

## *The New Evangelism*

By ANTON T. BOISEN

**T**WENTY-FOUR years ago, at the time I began the task of studying the social and religious conditions in the rural districts in America, to which I devoted several years, there was a fairly uniform answer to the question, "What are you trying to do?" Throughout the Middle West from Missouri and Iowa and Kansas to Kentucky and Tennessee the answer was, "We are trying to save souls." It might be expressed in different words, but that was what it meant. This answer, moreover, was given not merely in words. It was expressed in the revival meetings which throughout this region represented the common practical activity of the Protestant evangelical churches and which in many country districts was the chief expression of their religious interest.

### *The Old Evangelism*

When I would inquire just what was meant by saving souls, I seldom got an intelligent answer. Nevertheless, a fairly definite philosophy underlay it. The old evangelism at its best represented a commanding summons to complete commitment to a supreme loyalty as represented in the phrase, "Get right with God." It involved the view that to be saved one must be "born again" in the sense of passing through a sudden awakening or conversion experience which was interpreted as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. In its extreme form, as seen in some of our Pentecostal groups, this view was represented by the doctrine that to be saved a man must "speak with tongues" at least once. Even large and influential bodies, like the Methodists, taught their people to expect a period of "conviction

of sin" followed by a more or less clear-cut "baptism of the Holy Spirit." So important was this that when in the nineties Professor Starbuck wrote his book on the *Psychology of Religion*, he built it upon an extended study of the religious conversion experience.

Today the conversion experience has pretty much dropped out of the picture, so far as the liberal Protestant churches are concerned. The evangelists who forty years ago were so very plentiful are no longer much in evidence, and an inquiry among a group of prominent liberal ministers revealed among those who had been received into their churches during the year not a single case of a sudden transformation of character of the type that Starbuck has described.

### *Treatment without Diagnosis*

This is not wholly to be regretted. The old evangelism was based upon certain doctrines which are today scarcely tenable, and it made use of techniques for inducing experiences of this type which were often distinctly meretricious. Without the widespread popular expectation of such experiences and without the techniques for inducing them, Professor Starbuck could hardly have found the large number of cases which constituted the basis of his study. True understanding forbids that we should ever again assume that everyone, in order to become a Christian, must pass through certain more or less abnormal experiences or that the church should resort to artificial techniques for inducing them.

Nevertheless, it remains true that the old evangelism, with all its errors, was performing an important task. It brought

a message to the soul that was sick. That message may have been something in the nature of a patent nostrum. Certainly it was treatment without diagnosis. But it was treatment. It was an earnest attempt to awaken men to their real problems and to bring them into harmony with that which was supreme in their hierarchy of loyalties. To many troubled hearts it brought peace in a life of consecration to a new and enduring purpose. It is to be feared that the liberal church of today is all too often permitting that task to go by default. It seems to be laying the stress upon programs of social service and religious education, while the soul that is sick is being turned over to the psychiatrist and the psychoanalyst.

Now such a development may be desirable. It may represent a new step in that division of labor which has made possible the great advances in the understanding and control of the forces of nature and of human nature. I wish, however, as a specialist in the disorders of the personality, to bring before you certain considerations which lead me to believe that the minister of religion has his own distinctive task to perform, a task which no other professional group can perform so well.

*The Significance of the  
Inner Conflict*

Among Professor Starbuck's cases of sudden transformation of character he found some which seemed to him to represent merely a spontaneous awakening or blossoming out following upon a sense of incompleteness. Another large group seemed to represent "the eruptive breaking up of evil habits and the turning of the vital energies into new channels" consequent upon a sense of inner disharmony and conviction of sin. In such cases, he suggests, it seems to be nature's way to effect a cure not by lessening the conflict but by heightening it. These findings pub-

lished a year or two before the book came out, attracted considerable attention. Among others, a writer in the *Philadelphia Medical Journal* made this comment, "Professor Starbuck does not realize the full significance of his findings in the domain of psychiatry. Every psychiatrist knows that this psychalgia (the sense of sin) from whatever cause is one of the chief lesions in the largest group of cases of mental alienation." Starbuck in his book quotes this comment, but his reaction to it shows convincingly that the comment was right. He did not appreciate the significance of his findings in the domain of psychiatry. What is more, it did not occur to him that here was a lead worth following up. Like other students of religion, even those who have approached it from the angle of psychology, he was rather concerned about drawing the line between what is normal and what is pathological in religious experience, looking upon the latter as definitely outside of his province. In the same manner, also, the psychiatrist, dealing with the disorders of the mind, has come more and more to recognize the significance of the inner conflict and sense of guilt as perhaps the most potent factor in their causation, but he has not gone on to take account of those spontaneous constructive solutions which ever since the time of Paul of Tarsus have figured so prominently in the Christian religion. Both the psychiatrist and the student of religion have thus learned to recognize the significance of the inner conflict, but strangely enough it has not occurred to the student of religion that the inner conflicts might have unhappy solutions which he might with profit explore. Neither has it occurred to the specialist in psychiatry that he is dealing with a problem which must forever remain unsolved except as it is approached with the insight which comes through the understanding of religion.

*An Attempt at Solution*

This common concern of the psychiatrist and of the religious worker is to be found particularly in the acute, emotional disturbances of the functional type in which the issues of life and death are still in the balance and the outcome undetermined. Here, for example, is a young man who became seriously disturbed following his attendance upon a religious meeting. He had become excessively concerned about religion and expressed some most peculiar ideas. He saw himself climbing a high range of mountains. He had a great mission in life. He was to free Luther and Socrates and Jesus, all of whom were chained and were looking to him for help. At times he thought he was dead. He had sudden and violent changes in mood. Sometimes he was stuporous. Sometimes, without warning, he would break out into destructive activity. What is the matter in such a case as this? The physical examination gave no explanation. He had a strong and handsome body, free enough from organic disease. He had also a good mind. He rated high as a student and was well liked by his fellow-students. The difficulty seemed to lie in certain unsolved personal problems which he had allowed to accumulate until through the religious meetings he had become aroused to try to do something about them.

This disturbance was, of course, very severe. It called for medical care which no clergyman is equipped to give. But such a disturbance is nonetheless a manifestation of what Dr. Cabot calls "the Power not ourselves that makes for health." It is merely an exaggerated form of the "eruptive breaking up of evil habits" which Starbuck has described under the name of the "religious conversion experience." It is not in itself an evil but an attempt at cure analogous to fever or to inflammation in the body. It tends either

to make or break, and is to be sharply contrasted with those disorders which represent the end-results of malignant character tendencies. Where those who make little or no resistance against their unacceptable tendencies tend to drift down to destruction and hopeless disintegration, where those who meet their difficulties by trying to save their face tend to stop growing and to become stabilized upon an unsatisfactory basis, the acutely disturbed patient may either go to the back wards as a hopeless wreck or else he may come forth with his problem solved and in better shape than he had ever been before. Not a few men of outstanding religious genius have passed through periods of profound mental disorder in the process of finding themselves. Among these George Fox and John Bunyan are striking examples.

*The Widespread Need of Salvation*

Now in every parish there will be those who have allowed their difficulties to accumulate and are liable to more or less serious "mental breakdowns." It has been estimated that of all who reach the age of fifteen one person in ten will at some time in his life become sufficiently disturbed to warrant commitment to a mental hospital. I am thinking particularly of those who have accepted the ideals and loyalties represented by their parents and the church, but who have not paid the price necessary to the attainment of the higher loyalty and the more comprehensive understanding which their full development requires. They are trying to serve two masters. They may seem fairly well adjusted as regards contemporary society. They may be fairly successful in business, fairly popular with their associates, they may even be married and have a family, but they have not come to terms with their best selves. There are inconsisten-

cies in their lives which they would be unwilling for those whom they love to know.

*The New Evangelism*

I submit, therefore, the proposition that it is the business of the church to awaken such persons, to arouse their consciences before catastrophe comes crashing around their heads in order that they may turn and be made whole. I submit, furthermore, the proposition that the message which the church has in its keeping goes right to the heart of the problem with which such persons are faced. I refer to the insight of Jesus and of Paul that God is love and that love is the fulfilling of the law. This means, as I see it, that the deepest need of every human heart is that for love. To be cut off from those who for us are most worthy of love, those whose composite impress is for most men represented by their idea of God, means death just as truly as for a cell to be cut off from the organism to which it belongs. Such estrangement is the root evil in most cases of mental illness, and salvation is to be found through the re-establishment of right relationship with the undying love manifested in Jesus. This takes place whenever we are able with Paul to make the discovery that in the eyes of the love that rules the universe any man is good and worthy of honor in so far as he is moving to become better. This is the good

news set forth in the New Testament, that for all who are willing to come to the light there is forgiveness and life. Such a discovery sets men free from the tyranny of the standardized and makes them one with the fellowship which is striving for the attainment of that which is not yet, but ought to be, both in personal character and social order.

But the new evangelism cannot be content merely to arouse men's consciences and to give them a vision of that which ought to be. It must provide wise care for those who need it, in many cases intensive treatment for persons in serious difficulties.

As yet we have not the men who are competent to give it. The inner world is still compartmentalized. Few psychiatrists have the necessary understanding of religion, and few ministers of religion know anything about mental illness. But as we accept the challenge which mental illness brings to the minister of religion, as we study the inner world throughout its entire range from the bottommost depths of the infernal regions to religious experience at its best, then we may arrive at a new understanding of the laws of the spiritual life. Such an understanding will, I think, provide a solid foundation for a living and imperative summons symbolized by the cross of Christ, a summons to complete commitment to the sacrificial task to which he gave his life.