

How To Be a Movement, Not a Machine

by Charles Teel, Jr.

How can the institutional church remain responsive both to its message and its membership? How can it incorporate the “first love” of the past and the “latter rain” of the future into the nitty-gritty of the institutional now? In short, how can those who are committed to the institutional church keep the movement from evolving into a machine?

In pondering how the church can be at once a responsible organization and a responsive organism, I will draw on the work of pioneer social theorists Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber. Troeltsch’s monumental *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, and Weber’s *Sociology of Religion* and *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, have charted the course for much contemporary scholarship concerning the nature of religious institutions. Employing ideal types—generalized polar categories used for analytical purposes—these men laid the groundwork for the following constructs, which aid in analyzing the dynamics of change in religious institutions:

Type of organization: movement from sect to church

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Type of leadership: movement from prophet to priest

Type of authority: movement from charisma to bureaucracy

Before going on, let me express my clear hope that a review of these constructs will lead beyond the level of description to the realm of ends. As one who was reared on the church from the time I drank my mother’s milk, and who still finds much meaning and fulfillment in nurturing and being nurtured by a gathered community of faith, I make no bones about subscribing to deeply rooted norms and values. These norms and values both inform and are informed by what I perceive as “empirical” reality. Thus, it is precisely because of a commitment to the church I love that I am led both as pastor and as sociologist to lean heavily on the sociological description of “what is” in directing efforts toward “what ought to be.”

Sect/Church Organization: The sect is defined as “a voluntary society, composed of strict and definite Christian believers bound to each other by the fact that all have experienced ‘the new birth’ ”.¹ As a voluntary association which one enters only after having experienced a conscious conversion, the sect tends to be exclusive and to appeal to the individual element in Christianity. The sectarian community views the sacraments as symbols of fellowship and accordingly stresses lay participation and the priesthood of all believers. Sectaries live apart from the world and emphasize the simple but radical opposition of

the kingdom of God to secular interests and institutions. They have no intention of evangelizing the social order but instead attempt to incorporate within their own circle a Christian order based on love. In protesting against the status quo and attempting to embody a corporate life style that offers an alternative to existing social structures, the sect appeals primarily to the lower classes and thus works "upwards from below and not downward from above."²

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The church, in contrast, is characterized by institutionalism, organization and tradition. Instead of joining voluntarily, members are "born into" the church. The institution, in turn, defines itself as the sole keeper of an objective treasury of grace which it dispenses through rites and sacraments administered only by stipulated functionaries. Desiring to cover the whole of humanity and to be coexistent with society, the church accepts the social order and becomes an integral part of prevailing social structures. Hence, it correspondingly becomes dependent on the upper classes and reflects an overwhelmingly conservative outlook. In sum, the church is "an institution which has been endowed with grace . . . , is able to receive the masses, and to adjust itself to the world."³

Prophetic/Priestly Leadership: The prophetic leader stands in the tradition of the rugged Amos and his Hebrew colleagues. His authority is legitimized by his claim to having received a divine command. Unencumbered by a tradition, a constituency or vested power interests, the prophet proclaims a "breakthrough" to what he perceives as a higher spiritual order. Sharing the sectarian characteristic of withdrawal from the social sphere, the prophet shepherds a gathered community who are dissatisfied with belief and practice in existing religious institutional structures. In inspiring a strong sense of community among participants, the prophet encourages fol-

lowers to contribute their energies and expertise in giving birth to the movement.

The priest, who is most directly associated with the church-type religious organization, claims authority by virtue of his office and years of service in a sacred tradition. In contrast to the prophet who does not work within a structural framework, the priest must perform established service and maintenance roles in relating to a specified constituency. His priority is that of building up the system as opposed to inspiring renewal and reform. His first allegiance is thus the maintenance of institutional structures.⁴

Charismatic/Bureaucratic Authority: The prophet exercises a charismatic type of leadership, that is, leadership that is authenticated as participants in the movement attribute to him exceptional "gifts of grace." These gifts are perceived to be of divine origin and on the basis of this the prophetic leader is invested with authority. In the religious community governed by charismatic authority, leaders are not technically trained. There is no hierarchy, no dismissal, no promotion. In place of formal procedure or abstract legal policy, the community responds to one claiming a divine "call" and, in turn, seeks creatively to enhance the workings of the movement.

A bureaucratic type of religious authority emerges as initial enthusiasm for the prophetic endeavor begins to wane. In its pure form, charismatic authority is specifically foreign to everyday routine structures. Hence, a rational organization of administrative procedures is called for. Bureaucratic forms are established with an emphasis on hierarchy of administrative offices. Then follows the creation of an administrative staff and the formulation of policy, procedure and protocol. As bureaucratic authority takes root, the laity become readily distinguished from the clergy. Creeds and formal statements of belief become numerous and complex. Formal declarations and abstract policy emerge as authoritative in place of the charismatic call to which the prophet lays claim.⁵

Each of the typologies of Christian faith and practice and social organization has roots in the gospel and the primitive church. In minimizing the lay/clergy distinction and maxi-

mizing the total involvement of the membership, the sect type uniquely embodies the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. In ascribing specific role and function to members of the body by way of structuring an ordered and organized church, the church type places a greater emphasis on the doctrine of the body of Christ. The sect type, moreover, builds on the model of a gathered community which seeks radically to live out the gospel ideal while awaiting the future Eschaton. The church type instead fosters a scattered community which bears witness to and through the present social order.

From the sectarian types cited above, we glean obvious traditional "goods." Creativity. Spontaneity. Involvement. Renewal. Community. Responsiveness. The search for authenticity. A romantic idealism and radicalism. The prophet inspires and pioneer movers of the movement move. There is little time or interest for rank or organization or typing carbon copies or logging information to keep service records up to date. There are wrestlings and probings and truth seekings and prayer meetings. To the common pot one member contributes a printing press, another contributes the use of a vacant carriage house, another contributes editorial expertise while yet another hustles paper and ink. Letters to the editor reflect intense involvement in both the belief and practice dimensions of the movement. Articles are diverse in that Truth is viewed as a quest. Editorials at once liberally blast the status quo of the world and inspire community and an eschatological hope among movement participants.

From those church types cited above we also glean traditional "goods." To gear a movement for action requires organization, structure, planning. There is the matter of paying a full-time editor or president or treasurer or subscription manager. Practical and existential questionings follow on the heels of the earlier enthusiastic affirmations. Who carries on the work of a prophet? How can we do this most effectively? Who educates the children? Can we trim down the purchase price of ink and paper enough to get by without raising subscription costs? Given the complexity of our involvements and the increase in personnel, would not a systematic statement of policy help encourage more fair and equitable treatment? What iden-

tity is uniquely ours in relation to the world we are called to serve?

The religious institution thus faces a paradox; the demand for commitment and spontaneity and broad participation, and the demand for systematic order and structure and procedure. Hand in hand with this "structure" paradox is the "function" paradox: the demand for sanctification through detachment from the world and the demand to be a leavening dimension within the social order. Said bluntly, can the religious institution have its cake and eat it, too?

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Troeltsch alludes to this matter of paradox in his conclusion:

The Ethos of the Gospel is a combination of infinite sublimity and childlike intimacy. On the one hand, it demands the sanctification of the self for God by the practice of detachment from everything which disturbs inward communication with God, and by the exercise of everything which inwardly binds the soul with God's will. On the other hand, it demands that brotherly love which overcomes in God all the tension and harshness of the struggle for existence, of law, and of the merely external order, while it unites souls in a deep spirit of mutual understanding, as well as in the most self-sacrificing love, which, even in its simplest expressions, gives a true hint of the nature of God Himself. This is an ideal which requires a new world if it is to be fully realized; it was this new world-order that Jesus proclaimed in His Message of the Kingdom of God. *But it is an ideal which cannot be realized within this world apart from compromise.*⁶

The essential issue, to be faced in this General Conference year as surely as it was faced in the

days of the early church, is how to handle the "compromise" demanded by this paradox. "The history of the Christian Ethos becomes the story of a constantly renewed search for this compromise, and of fresh opposition to this spirit of compromise."⁷

To return to the questions posed at the outset: How can the institutional church remain responsive both to its message and its membership? How can it incorporate the "first love" of the past and the "latter rain" of the future into the nitty-gritty of the institutional now? In short, how can those who are committed to the institutional church keep the movement from evolving into a machine?

If the ideal types of Troeltsch and Weber hold any response to these questions, it is this: the viable religious institution will have a structure, as church-type organization requires; but it will be a structure flexible enough to encourage sectarian creativity and dissent. In the creative tension which ensues, the priest is then consistently forced to respond to the exhortation of the prophet; the bureaucratic planners of program and policy are necessarily reminded that the nature and essence of their vocation is grounded in the lay-orientated and charismatic call to discipleship; and the church with its forms and traditions is obliged to be open to the sectarian nudge of reform and renewal.

Some may question how a contemporary community of faith might build on this model of sect-church diversity and still experience that unity which is by definition essential to the very existence of community. To this query I regularly hark back to the refrain which reminds us that the decisive New Testament passages on unity do not speak of one program, one form of ministry, one vote, or one life style. Rather, these Scriptures speak of one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism. In fact, unity shines more brightly in the conflict of wills than in concord, for it is in such creative tension that we see ourselves as brothers united under one God who is above all and who is Father of us all.⁸

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹Troeltsch, Ernst, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. Vol. II. Translated by Olive Wyon. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960, p. 993.
- ²*Ibid.*, p. 331.
- ³*Ibid.*, p. 993.
- ⁴Weber, Max, "The Prophet." *The Sociology of Religion*. Translated by Ephraim Fischhoff. Beacon Series in the Sociology of Politics and Religion. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.
- ⁵Weber, Max, "The Types of Authority and Imperative Control." *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Translated by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. New York: Free Press, 1947.
- ⁶*Ibid.*, p. 999 (emphasis supplied).
- ⁷*Ibid.*, p. 999.
- ⁸See Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Life Together*. Translated by John W. Doberstein. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1954, p. 24.