

In recent months there have been

small changes in our church:

But in that list, I didn't say anything about the  
major change that is the business of the  
Church -- the changing of human nature, the  
changing of people like you and me. Surely,  
among the other things that the Church --  
should be doing to fulfill her Lord's  
commission in the world, this is quite  
central. Is there anything more important,  
than the business of changing sinners into  
saints? //

Right through the New Testament and  
the whole course of Christian history, you  
will find the conviction that the Gospel is --

what-it-is -- good news -- precisely because it offers the hope of changing people for the better. There's a whole string of words that don't belong to the fashionable speech of today, which express this transformation of human nature. I'm thinking of words like repentance, conversion, regeneration, salvation, justification, sanctification, and new birth. The conviction that lies behind all of them is that people like you and me can be changed through the power of Christ. This is not just an invisible change that happens deep down within us and has little to do with our everyday behavior.

According to the New Testament, it is a change of nature that becomes visible -- from selfishness to unselfishness, from despair to hope, from fear to faith, from greed to generosity, from bitterness to love.

This kind of change, whether sudden or gradual, is reflected in everything --

3

recorded about the early Church. The apostles obviously expected to find that those who had become Christians were experiencing this kind of change. St. Peter describes it as being called "out of darkness into his marvelous light." St. James says that "faith without works (that is, evidence of a real change of nature) is dead." St. Paul went so far as to proclaim that "if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things have become new."

The conviction that this kind of change both can happen and does happen is part of our Christian heritage. It lies behind all vital preaching. It is implied in the use of the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. It is the rationale for our prayers for the Christian graces. Why pray to be made kinder, or purer, or stronger-in-the-faith, if we don't really believe that such

changes can take place? But we may need to  
revive our confidence that this sort of thing  
can actually happen. //

I am probably speaking to some who  
will be thinking, "Ah, yes; I remember when  
all this talk about changing human nature  
had a terrific appeal. In my teens I believed  
everything was possible for me. I could be  
changed; my friends could be changed; the  
world could be changed. There seemed to be  
no limit to what might happen. But as the  
years have rolled on, I've gotten a bit wiser.  
I know my own limitations now, and my  
experience with others makes me very  
skeptical of any claims about changing  
human nature. You can perhaps do a lot  
with the early years, but once people form  
their character, we know nothing is going to  
make much of a dent." //

Well, let's give full weight to our  
experience of life. Let's admit that youth <sup>is</sup> ~~is~~ *people*

5

dreams, dreams and sees visions that are not always realizable. The Bible, too, is very realistic about human possibilities; and there is no evidence there that people become saints overnight. But we must be prepared to ask ourselves whether somewhere ~~along the line~~ we have simply lost sight of the transforming power of God. If we have come to the point where we no longer expect any real change ~~for the better in our own~~ nature, where we are skeptical of any improvement in the people around us, then are we not denying the Gospel itself? We are saying, in fact, that God can't do anything ~~with this human nature of ours~~, that the coming of Jesus Christ ~~into the world~~ didn't make any real difference to human nature, and that the Holy Spirit is powerless in the life of a human being. ~~This is a much more serious way of denying the Trinity than any utterance of "new theology."~~

You surely have heard the expression,  
 "You can't change human nature." It's  
 usually said with the implication that our  
 nature and temperament are so determined  
 by our heredity and environment, that nothing  
 can ever change them. And people who say  
 "You can't change human nature" are nearly  
 always referring not to its good but its ugly  
 side. They are rejecting any idea that there  
can be a radical change for the better in an  
 individual or in society as a whole.

*People used to say that*  
 Such an attitude ~~used to claim~~ *was supported*

scientific <sup>ally</sup> ~~support~~. This moral defeatism was  
supposed to be based on our new knowledge --  
 of the forces that make-us-what-we-are.

Religion, it was said, is powerless against the  
 brute facts of human nature, which science  
 reveals to be unchangeable.

It would be difficult to maintain that  
 position today, when some of the most  
 exciting -- and even alarming -- advances of

7

science are in the direction of changing human nature. We hear of wonder-drugs, of operations on the brain, of fiddling with DNA, of new psychiatric methods -- all designed to produce radical changes in the personality of people like you and me. It would be a bold and ignorant person today who would dare to say that you literally "can't change human nature." We hear now how it can be changed more drastically than our forebears ever thought possible.

The questions for our generation are therefore: How should human nature be changed? What methods are legitimate? and What kind of human beings do we want to see coming-into-being? The methods of science are morally neutral, and its inventions can always be used for good or evil. Our new powers, not only over nature but over human nature, can lead to tremendous good or the most catastrophic *evil*.

8

All true religion is concerned with the ends we seek and the moral power to reach them. Therefore more than ever before it is imperative to hear the message of God's transforming power. The Bible reveals both the potential for human destiny, as children of the living God, and the tragedy of human estrangement, from God, from our fellow human beings, and from our environment. But the Bible also reveals a divine activity, a supernatural power, that is at work to overcome the estrangement and transform human beings into the image of the children of God.

In simple Christian terms we can say that God has shown us what we are meant to be. For God has given us the living image of what is meant by "a Son of God." Jesus Christ is the new humanity. To be like him is the goal of this adventure that we call our life on earth. But such an example, such a



vision, is not enough. There is no good news in just being told that this is how we ought to live -- in perfect love towards God and our fellow human beings. The Gospel is that Jesus Christ, by being identified with us in his death and resurrection, is able to deliver us from evil and shape us in his image. All those words I spoke of -- salvation, redemption, regeneration, and the like -- indicate this working of the Spirit of Christ to transform us from within and change those natures of ours so radically that we begin to want what God wants, and unconsciously to grow in the right direction.

This is not an experience limited to people who have had what we call a "sudden conversion." Nor is it confined to any special sect or group within the Church. It is happening wherever -- and in whatever way -- Christ is received. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." It happens to men

and women of all kinds of temperament or churchmanship or theological conviction. It happens through every conceivable "means of grace." There is no standardized procedure for receiving this grace—that transforms our character, but most of us know very well how and where we can put ourselves, where it can reach us. And we know, too, the kind of thoughts and activities (or lack of activity) that cut us off from it.

It's worth stopping to think that in this amazing modern world, with all its glittering achievements, the most precious gift is still the presence of what we call the grace of God, the force that can change human nature and transform us to be more like Jesus. I know of one congregation that states its purpose in these words: "to bring men and women into the transforming presence of Christ, in the fellowship of the Spirit, that they may be made over in his likeness." In

11

these days of change-and-reform, this is  
surely where we must begin, namely, by  
renewing our conviction that human nature  
can be changed-by-God, since, in the  
apostle's words, the Gospel of Christ is "the  
power of God unto salvation to every one  
that believes;" and that salvation begins --  
and can be experienced -- in this lifetime.

16-17