

## Hands Dirtied In Anguish

How do we live as Christians in this world? Should we withdraw and let the world run its course; or should we get our hands dirty with the problems, anguish and needs of our times? These questions are very much in debate today.

Just recently I read two soul-searching and challenging articles on these issues. The first was written by Evgeny Barabanov, a Russian art historian, deprived of work since being investigated by the secret police for sending unpublished literary work on Russian religious and cultural life to the West. In 1974 he was refused permission to leave his country.

In his essay, *The Schism Between the Church and The World*, Barabanov says that the church in Russia is a "place for the performance of the rite of a religious community." This community is registered with and supervised by the State. The purpose of supervision is to make the church as "spiritually isolated as possible, harmless, and even comic, from the point of view of the ideology of the state." The church is forced into involuntary isolation. She has no right to speak about her convictions. She has no opportunity to be the salt and the light of the nation.

The state tries to make the church harmless and silence her voice. And, as Barabanov says, "there is nothing surprising in the fact that an atheistic state tries to reduce the life of the Church to the rite alone, or, in the words of believers, to turn it into a 'fulfiller of needs.'" The intention is of course that through atheistic propaganda and the muzzling of the church, religion will eventually vanish. As a result of the state's prohibitions, a strange view of Christianity has developed. The church is seen as a worshipping community that meets together for prayer and praise, but has nothing to do with the "outside" world. "The church is for prayer, and not for worldly cares."

In Russia there is forced withdrawal from world involvement and many Christians have come to agree with this narrow and isolationist position. But isn't it true that many Christians in the Western world have voluntarily withdrawn from the world? Hasn't religion become just a private matter? I agree with Barabanov when he declares that "the Russian Church is displaying with particular vividness just a few of the symptoms of that universal malady which has today affected Christianity, with varying degrees of severity all over the world." He believes that many Christians have abandoned their responsibilities and left problem solving to the world.

The second article was a speech entitled, *Evangelization and Man's Search for Freedom, Justice and Fulfillment*, delivered by Samuel Escobar at the international Congress on World Evangelization held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in July, 1974. Mr. Escobar was the general director of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship in Canada, but is now back in South America.

Mr. Escobar says that the organizers of the Lausanne Congress were not mistaken when they chose as a motto, the words of Jesus Christ in the synagogue of Nazareth,

defining his mission and ours: "To preach the Gospel to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised."

These words cannot be spiritualized in a world like ours, where there are millions of poor, brokenhearted, captives, blind and bruised. Jesus takes very seriously the problems of poverty, political power, relationships as these are basically the problems that cause social unrest and injustice. The early church through its teaching and practice brought about many changes for the good.

In later history, when the slave issue raised its head, evangelical Christians did counter this gross injustice. In 1774, in the wake of spiritual revival, John Wesley published his short treatise *Thoughts Upon Slavery*.

How do we live as Christians in this world? Mr. Escobar maintains that we have to be involved, in the name of the Lord, everywhere in life, also in the places where we have to get our hands dirty and where it can really hurt. He says, "please remember that precisely the freedom that Christians have in the Western nations, and the possibility of intelligent participation at decision-making levels, is a talent that has to be used, unless the day comes when it will be taken from us."

Let us, who still have the freedom, not only proclaim that "the end is at hand," but also, as Mr. Escobar says, "encourage one another in the search to make this world a bit less unjust and cruel, as an evidence of our expectation of a new creation."

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