

The Church and the Inner City

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REALITY – THE PROBLEM

Today's headlines certainly point to the metropolitan area of our nation as an area plagued with difficulty. Is it not paradoxical that in these days of modern technological knowledge, man has only made more difficult the matter of communicating between men? The riot-torn cities produce unavoidable evidence to emphasize this schism which has developed when one person is unable to communicate effectively to another person. In the confusion which reigns, where does the church stand? Where has it been during the crisis and what is the attitude of those who compose the church?

As we give consideration to the relationship between the church and the inner city it is necessary to come to an understanding of what is meant by the terms "church" and "the inner city." The church refers to the corporate body of the followers of Jesus Christ. The inner city is that area of any metropolitan complex often referred to as the ghetto or the slums. It is an area where large groups of people live in cramped quarters; the crime rate is high, poverty is everywhere. Often it is highly commercialized or industrial in nature, providing little opportunity for activity and recreation. It is a place to move out of, provided one is not trapped. Unemployment is high in the inner city, prostitution and vice are a way of life, and narcotics seem to be an ever present evil. The rate of illegitimate births runs high and mental illness shows itself all too often.

What is the inner city? It is people . . . people caught in the web of circumstances. They are either the wrong color, not skilled

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enough, too old, or unable to read or write. There is always some excuse, so on they plod only to meet impasse after impasse.

Where is the church? It can be said that it has often abrogated its responsibility, seemingly uninterested in becoming involved. Occasionally, some good-hearted man will start a "work" among the needy, but all too often these attempts are poorly administered and ineffective. Many seem to come and go with little lasting effect on the community. One sometimes is tempted to ask, without meaning to bring discredit to its ministry, has the rescue mission been used to salve the pangs of guilt? Moreover, is the church realistically meeting the problem as it exists? To put all effort and concern in providing soup and salvation to those who, enslaved by alcohol, have to a great extent already set their life's pattern seems a bit shortsighted. Many have come to Christ as they pass the sign "Mother's prayers follow you," but why stop at this? If this is all the church has to offer, it is time for an introspective evaluation resulting in answers.

What appears to be the pattern, as the complexion of a community begins to go through transition and change, is that the church moves away to the comfort of middle-class suburbia. Has evangelical Christianity become a middle-class religion caught in the materialistic and narcissistic atmosphere of the suburbs? It would seem so. Is it uncomfortable to see such need as can be found in the inner city? Evidently. Is a problem ever met by running away from it? Certainly not. Nor can the church run away from its responsibility, as hard as it may try. The headlines penetrate the most modern of architectural edifices and bring the need to each pew.

Christ looked upon the multitudes and had compassion upon them. His life bears witness to the concern He had for those in need as He lived His life on earth. Can we do any less than follow this example? He healed the lame, restored sight to the blind, and time after time He demonstrated His compassionate concern for others. The words He spoke give additional weight to His concern. The glaring error of the church is that it often seems to have failed to read and understand the teachings of the Master. Did He not sum up the commandments into two, the second being, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"? Did He not use the illustration of the Good Samaritan to demonstrate concern? What we see here is one man meeting another's need. We might further consider the words of Christ in Matthew 25, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." The issue is not how many souls have you saved, not how often have you attended religious meetings, not how faithfully have you served the local church. No—He does not say this; rather, He speaks of service to others in His name. We have fine buildings, curriculum, program

organization, but what about people? Other groups have attempted to fill the gap, but where is the church of Jesus Christ sending its representatives who attend the monthly mission meeting?

IS THERE AN ANSWER?

There is an urgent need for men called of God to serve the inner city. Foreign mission efforts are necessary, but Christ also spoke of Judea and Samaria. Areas at home—in our very midst—need to receive attention.

The educational needs of the young people are numerous. The traditional education systems are missing the majority of these adults of tomorrow. They become truant and eventually become dropouts even though they have ability. The church needs to give them attention by providing teachers in private schools designed to meet the young person on his level, working with him to bring him to the proper chronological level. Teachers are sent to foreign countries, why not to the inner city?

Emotional problems also present a great need. With Christian psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers, the church could certainly make a larger impact on the blighted metropolitan area.

Providing opportunities for young people and adults to communicate with believers in other social strata could also be advantageous. Seminaries of evangelical persuasion must become cognizant of the need for those trained in the area of theology and the Christian ministry to consider the inner city as their parish. The seminary curriculum should include this area even to the point of some increased emphasis.

The writer works with an agency in New York City called Youth Development, Inc., and serves as Director of its City Program. This agency was founded in 1958 by Jim Vaus, the wiretapper who came to know Jesus Christ through the ministry of Billy Graham. In this organization there are good facilities, program materials and fine support. The *big problem* is to find adequate staff members who are spiritually, physically, and educationally qualified for the task. There are some people willing to come, attracted by the glamor or excitement, but few willing to pour their lives into blighted areas such as the one at Hell Gate Station. Here there is no offer of the comforts of a suburban church, but certainly a ministry such as this can have a larger significance and impact. The voice of the evangelical community must be heard within the inner city.