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WHEN THE CHURCH ABANDONS GOD

by NORVAL F. PEASE

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On Sunday, July 11, 1965, my wife and I boarded a train at Charing Cross station, London, for the area known as Woolwich on the south bank of the Thames. Our purpose was to attend the evening service at the parish church and hear its rector, the Reverend Nicolas Stacey. From Woolwich station a short walk in a characteristic London drizzle brought us to the beautifully situated church on the bank of the Thames. Inside, the Reverend Mr. Stacey conducted a modified Church of England service and preached a sermon on the theme, "No one shall rob you of your joy." Approximately seventy-five people comprised the congregation.

Why did we select this particular church from among the scores of churches where services were being held? Because there is a story behind this church and its rector—a story that is very significant in reference to the religious movements of our day. This story was made public by Mr. Stacey in an article in the *Observer* of December, 1964.

At the time of writing this article, Mr. Stacey had been rector of Woolwich for five years. He took over this charge at the persuasion of the well-known bishop of Woolwich, Dr. James A. T. Robinson, author of *Honest to God*. The church was run-down, with only a handful of people attending. Mr. Stacey gathered about him a competent team of well-trained and experienced men and began a program which he hoped would make an impact on the people. The church was remodeled, a coffee house being constructed in

one unused gallery and a lounge in the other. A mission church in the parish was converted into a hall, used mainly for bingo. A branch of the "Suicide Samaritans" was established to dissuade desperate people from taking their own lives. A massive house-to-house visiting campaign was undertaken. A marriage guidance service and a christening service were established. The church services were modified to make them more relevant to a modern congregation. Parish suppers, outings, and theater trips were planned. The clergy of the church participated wholeheartedly in community activities. Capital investment alone amounted to 30,000 pounds sterling, plus the salaries of the staff.

What were the results of all this effort? Mr. Stacey summarizes them thus:

"We have played every card in the pack. We have done everything we set out to do. But we have achieved virtually not one of the modest things we hoped for. The regular members of the congregation have increased from about fifty to a hundred, mostly drawn from socially superior areas outside our working-class parish. . . .

"Our congregations at Christmas, Easter, and Harvest Festival are very little larger than on ordinary Sundays. The number of confirmation candidates has progressively dropped in the five years I have been here—last year to an all-time low of eleven. Although we have a church school, none of our efforts has raised the Sunday School attendance above twenty-five."

Secular Activities No Substitute for Evangelism. How Religionless Christianity Creates a Spiritual Wilderness.

Regarding the visiting program, one member of Mr. Stacey's staff reported that "after house-to-house visiting for six hours a day for six months not one extra person had been to church as a result." The counseling and christening programs likewise failed to bring people to the church. The whole program became known throughout England as "The Woolwich Failure."

Stacey's honesty in publishing the results of the experiment is refreshing. The sincerity of the efforts of his team is unquestioned. The problem of reaching an average community—be it in America, England, or any other part of the world—with the message of the church is staggering. There are some lessons, however, that we need to learn from this experiment.

First, Mr. Stacey himself puts his finger on the core of the problem when he says, "Living among the trees, it is not easy to see the wood; and if I try to discover the lessons of the last five grueling years, I am faced at once with the absurd contradiction that our parishioners desperately need a faith, a dynamic and a purpose in life, but the church seems unable to help them find it."

At Christmastime

by Mark Bullock



*The Christmas chimes ring out upon the air
To tell a story of the long ago.
There is a kindly spirit everywhere,
And windows shine with light of tinsel glow.*

*Perhaps in all the gaiety and glee,
In all the glitter that the eye beholds,
There is a danger we may fail to see
The truer values that the season holds.*

*Lord, may we all the deeper meaning find
And see within the Christ child in the hay
A hope to light the hearts of all mankind,
The dawning of a bright and better day.*

*A Saviour born to banish sin and fear
Were tidings that made even angels sing.
Should it not be our highest joy to hear
The message that He is our Lord and King?*

*Oh, may the songs that tell of Jesus' birth
Resound with gladness in the hearts of men
As Christmas chimes ring out to all the earth
To tell the wondrous story once again.*

In view of this startling admission, does Mr. Stacey propose that the church recapture its lost faith in a personal God, Creator of heaven and earth, and His Son who became man, died on the cross for man's sin, and was raised from the dead? No. There is no hint in Mr. Stacey's article of any such return to the evangelical interpretation of Christianity. His proposed solution is revealed in the following quotation from his article:

"God is desperately needed, and yet I have reached the point where I can see little chance of our capturing people's imagination by the traditional methods, however lovingly, vigorously, and imaginatively performed, over however long a period. Indeed, I believe things may get harder still as the residue of formal Christianity disappears and the secularization of society is completed.

"In Woolwich we now intend to take the first tentative steps in a new experiment. We hope to appoint a paid lay bursar to run the parish, and most of the clergy on our staff will take secular jobs, leaving the evenings free for spiritual counseling, leading lay training groups, sick visiting, and so on. No doubt some will interpret this as a counsel of despair—a retreat for those who have lost their nerve and whose faith has got wobbly. To us it seems an advance. For hundreds of years the ecclesiastical structures have served society fairly well. Today they are becoming increasingly irrelevant. It is the secular ones that determine the shape and tone of the world. If the Christian has anything to say, he must say it from within them."

Mr. Stacey is obviously sold on the "religionless Christianity" so much discussed today. "Judging from the way they have been talking, it seems that a lot of Protestant ministers consider the local church as obsolete as the village well."—*Time*, March 11, 1966. A distinction is developing between "worship-directed churches" and "man-directed churches."

But must the churches surrender to secularism? What is secularism? It has been defined as the organization of life as if there were no God. Langdon Gilkey has defined it as "the absence of the religious, transcendent, or ultimate dimension or reference in all the facets of life, and the consequent derivation of all standards and goals solely from the natural and social environments in which men live. It is as if for our age the receiving set for religion had been tuned way down, or in some cases turned quite off."—*How the Church Can Minister to the World Without Losing Itself*, pages 20, 21. Is this the structure within which the church must work in the future?

One observer of Mr. Stacey's experiment makes this comment:

"Christianity is a supernatural faith. The work of the Holy Spirit is alone adequate to break through the barriers of sin and unbelief. The answer to the Woolwich problem—and that of every other parish—is not to secularize the supernatural, to eliminate one by one the objections to Christian belief. The fundamental problem is not a rational one at all. In the eighteenth century a comparatively small group of men on horseback, led by Wesley and Whitefield, were enabled to stir the people of Britain out of just such a spiritual apathy as we see today. Obviously there are differences in the situation then and now; but is there any fundamental change in human nature or human need? That is the real question. If this kind of secular psychol-

ogizing is all that the church has to offer, then no amount of devoted effort and skillful organization will be of any avail.

"The cure for Woolwich lies in Aldersgate Street."—*The Christian Minister*, March, 1965 (quoted from *The Christian*).

The case, though serious, is not hopeless. Even in London, where the Church of England reported less than 3 percent of London's population was in its churches on a recent Easter Sunday, hundreds turn out every Sunday to the old Westminster chapel to hear Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and to All Souls', Langham Place, London, to hear Reverend John R. W. Stott, both of whom are evangelical in their preaching. Only the "everlasting gospel" of the saving grace of God through Jesus Christ will save the church and reach the deep needs of the world. No amount of purely secular activity, however valuable in itself, will take the place of a personal relationship with a living God—a relationship that expresses itself in faith, worship, personal integrity, and social concern.

In looking across the centuries, Jesus said, "Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?" Luke 18:8. This text reflects concern lest faith disappear. There was a time when the conflict raged between a church on the side of faith and a world against it. But now faith is being built by churchmen and torn down by churchmen. Is it any wonder Jesus expressed alarm as He foresaw our day? In describing this faith, Berkouwer has said:

"The act of faith is as much being held by God as holding Him; the power of faith is exercised as much in capitulation as in conquering—the faith that overcomes the world is capitulation to Christ's great victory. This faith is truly a gift, a gift which is totally unique because of its object and which in that uniqueness can lead us on the way of salvation. Beware lest anyone sap this tree!"—*Faith and Justification*, pages 190, 191.

The final figure of speech in this quotation is appealing. Sapped trees stand stark and naked against the sky—no leaves—no life. Such is a faithless church. Such is the church when it becomes a mere social-service agency. Such will be the church if it surrenders to secularization.



CAMERA CLIX

TEST YOUR "WORD" POWER

by Richard H. Utt

In the centuries-long controversy between good and evil, heroes and villains have often clashed. Each question below concerns one of the heroes of the Bible. Supply the correct answer to each question, choosing from the list of "villains" in the column at the right.

1. When Moses attempted to free his people from slavery and lead them to the "Promised Land," _____ stubbornly opposed him.
2. When Abel offered a sacrifice acceptable to God, his brother _____, in a fit of jealousy, murdered him.
3. Pilate offered to free one prisoner, either Jesus or a hardened criminal by the name of _____.
4. On Mount Carmel, Elijah and _____ met in a dramatic confrontation in which Jehovah triumphed over Baal.
5. The apostle Peter warned _____ not to try to buy sacred things.
6. Queen Esther accused _____ of trying to exterminate the entire Hebrew nation.
7. The prophetess Deborah successfully engaged _____, the Canaanite general, in battle.
8. David outdueled _____, the giant Philistine warrior.

Cain
Goliath
Ahab
Simon the sorcerer
Haman
Barabbas
Pharaoh
Sisera

(Answers on page 32)