

The Individual In the World Crisis

By Olin L. Browder

In the Gospel of John, the 14th chapter, Jesus said these well-known words to his disciples:

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

Again in the 16th chapter of the same gospel, perceiving that much of what he was and what he taught had escaped their understanding, even as the hour of his death approached, Jesus told his disciples that he had spoken much to them in proverbs, but that the time was coming when he would no longer speak in proverbs, but would show them plainly the Father. He then added a few words about his relation to the Father. To this the disciples remarked:

Lo, now speakest thou plainly, and speakest no proverb. Now are we sure that thou knowest all things, and needest not that any man should ask thee: by this we believe that thou camest forth from God. Jesus answered them, Do ye now believe? Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me. These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

We have heard it said so much of late as to be a commonplace that the times are out of joint, that our pleasant, easy world is about to come down on our heads, that our country, indeed all civilization, confronts one of the great crises of history. It is evident that this crisis of peoples quickly becomes a crisis for individuals. The reaction of human beings to the shocks of our times is not altogether unnatural or unprecedented in history. The immediate response in the human breast to this, as it has been in other times, is one of profound anxiety and fear.

Fear is one of the most insidious and treacherous of emotions. Because of man's very gregariousness, it possesses a terrifying contagion, so that two frightened men together have more fear than either of them would have alone. When this is stimulated by our rapid-fire, off-the-cuff media of mass communication, we have the makings of the human counterpart to a stam-

pede. But because of our human complexities, we cannot, like the animals, quickly exhaust our fears by an over-exertion of mere physical activity. And since society, like individuals, has become very complex, we are not able so easily to recognize or confront the sources of our fear. This is how our fears play us false. For although we recognize our present position of danger, none of us alone, and probably not all of us together, can hope to surmount this danger at any time in the foreseeable future. In fact we do not even know or agree upon what should be done to lessen the danger. Consequently, this fear, a useful emotion, designed, as in the lower animals, to rouse us to immediate and clearcut action, is on the contrary frustrated in us.

So what do we do? We do many strange things, but one thing we do forms almost a pattern and has been repeated over and over again in the past. Our fear turns in upon us, and instead of rising to meet an objective danger, we turn and rend one another. We seek a scapegoat. When Rome burned, the Romans turned on the Jews and Christians. When London burned in the 17th Century, it was attributed by many to the Catholics. When Tokyo was razed by an earthquake, mobs took to murdering Koreans. And the Nazis of course blamed all their ills of post-World War I on the Jews. So far we Americans have not been carried to these extremes; and so far, we can be thankful, our own racial and religious minorities have not been assailed. But we find much the same thing directed against less well-defined and less well-recognized classes, against mysterious conspiracies, some of which do exist, many of which do not. Then we have access to those most vulnerable and our favorite targets, our public officers, who are unceasingly belabored, sometimes with a partisan slant, sometimes indiscriminately. We hear a chorus which ranges from valid criticism to unfair criticism, to epithets, slander, and actual falsehood.

There is some hope, which is already partially justified, that when we become inured to these trials and thinking has tended to crystallize along more or less generally accepted paths, the fires may die

down a bit, in the very natural course of events. But our fears lie dangerously close to the surface, and who knows when some new jolt may send our fancies off on some new tack. The best it seems we can hope for is that our more desperate fears may give way to a steady tension. Tensions in men's hearts and the objectively created tensions already in society will combine to keep us on a kind of home-fires powder keg, which always has in it the seeds of our own destruction.

What is the special role of the Christian person or of the Christian church in such times?

There has been much searching into and re-examination of our doctrine in recent years, to cut away the dross and lay bare the nub and essence of our faith. We have been reminded of the exacting ethical requirements that are to be found in the teachings of Jesus. Above all else we are enjoined to love God and our neighbor; and if any of us forgets who his neighbor is, we find the mighty parable of the Good Samaritan echoing to us down through the centuries. That great story seems new to me every time I hear it, so central and urgent is its message. Surely this is one of the greatest ethical conceptions ever revealed to the mind of man. But we are brought up short with the charge that these things we have not done as we should have. The concept of the brotherhood of man cries out today for expression, and we are perhaps made more conscious here of our failings than in any other respect. If we are not quite sure what man's love for God requires, we are reminded that love of God and love of man are part of the same thing, and that perhaps the one may be found in the expression of the other. We are further reminded that to make a Christian society it is not enough for man individually to love his brother, but that society itself must be purged of man's inhumanity to man. In a time of crisis this challenge is, if anything, increased, not diminished.

But I am not sure that this is the whole of our faith, or of our need as Christians. It is true that unless a man acts like a Christian, more and better than most of us have acted, he is no Christian. But it is

also a fact that some non-Christians behave as well toward their brothers as Christians do. What troubles me more, however, is this: what is in store for our small efforts toward more brotherly behavior when evil forces are unleashed in the world and threaten to engulf us? When adversity comes and fear grips us, will the law of self-preservation predominate and our concern for our fellow men melt away like some fair weather project? Are there secure roots to our good enterprises? Or do we need some firmer undergirding to sustain our professions of regard for our brothers? In other words, is an ethical principle, or a system of ethics, even when put diligently to practice, enough by itself?

There is still another reason why I am in some doubt about an exclusive concern for the ethical, even in its broadest and best sense. We are likely to find ourselves putting the cart before the horse. We are inclined to think that the purpose of religious faith is to save civilization or to improve it, which is perfectly proper provided that we make the proper emphasis. It may mean that we try to make God serve human ends, instead of the other way around. It is not uncommon in recent times to find persons, often with a claim to intellectual superiority, joining hands with the Church because they believe that the Church is a handy and effective instrument for achieving the aims which they have previously assumed to be desirable. They would use the Church so long as the Church is useful, but reject it as soon as it seeks to go a different way. They would even condescend to look to the Scriptures for whatever they might find there to support them, and reject as invalid that which does not suit their preconceived ideas. A few among us would do this cynically and knowingly. Others, however, are innocent idealists, often well educated, but dogmatic in their ignorance at this point. Generally the Church has accepted all those who have offered their hand, and perhaps wisely, for whoever is for us is not against us—if only for a time. But to build upon such elements is to build upon the sand.

What then is the way for the professed Christian in time of crisis? Some will say that the answer to that question is obvious, that what I am trying to say has been said from the beginning. Maybe the words of a poet, whose name I do not know, are appropriate here:

*The way is all so very plain
That we may lose the way . . .
So very simple is the road
That we may stray from it.*

What is the way, and why do we so often lose it?

Before looking further in this regard, consider this one somber alternative. A few

years ago a professor at Princeton wrote an article in a distinguished national magazine¹, in which he described modern man's loss of faith, which resulted from man's gradual realization that there is no purpose in the universe, by which of course he meant that there is no God. Scientific discoveries and analyses show us, he believed, that nature is "merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly." Man should learn to face up to this fact, he said, put aside his childish dreams, and be thankful for small mercies. Here is his final paragraph:

Man has not yet grown up. He is not an adult. Like a child he cries for the moon and lives in a world of fantasies. And the race as a whole has perhaps reached the great crisis of its life. Can it grow up as a race in the same sense as individual men grow up? Can a man put away childish things and adolescent dreams? Can he grasp the real world as it actually is, stark and bleak, without its romantic halo, and still retain his ideals, striving for great ends and noble achievements? If he can, all may yet be well. If he cannot, he will probably sink back into the savagery and brutality from which he came, taking a humble place once more among the lower animals.

The writer did not find any need to explain what basis there would be under his theory for assuming the existence of the "great ends" for which he said men should strive, or what standards there would be for describing any achievement as "noble," or how any such strivings or achievements like any other aspect of nature can be anything but meaningless and chaotic. And one may be surprised to hear such a voice in our day, for one might have supposed that the old problem of the effect of science on religion had been put to rest long ago.

It was inevitable that this thesis would arouse a critical response. I think that the reply of deepest insight came from another professor—if you please—this time from

¹W. T. Stace, "Man Against Darkness," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 182 (September, 1948), 53-58.

Yale.² He said that the scientific evidence on which the first writer relied is by its very nature incapable of explaining the whole of reality; indeed, it is beyond its purpose to do so. The data of science are essentially based on sensory experiences, and the theories of science are the logical interpretations of sensory evidence. If no other experience is possible, then the conclusions of the Princeton professor may follow, although this may be disputed. Our second writer asserts that man's experience of reality has never been limited to what his five senses reveal to him. There is a point of contact with reality beyond the senses, and this is the basis for reflective religious faith. Such faith is not blind and uncritical. It rests on evidence as much as do the hypotheses of science, although of a different kind. We can begin if we wish with the related experiences of Jesus himself. He lived and worked in an experience of reality beyond the mere senses, with a sense beyond the senses, a sensitivity, an understanding of a presence that is ultimate and infinite, which he described as being in the Father and the Father in him. There is evidence of experiences of the same sort in the lives of saintly men and women since Jesus. The unalterable conviction of all of these persons that they had touched the ultimate of reality, their serenity and uncommon resources of strength in the face of suffering and tribulation, the mysterious transmission of this poise and power to those around them, and their almost instinctive devotion of themselves to the good of others, is altogether impelling proof that their experience was with something other than madness or childish dreams.

It is, I think, on some such a basis as this that religion of late has acquired an intellectual respectability which it had lacked for some decades, probably through the fault both of the intellectuals and of organized religion. And this recent development is altogether to the advantage of the intellectuals, and I hope that it will also

²Theodore M. Green, "Man Out of Darkness," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 183 (April, 1948), 45-49.

About the Author

Olin L. Browder, Jr. graduated from the University of Illinois in 1935, received his LL. B. in 1937, and his doctorate in law from Michigan in 1941. After practicing law in Chicago, he taught at Alabama and Tennessee, served as an attorney for TVA (1942-43) and as Special Agent for the FBI (1943-46). He joined the faculty of the College of Law at the beginning of the second semester, 1945-46. He has contributed a number of articles to several law reviews. The address here published was delivered at a Union Church Service in Norman during Holy Week, 1951.



prove of some advantage to the Church and everyone concerned with the Christian way.

No, faith is not blind. But it is something more than the intellectual acceptance of an idea. It is justified by experience; if not from one's own experience, then the experience of mankind.

I hope that the sense in which I say this is understood, for I could be misconstrued. A Frenchman of letters wrote this in his journal:

In order to see Christianity, one must forget almost all the Christians. To discover a little faith, one must restore the nimbus which experience dissolves and disperses, one must re-create the illusion in one's self.

This cynical statement must have come from a man whose insights were quite wide of the mark. But perhaps I in turn merely misconstrue him. In order to see Christianity it may be necessary to forget almost all the Christians, but I suspect he means those who merely profess to be Christians, and I suppose they usually have been a majority. And the experience which dissolves faith can only be the benumbing experience of the petty ways of the world, the experience of the senses. This, of course, is not the sort of experience to which I was referring.

The consciousness of an infinite presence in the world to which I have referred and which, I have been trying to say, is promised to man in the Scriptures and proven to have existed by the experience of mankind, has been explained from the beginning of our era much better than I can explain it, and by those much better qualified than I to do so. Indeed, I assume that it is the final goal of all Christian preaching and teaching. But like all great and ultimate truth, it can never be put into any words of man so as to reach the understanding of all men or for all ages. So the effort to suggest or intimate this truth finds expression in as many different ways as there are persons to make the effort. Certain expressions, common in our use, were intended to perform this office. Assertions about faith, salvation, knowing the Father, being in Christ, must all have been originally used with this same intent. But they have been repeated so often, and without understanding, that they have, for many, been emptied of their meaning, and now all too often remain but empty symbols. So it is the task of every generation, in every place, by every proper means of reaching the understanding of men, to refill and maintain them as quickening symbols of the age-old truth which when seen seems to be forever new.

At still another point I want to avoid being misunderstood. This assurance of things unseen which we most commonly

call faith, may be simple, and the way to it may be plain, but this does not mean that it is easy to acquire. Like all great truth, its essential simplicity may be the very reason why we stray from it and stumble over it and avoid it. It is not to be had merely for the asking. Even the apostle Paul spoke of the mystery of Christ. Simple, yet mysterious, such is the paradox of our faith. It is conviction "illuminated by a sense of wonder," a sense in early times called the "fear of God," perhaps more properly called "awe." But "wonder" is the better word for it, for it has no element of terror, but is a purging thrust of light through dark clouds, which at the same time both stirs and quiets the soul. It may be revealed to the child-like, and denied to the sophisticated. It may slip in like a thief in the night, and resist fretful efforts in search of it. It is reserved for the pure in heart, but not necessarily for the simple-minded. A man's eyes may be opened on a road to Damascus, but remain closed through a lifetime in the Church.

Sudden revelations may seem dramatic and fortuitous, but I suspect that in such cases we are not told the whole of the matter, and that these events are the culmination of long and earnest quests or searchings of the soul. Jesus often said, "Those who have ears to hear, let them hear," realizing that great numbers of his listeners did not hear his message. A man must prepare his ears to hear before he can understand. And we have Jesus' own testimony in the passage which I quoted at the beginning that even his own disciples, after much careful instruction by his own teaching and in his very presence, did not fully understand him as late as the day of his crucifixion. But standing out over this was his promise to them that he would show them the Father. That this promise was fulfilled I believe is shown by the testimony and acts of the disciples after the resurrection.

I cannot presume to say, I do not pretend to know, how that promise can be fulfilled for any man today. It is my belief, however, that he must seek the way himself and stand alone before his Maker. But that does not mean that he must go unaided. He may find help in the accumulated experience of the race, if he will seek it out. He needs also the voices and labors of those especially charged with that responsibility, voices that can stir the mind and heart. And I believe further that he can gain as much, if not more, from the vision of the poet as from the analysis of the philosopher.

When that promise is fulfilled, today as in the beginning, experience seems to show that man is proof against the whips and

scorns of time. Returning again to the quoted passage from John's Gospel, Jesus said that he revealed himself to his disciples that in him they might have peace. The peace he spoke of here was not the peace of the world, the attainment of that state on earth when men behave like brothers, for which we always strive. He did not promise that, not at least in this passage, but rather quite the opposite. And so it seems to be with us in this time of tribulation. But Jesus made his promise of peace to those who lived in just such a world, if only they could grasp it. It is a promise of peace of mind or peace of soul, of confidence, serenity, strength, and compassion, which can stand against adversity and does not yield to fear. Again the proof of experience sustains that promise. The favored ones, the devoted ones, the saints of history, all lived in adversity and yet triumphed over it. In that promise and in that proof is our own hope.

These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

When this is accomplished; when a man first establishes himself in the compass of the infinite and thereby secures himself against adversity, he also is then adequately fitted to perform with lasting value good works for his fellow men. His ethics then find a firm foundation, for he then has compassion in his heart. He is able to avoid the frustrations usually in store for those we might call the busy Christians, who in a kind of bitter and cynical zeal for neat schemes to introduce overnight the brotherhood of man, or a reasonable facsimile of the same, are willing to short-circuit the source of all light on this subject. It is little wonder that such well-intended efforts sometimes result merely in the blowing of fuses, since usually more heat than light is created. Rather it is only to the extent a man's eyes are opened to the infinite that he can look with compassion on his brother, for it is then when he realizes that men are all brothers only because they are all children of the same Father, who "maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." Here is an ethic that is beyond the good and evil of the world. It stems from the same source, it is part of the same idea, the full possession of which enables a man to overcome the world.

The Good Wife

She's a born wife and mother, maam," sighs Collins, the green-grocer in *Getting Married*. "She's a born wife and mother . . . That's why my children all ran away from home."

—Bernard Shaw.