

Can the Christian Churches Adjust Themselves to the Coming Age?

E. C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

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Forces operating today create the coming Age of tomorrow. The Machine Age, our age is rather aptly called. Railroads, automobiles, great automatic machines, huge cranes that lift a great locomotive, printing presses, telephones, radios, vacuum cleaners, all these marvelous devices that are so influencing our thought, conduct, and social institutions, are characteristic of our age and are making the coming age.

Back of the machine is the keen thinking mind that has discovered for us and described in new terms our universe in which we live. Science, and most important of all, the method of science, investigation, has changed, and is changing, our whole outlook in life. Two [powers] "the reign of law" and the "forces of evolution" are symbols at once of the achievements and attitude of mind of this age we live in and through which we move into a coming age.

When we come to raise the question, we are told by many competent men that the Christian Church, product of another age, has already demonstrated its inability to meet the requirements of the coming age. Not only, it is said, are we in the twilight of Christianity, but the curtain of history is already falling upon the great historic religion and its institutions. History will record the answer, but the answer which history will record is being made by you and me in our daily thought and attitude. The question presses home to each one. It cannot be evaded, for evasion itself is an answer. If we seek a dramatic event in history, as a starting point of evolution towards what we are today, we naturally think of that incident in January 1077, when Henry VI stood for three days in the snow at Canossa begging absolution from Pope Gregory VII.² The dramatic conflict of two

¹ This manuscript has no explicit date. However the paper on which the manuscript is written is identical to paper used for manuscripts that can be dated to this period.

² Henry IV (1050-1106), King of Germany from 1054 until 1105, and

great forces, the State and the Church, as to which is supreme, which rules by Divine Right, that is a mountain top of history. From that day to this there has been a movement politically away from the Divine Right of Kings to rule the people in the direction of a Republican or Democratic form of government based on the consent of the governed. From that day to this in the field of religion there has been a consistent movement away from religion as a supernatural revelation, to religion as a way of right thinking and living, which we must discover, and concerning which in conscience declare our honest conviction.

But while there has been this consistent tendency for 850 years, none of us have entirely left behind the middle ages; nor have any of us become complete and natural citizens of our "modern" age, or the age to come. In us, individually and institutionally, the tares grow with the wheat. Time will tell the story.

The record of this remarkable era in history exists right here in our own community in its religious institutions. The Catholic Church still holds, as the Great Hildebrand held in 1077 at Canossa, that Christianity is a supernatural revelation, entrusted by God to the Church, a fixed and final, unchanging thing. In our restless time, many looking into the age to come, shrink back and turn to the authoritative shelter of the Catholic Church as the shadow of a rock in a weary land. The Catholic moves slowly but it is a wise and living force. Perhaps it has a great contribution to make to the coming age.

Then historically and institutionally comes the Protestant Episcopal Church, friendly cousin of the Anglican Church, it is

the Holy Roman Emperor from 1084 until 1105. He was involved in the disputes with the Popes over the claim of European monarchs to control. Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) held the position of the overarching power of the Papacy. In 1080 Clement III (1029-1100; Pope or "Antipope" 1080-1100) was elected Pope—or Antipope—in opposition to Pope Gregory and in opposition to this position concerning the European monarchs. Pope Gregory excommunicated Henry, and Henry took a penitential walk to Canossa in 1076 to seek there the Pope's absolution, in which he was successful. However, he continued to appoint high-ranking clerics and was again ex-communicated in 1080. Ultimately Clement III crowned Henry Holy Roman Emperor in 1084.

a symbol of that historic development in Europe when the old Empire broke up into its nationalities and the old Catholic Church was broken into nation units. Such, from one point of view, was the significance of the Reformation. Here the Episcopal Church had its historic origin. It seems that elements of it today are returning to the Catholic Church of authority, following the path along which Cardinal Newman followed. Elements of it are following in the direction of greater individual freedom, and without changing its doctrinal symbols, tending to permit a loose and inclusive interpretation of its creeds, so that even the most modern may find satisfaction in its worship and fellowship.

The Methodist Episcopal Churches, offshoots of Episcopal orders, still retain the "Bishop" and the Episcopal Order, but it has followed the democratic tendency towards individual freedom in thought and interpretation until, within its folds, we now find a wide variety of belief and practice. It has moved far from its 18th century standards, and is still in process of change and adaptation.

Then we have the various churches of the Congregational Order. Congregational and Baptists, the Congregational closely tied to the Puritan tradition, the Baptist struggling with the problem of complete individual freedom, which Roger Williams espoused, and its interest in certain institutional inheritances.

In all our Protestant Churches are the various shades of belief ranging from very conservative, even fundamentalist ideas, to the most advanced modernism. It may truthfully be said, I think, that the formal flat forms or creeds of the Protestant Churches are not at all an indication of the actual belief and practice that exists. There is an undercurrent of change, almost revolutionary in character, going on. It is an attempt at adaptations.

There are two so-called "liberal churches," the Universalist and the Unitarian, the youngest in the church family of Concord, and, based upon the 18th and 19th century point of view, [of] the dignity, or even the essential divine character, of human nature. In the Unitarian Church is an attempt to leave behind completely the idea of religion as a supernatural revelation, to organize a Church without any creed, either stated or implied,

and to work our way through into the Coming Age, free to preserve whatever of the past appeals to our affections and our intellectual and moral requirements.

Two things at the present moment are clear. 1st. Every church realizes that Christianity, the institutions of the Christian Churches, are being questioned as to their qualifications to exist in the Coming Age. 2nd. Each believes that it has a contribution to make. That religion is an essential fact and factor in life. 3rd. In the process through which we are passing, respect, a soundly critical respect, each for the other, will help to leave the dead leaves to the winds, and carry the vital side into the Coming Age.