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AN HOUR WITH DR. R. L. ELSON

Famous Presbyterian Preacher Discusses

Modern Protestantism; Believes

Reformation Not Yet Completed

by Daniel Walther

Walking with a friend from abroad along fashionable Connecticut Avenue in Washington, D.C., we sighted a rather awesome church building with a heavy, square bell tower. "That," I said, "is the National Presbyterian Church, where former President Eisenhower worshiped." My friend wondered why a "national" church in the United States, since church and state are separate, and why, for the same reason, a President's religious affiliation is of such great importance.

It may be said that the word "national" does not mean that it is the church of the state, but that it is located in the nation's capital; and it is not state-controlled any more than the "federal" church councils. And while there is no state church, the American people are intensely interested in a President's personal convictions, including his religion.

I do not think I quite convinced my friend, because it is often difficult, if not impossible, to explain the principle of separation of church and state in its practical applications.

In front of the church we noticed a statue of John Witherspoon, the only clergyman who signed the Declaration of Independence, and as we entered the sanctuary we remembered that the voices of Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and Henry Ward Beecher were heard here. Several Presidents worshiped in this temple: U. S. Grant, W. Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, Coolidge, Hoover, and, occasionally, F. D. Roosevelt. Seat No. 46 is Graham Bell; and No. 33, the simple notation: "the President."

We were graciously invited into the study of Dr. Elson, who gained prominence by being "the President's pastor" and by his personal contributions. His search for truth has been recognized, symbolically, by nineteen academic hoods, including sixteen honorary doctor's degrees; but mostly is he appreciated for his earnest spiritual leadership.

As you meet Dr. Elson, you sense a strong personality under constant control, exuding warm sympathy and stern firmness reminiscent of his Scotch Presbyterian ancestry and his strongly Calvinistic theological thinking. His entire behavior is dominated by the pastor's concern: the feeding of the flock and the witness of his church. He aims to be the shepherd who, in the words of Calvin, must "watch over the life of each individual, warn affectionately those who err, and teach the faithful ones in holy doctrine."

One striking feature of Dr. Elson's ministry reminds one of the Swiss Reformer Zwingli, who was by temperament an army chaplain. As a priest, Zwingli went with the soldiers on the battlefield, and later, as a Reformer, assisted the armed forces and died as a chaplain on the battlefield. Similarly, Dr. Elson at first considered a military career and was, in fact, appointed to West Point when he suddenly decided to "wear the cloth." But two days after ordination he applied for Army chaplaincy, where he has been very active in executive leadership until he laid down his burden recently at Fort Myers.

Of particular interest to us are Dr. Elson's opinions on the state of religion in America today.

Question: What do you think of the Protestant climate today?

Answer: There is a new cynicism in the air. It is not the cynicism of the atheist nor of the out-and-out secularist. It is a cynicism of some American religious spokesmen about religion, about the state of the church, about American life and culture.

Question: Do you think that this cynicism gives a distorted picture of the actual religious condition?

Answer: To listen to some spokesmen you would conclude that American Protestantism is anemic if not impotent; that American laymen are spiritually destitute, that their faith is flabby and their morals inferior. The laymen, we are told, have become slaves to the evils of the "organizational man," manipulated by the mob, directed by a soft suburban climate. The layman is possessed only of a "religion in general;" he is pious but pitiable and decadent.

Question: Is this a personal opinion of yours?

Answer: I am not the only one to be alarmed about this condition. Dr. William R. Farmer of Drew University has this to say about a cynic, described as "the idealist gone sour": "One of the characteristics of the cynic is that he has so little to say that is positive and constructive."

Question: What do you think is the answer? Are the clergy in any position to correct this trend?

Answer: The church must stand in the center of life and make its gospel and its fellowship relevant to all of life—politics, economics, art, literature, education, industry, international affairs. The clergy must be prophets who know in the depths of

their being that they speak for God.

Question: Speaking of Protestantism in general today, is there not a grave concern about its vitality and its very survival?

Answer: Ours is a time when Protestantism seems to be flourishing. The majority of Americans are Christians, and among the Christians in America Protestants are in the majority. Sixty-three million Americans belong to Protestant churches. This is to say that 35 percent of all Americans are Protestants. By contrast, at the beginning of our national history only 5 percent of the people claimed membership in any church, although the Protestant way of life may have been in evidence in colonial times. A hundred years ago only 15 percent of the total population belonged to any church. Thus, judged by membership, Protestantism appears strong today.

Question: Are the criticisms concerning Protestantism due to leaders and theologians?

Answer: Most of the negative judgment seems to come less from the working pastor than from theologians and church officials who are not regularly in touch with the lay mind of the church. Too often the methods of sociology are applied to evaluating religion. The methods of sociology are not necessarily valid in dealing with religious phenomena. Religion has its own methods. Religion is, essentially, a vertical God-man relationship—intimate and personal, a reality that is not measurable by the methods of the physical or the social sciences. What happens in the soul of a man, what happens in the soul of millions of people, is not subject to laboratory tests.

Question: Are there not many encouraging signs in Protestant ranks as well?

Answer: There are. First of all, there is a new dynamism among laymen. This began spontaneously after World War II and has now developed into organized efforts within the church. Everywhere, laymen are on the march, from spiritual retreats and evangelistic campaigns to programs of intense theological study.

Another hopeful aspect is the new intellectual vigor within the church. This is an age of great theologians. There is a seeking after Christian orthodoxy based on sound scholarship.

Protestantism in America is not dying. It has within it the power of self-criticism which can produce self-reformation. Chronic criticism will not make us strong.

Question: What are Protestantism's immediate needs?

Answer: Protestantism's chief need today is for a better comprehension of the faith to which it holds and a deepening of spiritual living. We have numerical strength and tremendous resources for witnessing to the gospel, but we need a better understanding of our faith. We need greater emphasis on a clear-cut proclamation of the Reformation gospel.

Question: Is a church reformation called for? What would be the nature of such a "reformation"? Is it possible? How could it be accomplished?

Answer: What is needed today is to finish the Reformation, which reached its apex in the sixteenth century through the ministry of Luther, Calvin, and Knox. The movement which they set in motion has not been brought to fulfillment. The Reformation was distorted by extremists who were more effective in destroying evil things than in purifying that which should have remained. We must proceed patiently by evangelism and education to complete the Reformation. Some of the Reformers would be appalled at what has happened to the church as a result of their movement.

Question: Is ecumenism the answer to our present needs?

Answer: No. It is a contribution and may lead to some solutions, but we have not yet at this time found the answer.

Question: Is the National Council of Churches an effective means of spiritual reinvigoration?

Answer: The National Council of Churches is not a church or a substitute for the denominations, but a federated agency of churches to perform those functions which the denominations authorize the Council to do. The Council assists denominations to do things together, to "talk" together. There are two conspicuous movements in Christendom today: a greater ecumenicity, and a reemphasis on confessionalism.

Question: What word of advice would you have for a young minister in training at a seminary?

Answer: The first requirement for the minister is a knowledge of God in personal experience. To keep one's life incandescent with the love of Jesus Christ is a basic requirement. The real test after that is the love of people. A minister must love all kinds of people, the good and the bad, the pious and the impious, the cultured and the uncultured; he must know all there is to know about them and still keep on loving them.

Question: If you could address all Christian youth, what would be your topic?

Answer: "Life's Single Vocation" would be my subject, and the theme would be that the purpose of life is to glorify God.

Question: What is Christianity's greatest, most urgent challenge?

Answer: The first challenge is the spiritual rebirth of Christianity's message, and the second challenge is an encounter by a revived church with atheistic communism.

On taking leave of Dr. Elson, our spirits quickened. We were particularly impressed by his unalterable confidence

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DR. R. L. ELSON



ACKAD

this one day of forgetfulness is a hopeless defeat, or shall I look back at the five days of victory and recognize that I have made some progress toward my goal? The experience of those five days will make it a little easier to start in the right direction again on January 7, and to keep going. Someone has said, "All men stumble; some fall; the wise ones get up and go on."

3. *We depend too much on self and too little on God.* A car may actually be moved a short distance, if the going is easy, by putting it in gear and stepping on the starter. But to keep the engine turning and the car rolling requires power from outside the car itself. The tank must be supplied with gas, and the gas must constantly flow into the engine without obstruction. We, too, must have power from outside ourselves in order to keep our good resolutions and to establish habits that will glorify God and benefit our fellowmen. If we rely on our good intentions and good resolutions, life will consist largely of resolutions made and resolutions broken. We need to die to self, cease clinging to self, and surrender to God. We need to look away from self to Jesus. This will not mean any less exercise of the will. On the contrary, it will mean more resoluteness and greater effort, because God gives the power to make the effort, and we use it. Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will bear witness for Me." Acts 1:8, N.E.B.

Just as it is necessary, even on a hurried journey, to stop and fill the gas tank, so it is necessary, in advancing along the Christian way, to take time daily for communion with God, for receiving new supplies of power to make our resolutions work. And we must see to it that the gas line does not become clogged with selfishness or sin.

Let us face the year 1963 with courage and high resolve. By starting with renewed determination every time we seem to fail, by daily drawing fresh supplies of power from God, we can make our resolutions, revolutions. "Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Corinthians 15:57. [END]

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in the Bible prophet who today, as ever, heralds the divine message and points to God's way as the answer to our dilemma. His thought is expressed in a statement in his book, *America's Spiritual Recovery*: "As a generation we dope ourselves with amateur psychology. We buy up all the books of the peace-of-mind cults, pitifully confident that it is possible to have peace of mind in our kind of world. We follow preachers who hawk formulas for banishing worry and fear and tension while the prophets of God, with their painful judgments requiring repentance, go unheeded. We turn wistfully to 'inspirational' speakers, and are left with a *terrible emptiness and loneliness of soul*. . . . To man today comes a tragic sense of failure—failure in living. We are brilliant but unhappy, clever but unstable, comfortable but comfortless; we own so much and possess so little. We are forlorn souls, groping and hungering and lost. Once again, as in the Garden of Eden, man is a *fugitive from God and bereft of spiritual certitude*." [END]

"Fearfully and Wonderfully Made"

(Continued from page 13)

Here are several very mysterious procedures. How can a section of the ectoderm which elsewhere gives rise to skin cells, in a certain region produce the elaborate mechanism of the brain and spinal cord, with all their potentialities? How can the nerves growing out from here find their way to exactly the right places in the tissues?

Explanations in terms of mere mechanical pressures or chemical influences seem futile. In this, as in most embryonic processes, it looks as if the cells know exactly where to go and what to do. But we know that they cannot possess intelligence. The only conclusion we can reasonably reach is that they are guided by an Intelligence that knows the end from the beginning, and causes each growth process to fit into every other one in such a way as to bring about the completed structures. [END]

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

by Hildegard Campbell

*O Preacher of godliness, teach us today
The Beatitudes' lowliest, holiest way—*

*The poverty journeying volunteered miles,
The mourning awaiting the daylight with smiles,
The meekness concealing invisible wings,
The yearning for righteousness' manna and springs,
The compassion that weeps for humanity's woes,
The purity spotless as mountaintop snows,
The skill that conciliates obstinate minds,
The forbearance that blesses when tyranny binds,
That rejoices when jeered, when accused by deceit.*

*O Master, instruct us who sit at Thy feet
In the great fundamentals which Thou didst impart
On the mount long ago. May we learn them by
heart.*

When Christ Was Surprised

(Continued from page 15)

If Jesus should visit this world at the present time, what would amaze Him most? Would it be the marvelous scientific inventions and achievements which have ushered in a new world, or the vast preparations of the nations for an atomic war that would virtually depopulate the earth, or the rising tide of crime and juvenile delinquency? Or would it be the low ebb of spiritual life among His own professed people? Speaking of the days preceding His second advent, He said, "When the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?" Luke 18:8. While He did not answer