

What Christianity does/should do to the traditional "natural" roles in societies is a central issue for (1) the shape of church life today and (2) the shape of Christianity tomorrow. The most problematic role is that of priest (with its liturgic function, which this article in the Jan'75 YDS Reflection addresses by indirection).

On the rear of this sheet, please write the fruits of your meditation on the following statements of position:

1. Down with priestcraft! NT says Jesus is our only priest, and we could save power-struggle and money if we practiced it.
2. You never outgrow your need for a priest. The notion that Christianity mystically-eschatologically transcends priestcraft is an ecstatic myth insustainable in the light of common dailiness.
3. Let's have priests, but only by specific contract: none of this character indelibilis, congregation-transcending, ordination.
4. Let's ordain priests, but not pay them. Paying the priest--priest-feeding--is the chief source of corruption in any religion.
5. Yes, NT gives many signals on priestcraft: Jesus only, a special class, all "laity" (God's people)--but let's emphasize the last before the middle and the first before the last.
6. I personally hope that in the year 2000 it will stand this way, i.e. priesting will be thusly provided for in "church":

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One Sunday years ago I attended the eleven o'clock service of worship at a small-town church in Pennsylvania. As I entered the usher handed me several sheets of paper covered with financial data. And I noticed that a slide projector and screen had been set up in the center aisle.

When the time came for a sermon the pastor announced that, since very few of those present would appear at the annual meeting, he was going to give a detailed analysis of the budget. He proceeded to do this in a manner strikingly reminiscent of Robert Benchley's famous "Treasurer's Report."

That incident brought into focus something that I had begun to suspect somewhat earlier, i.e. that a major reason for the decline of preaching is the tendency of Christians to overburden the sermon. As it has become more and more difficult to gather the faithful at any other hour or occasion of the week, ministers have come to depend increasingly upon preaching to carry the total communication task of the church.

As a result proclamation of the gospel has been subordinated to a great many laudable institutional purposes. And the vitality of preaching has suffered. It is undoubtedly important for the congregation to be informed about the bishop's most recent concern, the sad state of the heating plant, the shortage of Sunday School teachers, and the treachery of the parsonage roof. But the effort to carry on such discussions as sermons puts a knife at the throat of preaching.

More recently, it has seemed to me, the whole Sunday morning service has been threatened with an extension of the same affliction. One observes among younger clergy the assumption that anything that Christians ought to do together is appropriate as *worship*. This misapprehension has, of course, a long and painful history, as anyone familiar with children's pageants can attest. I am not sure who first got the idea that the place to demonstrate the thespian talents of our offspring is in the chancel at

eleven o'clock on Sunday. But whoever it was has gained a host of latter-day adherents.

Today the range of activities which innovative souls wish to have defined as public worship is almost limitless. And most of us are getting inured to the presence of loudspeakers, tape recorders, overhead projectors, balloons and trained seals before the altars of the Lord. Nor are we greatly dismayed when exhorted to clap, dance, kiss, hug and pinch as expressions of fellowship.

But it seems clear to me that some of what is regarded as liturgical enrichment reflects the spirit that has almost killed preaching, the unwillingness to expect Christians to give more than one hour a week to their church. Of course we should have opportunities to see and participate in religious dance, drama, multi-media presentations and a heart-warming variety of fellowship programs. But when we insist upon trying to cram all of these things into the chancel between eleven and twelve o'clock on Sunday we threaten the integrity of worship and make a damning statement about the fullness of our religious commitments.

It would be far better, I am persuaded, to recognize that a satisfying Christian life needs to be nourished and instructed in many ways. There is much besides worship that we ought to be doing together in the churches to express both the depth of our need and the presence of God's grace. If we face this fact openly and act in response to it, we may prevent the Sunday morning service from becoming a circus rather than a sacrament.

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