the beginning, into the problem that communication cannot but take the form of expression, adaptation, assimilation. The Church cannot live without them, and has to practice them vigorously, not timidly. During its whole history, also its future history, the Church, therefore, pends between the Scylla of succumbing in the attempt, or the Charybdis of shunning the attempt, surrendering itself in this case to the vain illusion of remaining unspotted of the world.

In the pages of the New Testament, especially in the Pauline Epistles (for the simple reason that Paul was in the first place a missionary and builder of the Church), we immediately find the evidence of this combat. We also find there the imperishable directives and points of orientation for this hazardous journey of the ship of the Church. We shall select some salient points of the encounter of Church and world in the first centuries, and of the Church's practice of communication, drawing mainly upon A. von Harnack's masterful work: *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries). C. J. Cadoux, *The Early Church and the World*, as well as other literature, also contains ample information.

The profound difference between the Primitive Church and our present situation is that the Primitive Church entered as a tiny new thing into a pagan world, inheritor of a great history, whereas at present Christianity lives as a still big, but old, institution in a world in whose formative history it has played a decisive role, but which has now emancipated itself from the unquestioned authority of and allegiance to the Church. The resemblance between the Primitive and the present Church is that then and today (at least in many parts of the world) the Church is a mi-

nority. There is even ground for maintaining the thesis that in some respects the situation of the Primitive Church was more favorable than the present one. There were external conditions of the Roman-Greek world working in favor of a spread of Christianity and conducive to communication in the two senses we use it in our lectures. There was one empire, one world language, one culture, a common trend toward monotheism, a common nostalgia for saviors, a common feeling that understanding of life, religion, and strong moral discipline belong together. This impressive list is an eye opener to our present destitution.

Harnack summarizes the expansion and communication of Christianity in the following illuminating points: The main points of the missionary proclamation in the first century were: (1) The Kingdom of God is at hand, Jesus the Resurrected is the expected Messiah, the message is the fulfillment of Old Testament revelation (I Cor. 12:2; 15:4, etc.; Acts 13:38, etc.; I Thess. 1:9, etc., give a good idea of the communication of the message). It is very important to note here that in the second century the kerygma had changed considerably. Instead of the elemental tones we hear in the verses just quoted, the main points of emphasis were: the one living God, the Soter and Judge Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, continence (in the ancient world this resolute abandonment of the world in the face of divine majesty was revolutionary), all five still challenging enough in the ancient world, but showing a difference of axis with the New Testament. (2) The gospel of the Saviour and of blessing. (3) The battle against the power of the demons. (4) The gospel of love and practical aid. (5) The religion of the Spirit and power, or moral sincerity and sanctification of life. (6) The

religion of authority and reason, of the mysteries, and of transcendental knowledge. (7) The message of the new people and the third species, in which the Christian consciousness in regard to history and the field of political life was expressed. (This last point has great relevance for us today.)

Pervading all this, the preaching of severe morality, of a determinate change (*metanoia*), the firm conviction of God's presence and guidance, were strong elements in the total act of communication. Harnack particularly stresses the point that the Christians were entirely new by the fact of their being a strong union of charity and practical aid. In a colossal way the Christian community practiced the rules given at the end of Matt., ch. 25. As Harnack says — and this is extremely important for a discussion on communication, which at present is in danger of moving principally on intellectual lines — “The new language of the Christians was the language of love in power and act” (*op. cit.*, 2d ed., p. 173).

Under the most difficult circumstances care for the poor, the sick, those in prison and in exile, was practiced. The Church developed no action or program — to use our modern Church jargon — for the abolition of slavery as a social institution, but it treated them rigorously as equals and of equal value, especially when they became members of the Church. (Slaves could occupy any rank in the clergy, including that of bishop.) Exorcism was a means of manifesting the powers of the Kingdom, because to the Christians the age of Christ was not, as to many of us who have succumbed to the suggestion of modern apprehension of life, an important spiritual and cultural phase in human history, but the new age in which the victorious powers of

God are at work and wrestle with the demonic powers which enslave the world. (This again is extremely relevant to our own situation.)

In all these senses, and in many more, Christianity became a social message of very specific caliber. Harnack rightly points as evidence of its significance to Justinian's imitation-endeavor to restore paganism. Moreover, by its character as a universal brotherhood under Christ, Christianity developed into a center over against the State. In an indirect way the attitude of the martyrs, the personal expression of the Christian way of life by the ordinary members of the Church, mostly simple, unlettered people, the local congregation as a concrete embodiment of the whole Church, possessed a power of communication, often transcending by far all direct and conscious efforts. The study of this whole process of encounter is very illuminating, because on the one hand the means of indirect communication appear numberless, *if there is a faithful allegiance to the new reality in Christ*, and on the other hand it is clear that often the points of attraction, the doors to step in, have their historically conditioned aspects (e.g., the point of greatest attraction often was the promise of "purification" and "eternal life," *the concerns of the mystery religions*).

It is worth-while to have a look at the struggle with adaptation by paying attention for a moment to the conflicts of Christians in their profession. The great question was, How far is a Christian allowed to enter into the professional jobs of those days with their mores and customs, *without denying Christ and without becoming polluted by participation in idolatry*? In this pagan world, it was indeed a very intricate question. Was it at all possible for a Christian to partake in this utterly pagan society in such a vital sphere as

professional life? This question has been fiercely debated. There were, of course, different attitudes: rigorous, lax, etc. Tertullian (e.g., in his *De spectaculis*) has been one of the most violent partisans of the rigorous party. How to be a Christian in professional life was a question of life and death then, just as now: then, in a pagan society; now, in a secular society with its camouflaged idolatries. It raised the whole question of the relationship of Church and culture. It was inevitable that there were lists of professions, untouchable to Christians, as there ought to be now, although quite different. A special point, treated, for instance, by Tertullian, is the question whether within the framework of the educational school system of the ancient world a Christian could be a teacher or a professor. His answer is no, for they get too much immersed in a life and teaching that are steeped in idolatry. But even the rigorous Tertullian shows that the problem of the *relation* of Church and culture is inescapable, and cannot be answered by the slogan of separation or isolation. Although he forbids teaching, he allows "learning," making the remarkable pronouncement: "How can we reject the application to worldly studies without which the religious studies cannot exist?" In this battle between the rigorous, the lax, and the many middle positions, it is important to note that there is often a very virile tone. To the argument, "I have nothing to live on if I leave my profession," one sometimes finds the answer, "A Christian ought not to be afraid of hunger."

Without saying something on the apologetes we cannot leave the period of the Primitive Church, when the Church, although establishing itself gropingly in the world, was never established, but always in principle and often in practice an insecure candidate for ostracism. In the stricter sense of communication by word they were the people who

consciously sought for communication on the highest level of philosophical and religious discourse and dialogue. The urge for communication inherent in the Biblical message, as we indicated in the first chapter, manifests itself in the work of the apologists. Indirectly this appears in the striking fact that whereas the many mystery religions took a passive attitude toward the religious philosophy of the imperial religion, the Christians engaged in an encounter. In the beginning it was even one-sided. The apologists made their case for the Christian faith, and expressed their estimation of Greek religion and philosophy, often without finding a real partner for a dialogue. Christianity was still too inconspicuous, but the more it grew in weight the more seriously it was taken. This dialogue from both sides certainly did not exemplify ideal communication as the phenomenology of communication now defines it. Rather, it showed, because it was in fact a combat, all the marks of mutual misunderstanding and mutual misinterpretation which are the usual concomitants of communication in concrete life of all ages. In the present time we feel more deeply the frustrations of these defects because the fundamental principles of democracy and science have developed, at least in a tiny minority, a more acute feeling for the necessity of genuine mutual understanding in the process of communication. The apologetes were in many cases eager to meet their opponent by giving to Roman-Greek culture and religion a certain place in the scheme of divine revelation. They were, moreover, often unconsciously still so strongly enchanted by the fundamental notions of the culture to which they belonged that their presentation of the faith was often an adaptation, which fell far short of the Biblical message and was what is called in our time a reduction of this message.