

Bischof Selwyn U. Hastings;

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A Changeless Gospel in a Changing World

On behalf of the Jamaica Province of the Moravian Church and in the name of our world-wide Unity, and in the name of Him who is head and Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ, I bid you welcome to this Unity or International Synod. We feel greatly honoured in a two-fold way; firstly, because our brethren from all over the world have selected Jamaica to be host to this international gathering, and, secondly, because you, our guests, have come to be with us on this most auspicious occasion.

Two hundred and twenty years ago the first Christian Missionaries ever to take the gospel of salvation and liberation to the poor and under-privileged slave population of this country arrived in Jamaica and began their work on the plains of St. Elizabeth. They were three Moravian Missionaries, and your presence here this evening, coming as you do from five continents and from the islands of the seas, is a clear indication of the effectiveness of their work and witness, and of the immortal contribution made by countless numbers who followed after them. From across the seas you have come to us, not any more as privileged donors to under-privileged recipients, but as equal partners in a tried and tested and visible demonstration of the divine concept of universal brotherhood. As we work and worship together for the coming three weeks may our perspective be widened to embrace within the ambit of our love and concern all God's people everywhere - of whatever race or religion or class or colour; may our vision be lifted to the heavens whence strength and inspiration comes; and may our feet be planted firmly on the ground forbidding us to escape from the harsh realities of this troubled and tortured world, but through our commitment to Christ seek to find an answer to some of the problems and perplexities of our time.

1. The Challenge of Change

We are living in dynamic and changing times. It is one of these periods in human history when our old men are looking back and dreaming dreams of the so-called glorious and pleasant days that used to be; and our young men and maidens are seeing visions of a kinder world and a more just and humane society. They are asking searching and penetrating questions and our theological formulations of yesterday cannot adequately answer the questions of to-day or of to-morrow. The new wine is destroying the old wine-skins.

Does this mean that the Church has become redundant and that the Gospel which it proclaims has become old-fashioned and out-dated? Emphatically, this is not so. The Church which is the people of God, the Body of Christ, the Fellowship of Believers and the message which it proclaims are as modern as to-day and as relevant as to-morrow, but we need to exercise patience

and understanding and creativity so that the work and witness of the Church can be transmitted to the man of to - day in terms of to - day and in the situation of to - day .

As we study the history of the Church, and of our own denomination in particular, we discover that our forefathers in the Faith were not afraid to experiment, to try some new thing, even though some of them were doomed to failure. They were real pioneers and it was this pioneering spirit which brought them to these shores, to Labrador and Alaska, to Africa and America, and to the remotest parts of the earth. Can we their successors, their spiritual heirs, be less daring in our time when men are exploring outer space and travel agencies are booking passages to the moon? Let us hope that during this Synod we shall not be afraid to dare for, as a Church, if we are afraid to dare then we shall surely die.

One of the areas in which we may have to dare has to do with the re-interpretation of the gospel in terms of the social, economic and political needs of man and be a link uniting and at the same time modifying, two opposing schools of thought. What we are confronted with to-day is a view, all too prominent and prevalent, that evil and crime and violence and sin will automatically disappear with better housing, more and better education, bigger bank balances and a greater measure of freedom for unbridled self-expression which sometimes is only another name for self-indulgence. Those who hold this view interpret the gospel solely in terms of its social and economic dimensions and assess the Church mainly on her efforts in social, economic and political advocacy. It must be the great crusading agency for secular improvement under the big red banner of LIBERATION. For such people the spiritual and transforming aspect of the gospel as it relates to individual personal experience is of little significance - and one suspects that they regard it as even sinful!

On the other hand we have another group of people who feel that the Church is a purely spiritual organisation which should confine itself to praying and "Soul-saving" and if ever it attempts to concern itself with the vital social and economic wellbeing of human existence it is labelled as interference. Those who subscribe to this view studiously ignore anything which has to do with the betterment or improvement of a man's life in this world because they are too busy preparing him for the next.

"Being in this world and yet not of it," they have taken to the point where they refuse even to use their rights as citizens by exercising the vote. Here we are faced with a real dilemma, and as Walter Arnold of the Church of Wurttemberg asks: "Do we not have to discover a new balance between the individuality and the universality of the Christian Gospel?" For "whereas on the one side the danger is of betraying the world for the sake of the Gospel, on the other side the danger is of selling the Gospel short for the sake of the world".

An African Churchman, writing of the situation in Africa, says this: "With alarm I also beheld a perilous evangelical withdrawal from the social and

political arena in a land where such non-involvement seemed calculated to doom one to irrelevance. By contrast, the so-called ecumenical churches were profoundly involved in these issues, thereby winning African respect, yet evangelism in these circles often seemed to have become a casualty of political pre-occupation. To see the imperatives of the Great Commission relegated either to the periphery or to oblivion in the life of some of these churches became equally perplexing. . . Increasingly, I began to feel that each needed the correctives of the other, and both needed re-converting to Christ, to community and to the world, lest each end up perpetuating different species of anaemia*. The situation described above is true not only of Germany and Africa but of nearly every Christian region of the world. Can there be a reconciliation between the two?

2. Social Reformation through Personal Transformation

Our Moravian Church is in an ideal position to act creatively and assume a role of reconciliation in situations such as these. We affirm that this world belongs to God and that He has placed us here to live a full rich life. We affirm the right of every man to social justice, economic well-being and political freedom. Our early Land Settlement Schemes in this country long before the State thought of such things, our record in the field of education here and in our several provinces, our medical work, our homes for the aged and the handicapped, our readiness to assist oppressed peoples all over the world is evidence of our continuing commitment to the ensuring of a full life to all God's people everywhere. But we believe in a transformation of society through a change of heart and mind and attitude; for it is eternally true that while external circumstances can and do influence the inner quality of life it is even more true that it is the internal condition of one's heart which largely determines his outward circumstances. It is this dynamic role which, as a church, we are called upon to fulfil in the midst of the conflicts and tensions of our time, and we must remind those who are continuously presenting a picture of materialistic utopianism that "man does not live by bread alone". In the developing world many new Messiahs are presenting themselves in the form of political leaders and liberators. But the world needs to hear again in unmistakable terms that men need not put their trust in princes nor in the son of man for salvation cometh only from the Lord. For us the social gospel has relevance and meaning only when its spiritual dimensions are grasped and applied; this is the essential difference between social development and turbulent revolution. God in our day is presenting to us a great opportunity to redeem His whole creation by proclaiming the whole gospel to the whole man throughout the whole world. It is to this spiritual, attitudinal dimension of life to which we have been specially called and commissioned so that by changing men's lives we may change society and redeem the world.

On the eve of the French Revolution France had so much prophetic, evangelical voice to proclaim this redemptive message of love and reconciliation, and the cry of "liberty, equality, fraternity" was futile and meaningless on the lips of selfish and savage men. The French Revolution with all its banality,

cruelty and brutality is recorded in our History Books for all to read. On the other hand, when a similar situation faced Britain a few years earlier God raised up His servants John and Charles Wesley, the Congregationalist preacher George Whitefield and the Moravian John Cennick who preached the gospel throughout the country with great fervour and evangelical zeal. Thousands upon thousands of men and women - rich and poor alike - accepted the Faith and were brought into fellowship with Christ and His Church. Britain was saved from bloodshed and revolution by the transformation of hearts and lives, which, in turn, transformed the British social order. British society was redeemed through redeemed men. As churchmen and church leaders, therefore, who are rightly concerned with and working through every legitimate channel to organise society in a more humane, just and brotherly fashion let us not neglect the basic requirement of our vocation, that is, by word and deed to proclaim the redemptive and reconciling work of Christ whereby hearts can be changed and lives transformed. Let us never forget how easy it is to be an Old Testament prophet - criticising and condemning - but how difficult to become a truly Christian Pastor - loving and caring.

I like to think of the story of the Jews rebuilding the walls of their city after their return from the Babylonian captivity. While busily engaged in their work of reconstruction they were being distracted and prevented by the Samaritans from accomplishing the work to which they had set their hands and hearts. It was even necessary for them to defend themselves with the sword. But in doing so they did not neglect their main occupation for we are told that while they held the sword in one hand their working tool was in the other. This, I believe, is how churchmen should operate - not allowing themselves to be deflected from their main task of helping to build the City of God out of the bricks and mortar of redeemed human lives - lives that are made fully whole. This is our major assignment under God, an assignment which has been specifically given to God's Church, and an assignment which no one else can do as effectively as we can.

"Make me a man", said the king to the artist. So he made a man from white gleaming marble and took it to him.

"It is cold", said the king. "Make me a man". The artist made another from pure wax - brown and beautiful and life-like.

"But it cannot breathe", said the king. "Go and make me a man". The confused artist went out into the street and found a dying man lying in the gutter. He took him home, loved him, washed him and then brought him to the king, saying: "Your majesty, I could not make a man but here is one whom I have saved, cleansed and fed".

"Ah!" said the king, "he who saves is like unto him who makes".

The meaning is clear: We are assisting God in His creation when we embark upon our work of salvation.

3. The Utopian Vision

Dr. M.M. Thomas, Indian scholar and Christian and Chairman of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches recently stated that one of the main functions of the Christian Church is to preserve for the world what he called the "Utopian Vision". By that he meant the Christian hope. Man must have a dream, a goal, an ideal towards which he is forever moving. "Man never is but always to be blessed", said the poet, and this end towards which he moves is conditioned by what he thinks of himself, his fellowman and the world in which he lives. Similarly, the methods and tools which he uses to achieve his goals - to transform his vision into reality - will be conditioned by his beliefs and by what he conceives those goals to be.

The Church of our Lord Jesus Christ has a vision of man's future and of the world which gives hope, and impels and motivates us to work and pray for that day when "hope shall vanish into sight" and man's final redemption shall come here and in the hereafter. It is this vision proclaimed both by Old Testament prophets and New Testament saints. Isaiah joyfully proclaims that the days are coming when:

"The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox
The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put his hand in the adder's den.

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;
For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters over the sea."

John persecuted, imprisoned, and banished on the Isle of Patmos "saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them; He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more for the former things have passed away'".

This is the Utopian Vision, the Christian Hope, that we are called to hold consistently and persistently before the eyes of the world. And one day through the Crucified, Risen, Exalted Lord Jesus Christ man shall enter into that glorious Kingdom prepared for him from the foundation of the world. This is the Utopian Vision for man and the world, and those who proclaim it and those who work for it are co-workers together with God. The way to fulfilment is

the way of Jesus Christ and His Cross. There is no other way but this.

I cannot tell how he will win the nations,
How he will claim his earthly heritage,
How satisfy the needs and aspirations
Of east and west, of sinner and of sage.
But this I know, all flesh shall see his glory,
And he shall reap the harvest he has sown,
And some glad day his sun shall shine in splendour
When he the Saviour, Saviour of the world, is known.

Amen.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Bischof Hastings legt seiner Predigt keinen Text zugrunde, sondern spricht zu dem Thema: "Das unveränderliche Evangelium in einer veränderlichen Welt". Im ersten Teil geht er der "Herausforderung der gewandelten Situation" nach und stellt zwei Auffassungen über die Aufgabe der Christenheit heute gegenüber; die Anschauung, als sei die Kirche nur nach ihren Leistungen im sozialen, wirtschaftlichen und politischen Bereich zu messen, und die Ansicht, daß die Kirche eine "rein spirituelle Organisation" sei, die sich auf Seelsorge und Gebet beschränken sollte. Hastings beobachtet eine Konfrontation dieser gegensätzlichen Sichtweisen in Deutschland ebenso wie in Afrika.

Im zweiten Teil bemüht er sich um eine Antwort unter dem Stichwort: "Soziale Reformation durch persönliche Wandlung". Er hält die Brüdergemeine dank ihres ganzheitlichen Verständnisses vom Menschen als einer Einheit aus Leib und Geist in besonderer Weise für geeignet, die gegenwärtigen Gegensätze zu versöhnen, indem "wir durch die Veränderung des Menschen auch die Gesellschaft ändern und die Welt erlösen" (S. 49). Was er meint, zeigt er an einem Vergleich der französischen Revolution mit der Situation in England zur gleichen Zeit. Während die französische Revolution trotz ihrer Parole "Freiheit, Gleichheit, Brüderlichkeit" in Grausamkeit und Brutalität endete, haben englische Erweckungsprediger wie John und Charles Wesley, George Whitefield und John Cennick England vor Blutvergießen bewahrt. Hastings erzählt dann die Geschichte eines Königs, der von einem Künstler verlangt: "Mache mir einen Menschen". Da der Künstler das Verlangen des Königs nach einem Menschen mit Leben und Geist nicht erfüllen kann, nimmt er einen Sterbenden bei sich auf, pflegt ihn und rettet ihn so vor dem Tod. "Ja", sagt der König, "wer errettet gleicht dem, der erschafft". ("make" heißt im Englischen "machen" und "erschaffen"). Hastings will sagen: Wenn wir uns auf die Errettung eines Menschen einlassen, sind wir Mitarbeiter Gottes in seiner Schöpfung. Im dritten Teil möchte Hastings seinen Hörern die "utopische Vision", die nach dem indischen Forscher Thomas die Kirche der Welt schuldet, vor Augen stellen. Er meint die Vision der Bibel von der zukünftigen Welt Gottes, die er mit Zitaten aus Jes. 11, 6-9 und Offb. Joh. 21, 3-4 schildert.