

Manifesto for the New Liberal Church

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This article appeared in the *Christian Century*, October 6, 1976, pp. 837-839. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation; used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at www.christiancentury.org. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

SUMMARY

It is now time for the liberal churches to come out of their corner fighting, to declare boldly and without apology for their own option. Five rejections of the old liberal church and five affirmations of the new are chronicled.

There are signs that something may be stirring in the more liberal wing of mainline Protestantism. Here and there new faces appear in the pew. No doubt some appear under the misconception that this pew will shake as it does in places calculated to lie more directly in the line of fire of the saving word. Others appear precisely because they look for a settled spot free from any sort of temblor. Whatever the reasons, such new faces do appear. In the meantime, among the scattered folk who have remained in the liberal pew from days of old, one begins to discern a faint glimmer of interest in such matters as God, prayer and the Bible. It is not clear yet whether this interest is part of the bicentennial remembrance or a contemporary concern. But something is stirring.

This development confronts the liberal church with some powerful temptations. For so long it has been told that its troubles are "bottoming out," while all the time it was the bottoms of all its statistical charts that seemed to be falling out. While their more orthodox brethren seemed to be taking on new life, the liberals watched succeeding generations of their own youth rise up and pass away into religious indifference or into forms of religiosity so private as to defy any sustained connection with Christian institutions. Now the urge is almost irresistible to try to gather up the crumbs that fall from those tables where some form of old-time religion is served up with new relish.

To shift to another metaphor, and one more fitting to the ecclesiastical heritage, it may be said that the ship of the liberal church has been drifting aimlessly, calking up the leaks as best it can, and looking for some heavenly breeze to sweep it out to sea and on to the Western Isles. The rudder sticks, the motor misses, and it is increasingly uncertain whether there is even a captain on the bridge. Therefore, if some strong current begins to pull in an illiberal direction, the disposition is to go along. It feels better to be dragged somewhere than to stay nowhere.

The time has come for some of the hands now curled up in the hammocks down below to stumble onto the deck, demanding that the liberal church begin to chart and to pursue its own course. If the breezes of the Spirit are ablow, there is no reason why such hands should allow others to pre-empt the opportunity that these breezes afford. To speak literally, the time has come for the liberal churches to declare boldly and without apology for their own option. Hence this provisional manifesto. I use the term "liberal" with great reluctance. It carries so much awkward baggage, theological and political, to say nothing of moral. Yet other expressions I have tried, such as "Progressive Church," "Pilgrim Church" and "Prophetic Church," do not seem to serve. So I stick with "liberal" but put before it the word "new" to indicate that, while there is a historical connection with the old liberal church, we speak of a church that finds itself in a different situation.

My manifesto contains a set of five rejections coupled with five affirmations. It is perilous to begin with rejections, especially since getting bogged down in negativities continually undermined the old liberal church. Yet I take the risk anyway, preferring to end on a positive note.

The New Liberal Church rejects:

1. *Authoritarian and fanatical ways of thinking and behaving.* This rejection is not limited to doctrinal positions that are "dogmatic" in the pejorative sense of that word. The rejection applies as well to styles of governance, to techniques of group dynamics, and to the general atmosphere of the church. The new liberal church rejects all methods of working with people which subject them to emotional duress. It also rejects all tyrannical fads, all obsessive enthusiasms, and all rigid, true-believing mind-sets, whether of the right, left, or in between.

2. *The spiritual imperialism which approaches people not as persons to be respected, but as territory to be captured.* I find that the phrase "spiritual imperialism" disturbs some people. I suspect that they suspect that something is implied with regard to evangelism and missionary activity. Well, something *is* implied. I do not believe that the new liberal church should reject its obligation to share such grace as it has received. Nor do I suggest that it should refrain from entering the fray against opposing points of view. On the contrary, the purpose of my manifesto is to say that it is now time for the new liberal church to come out of its corner fighting. However, it will refrain from the arrogance, the bad manners, and the assault on human personality sometimes found in connection with religious zeal.

3. *Efforts to narrow down the Christian message to something less than a comprehensive strategy for human existence.* In particular this means that the new liberal church will resist the temptation to confine itself to the private aspects of spirituality and morality. Yet this rejection implies as well an avoidance of all single emphases, whether the emphasis be that of spiritual healing, women's liberation, liturgical reform, or the rights of lettuce pickers.

4. *The impulse of society to use the church as an agency for keeping things as they are.* The traditional role of religious institutions has been to declare the blessing of the gods on all other institutions. There have been exceptions: the prophets of Israel, the one who announced: "It was written of old . . . but I say," even at times the leaders of the old liberal church. But the exceptions have been rare.

The new liberal church will not forget its heritage; indeed, the hope is that it will do a

better job of remembering that heritage than did the old liberal church. The new liberal church will not reject old values or customs or institutions simply out of rebellious pride. However, it will continually raise questions as to whether some old values may not be ancient prejudices; some old customs, antique superstitions; some old institutions, stubborn obstacles in the way of a more abundant life.

5. *The proposition that because it is a liberal church, it should never stand for anything in particular.* That proposition is the terminal disease which is "doing in" the old liberal church.

Now for the positive side. *The new liberal church will affirm:*

1. *Faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ that is secure enough to live with changing images of God.* The new liberal church will not ship out like Jonah when the word entrusted to it becomes unthinkable. Nor will it panic into fundamentalism. At the very least, it will provide a setting in which people can struggle to steer clear of those disastrous shoals. It will find freedom and strength to engage in dialogue with the agnosticisms, atheisms and variant theisms of the day. It will do this not so much on the basis of concepts of God that it claims as its own, as out of the conviction that One beyond conceptualization claims us as his own. The new liberal church will find strength and freedom in the assurance that it is so claimed.

2. *Reverence for each person's spiritual insight.* The new liberal church need not fall into the grievous error, so popular among tolerant Americans, of thinking that it doesn't matter what people believe so long as they believe something. It will not inflict on people the insult of saying that it can care for them while showing indifference concerning their beliefs. However, such a church will recognize the need and the right of every person to arrive at a faith that is truly his or her own. It will provide a setting where people do not impose beliefs arrogantly, but rather share them humbly. Finally, its reverence for persons will link to a higher reverence in such a way as to yield the hope that, when people meet freely and in mutual respect to share their deepest concerns, something greater than the people themselves will appear.

3. *A forthright dedication of itself to the social implications of the Christian ethic.* Today people grow fatigued with social controversy. Denominational officials who once

thought they were Elijah on the mountaintop now seem persuaded by shrinking budgets to speak their minds like shrinking violets. Consensus will not be achieved on many issues. Practical wisdom knows that the parish church is only rarely an appropriate or an effective structure for social action. Nevertheless, the new liberal church will labor to make people confront the issues in the context both of Christian community and of their own individual discipleship. It will insist that any version of Christian faith that does not grapple with war and peace, human equality, hunger, civil liberties, the hard decisions posed by medical technology, and a host of other social challenges is not a version of faith worth the time of either pulpit or pew.

4. A courageous acceptance of the open-endedness of the church's task and the church's perspective in a fast-changing world. Its faith will include not only the elements of belief and trust, but also those of venture and vision. Knowing that the future is open and that all creaturely endeavor is finite, the new liberal church will confer no finality on any way of doing things either in the church itself or in society at large. Confident that their God goes before them as he went before the people of Israel, the people in such a church will see themselves engaged not in a holding operation, but in a great adventure.

5. Standing for many things in particular. It will stand for answering the claim which God lays to us through Jesus Christ. It will stand for reverencing the freedom of the human spirit. It will stand for the social application of the gospel. It will stand for accepting the challenge to build new social structures and new styles of human relationships. In very specific ways it will follow through on these affirmations as it confronts day by day the issues of life and death.

The people in the new liberal church will acknowledge quite frankly that it would be more comfortable to gather in the kind of church that supposedly existed in past times -- a monumental place in the center of town where the same cycle of ceremonies was repeated from generation to generation, the same ordered doctrines were taught in the same words, the same relationship to the outside world went on and on. They will also admit that it would be more comfortable to close down the church and to blend into the surrounding landscape with their private light and their private doubt.

Nevertheless, the new liberal church will stand as an opportunity for those people who

could never enjoy such varieties of comfort even if they tried. It will summon together those hardy souls for whom the way of Christ is an exploration, a quest, a seeking, and who look for company both in walking through the darkness and in celebrating the light.

