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Protestants, Look!

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The popular magazine *Look* in the issue of August 2 ran an article by Agnes E. Meyer entitled “Why Protestants Need to Wake Up.” At the end of the article the author, or perhaps the editor, summed up her prescriptions for Protestants in six directives. (Reprinted elsewhere on this page.) A fine Miss sat in kirk one day when Burns saw a louse crawling on her bonnet; we too might thank a modern critic if she enables us to see oursels [sic] as ithers [sic] see us.

The Prescriptions (What the Protestant Churches Must Do)

- 1. Forget their theological squabbles and subordinate their differences to broad concepts of service to all their fellow citizens.**
- 2. Clean out the bureaucracy in the Protestant National organizations.**
- 3. Undertake interdenominational programs for youth activities on a community wide basis.**
- 4. Working together throughout the community to strengthen family life.**
- 5. Overhaul the system of religious education.**
- 6. Revive the indomitable spirit once characteristic of the Protestant movement.**

Look Magazine

Indomitable Spirit

The sixth and last part of the overall prescription is one to which no true Protestants would object: “*Revive the indomitable spirit once characteristic of the Protestant movement.*” But such a useless prescription is like telling a sick patient to recover his once buoyant health. What he needs to know is, *How?*

The fifth prescription is more definite: “*Overhaul the system of religious education.*” The author notes that the American home is incapable of giving religious training, for the parents as much as the children need instruction. The Sunday School is also incompetent because its teachers are “pathetic amateurs.” This, and we Protestants need to recognize it, is all too true. But the authors remedy, which is to establish courses in educational methods for these “pathetic amateurs,” is not nearly so important as to establish courses in the contents of the Bible. *Methods* are a help if first the *content* is clearly in mind, but it will do little good to train teachers *how* to teach nothing, or *how* to teach trivialities, or *how* to teach untruth. The important thing is *what* to teach. The indomitable spirit of the Protestant Reformation had a good deal more to do with *Biblical truth* than with *educational methods*. The Reformation was a return to the supreme

authority of the Bible and a rediscovery of what the Bible itself teaches. This is precisely what is needed in the present uncertain and superficial age.

Forget Theological Squabbles?

Points four, three, and one reflect the author's idea of the *purpose* of the Protestant churches. She seems to think that the churches are or should be social service agencies rather than a divine instruction for the worship of God. "*They must forget their theological squabbles and subordinate cultic differences to broad concepts of service.*" They should have shown "sympathy for . . . the emerging labour union movement, the destitution of sharecroppers and of the inhabitants of our ever-expanding urban slums." "The Protestant church must translate its spiritual ideals into social terms."

That Protestantism should translate spiritual ideas into social terms is both true and important. It may also be true that the churches have failed to do so—not so complete a failure as the tone of the article seems to imply. The churches have founded and supported hospitals, orphanages, old peoples' homes, schools and colleges; the people of the Protestant churches, taught by the gospel, have contributed generously to many philanthropic causes without the churches receiving or desiring credit; and in the present situation they are straining to relieve the misery in Europe and provide homes here for DP's: witness in particular the Lutheran churches, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the American Council of Christian Churches. The author takes no note of all this. But nonetheless, we grant that we have not done enough.

The dangerous half-truth of this part of Mrs. Meyer's argument is concealed partly in the specific items of social service she thinks important and in her conception of the purpose of the church. Translation of spiritual ideals into social terms does not carry the conclusion that the churches should try to plunge our nation into the bankruptcy of a tyrannous welfare state. Nor does it mean, that Mrs. Meyer seems to think, that social service is the churches' main business. It is true and essential that the churches should proclaim to wealthy businessman, "Thou shalt not steal." They should also tell the power-hungry labor leaders, "Thou shalt not kill." Christ said, and we ought always to remember it, "Ye have the poor always with you"; but to imply that poverty and slums are the churches' first responsibility is a singular reversal of Christ's summary of the Ten Commandments. The second commandment assuredly is, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"; but the first is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all my heart, and with all by soul, and with all thy mind." If first things are put first, secondary matters will come second. The belittling of "cultic differences" i.e., the worship of God, to emphasize social service means in plain English; man is all-important, God doesn't matter.

Denominational Divisions

The author voices the common complaint that there are 250 denominations and adds for good measure that they are feuding and pulling down the social structure around their heads, although "there is fortunately a trend . . . to unite." What could be said with more truth is that the

social structure might be more stable if some of the larger denominations, instead of uniting, should split into two or three. A long time ago, apparently beyond the memory of some ecclesiastical Big Wigs, there was a period in history when only One Big Church existed. And if the Protestant churches unite, more than likely the corruption, superstition, and persecution which characterize and still characterizes the Roman Catholic church will again be the rule.

The Federalist Papers, which did so much to persuade the people of our country to adopt the Constitution and formed the United States of America, argued that the social structure would be steadier if it contained many smaller fractions rather than a few larger fractions. American liberties today are more in danger from large pressure groups than they are from the multiplicity of denominations.

Perhaps the author dimly recognizes this fact, for after she has bemoaned the 250 churches and has called the tendency to unite “fortunate,” she does not, strange to say, argue for unification, but for unity. This is a most excellent proposal. The Protestant hierarchy in the Federal and World Councils seem to be grasping for power, desirous of ruling a big political machine, and insensitive to “cultic” differences. They piously repeat our Lord’s prayer “that they all may be one.” But they regularly fail to complete the sentence – “As Thou Father art in me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us.” There is no evidence that Christ desired organizational unification: he desired a unity of purpose, of principle, of doctrine. Unity, not unification, would indeed revise the Protestant spirit, if it should be a unity in the Father and the Son, but a unity in humanistic social service would turn the Church into a Club, or worse, a Political Party.

Protestant Bureaucracy

The author, though she shows no interest in religion, seems to be aware of bureaucratic politics in the churches. The second of the six prescriptions is, “Clean out the bureaucracy in the Protestant National organizations.” With this many of us will heartily agree, for some of us believe that these national, and now International, organizations are an enervating curse to the original indomitable Protestant spirit.

Even though Mrs. Meyer’s article suffers from an unsympathetic approach and a total lack of religious interest, some of her proposals are to be commended, and a consideration of them “. . . wad frae mony a blunder free us An’ foolish nation.”

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