

# The Crisis -- It Is Inevitable

by C. William Fisher

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*C. William Fisher discusses the inevitable crisis in evangelism driven by economic and social changes, emphasizing the need for revival and focus on souls over status.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 11:28, Matthew 16:26, Galatians 6:7, 2 Timothy 3:1, James 4:4

**Topics:** "Church Revival", "Effective Evangelism"

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## Description

C. William Fisher delves into the profound and inevitable crisis facing evangelism, discussing the economic, social, and spiritual changes as a movement transitions into an institution. He highlights the dangers of losing spiritual intensity amidst increased affluence and social acceptance, leading to a decrease in concern for souls and a focus on image and denominational profile. Fisher emphasizes the impact of economic and social pressures on the church's transition, warning against the secular sag that hinders effective evangelism and the importance of revival and renewal for Spirit-filled outreach.

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## Transcript

I said in my introduction that we were approaching a profound and inevitable crisis in our evangelism. I have mentioned a few of the reasons why the crisis is profound and have suggested a few dimensions of the crisis.

Now to the reasons why the crisis is inevitable.

Most of those reasons would be included in the economic, social, and spiritual changes inherent in a people completing the cycle from sect to church, from movement to institution.

"In all religious movements," says a religious historian, "there is a period of danger. It comes when the first passionate enthusiasm begins to die down, and the statesmen are called in to regulate and organize."

It is Lord Acton who lists the three stages in the development of institutions: first, there is the cause; then there is there is the institution which arises to promote the cause: then there is the subtle shift of allegiance from cause to institution. Where we are in that progression is not within the scope of this discussion except as it applies to our evangelism. But one of the most attested facts of church history is the prevalence of the economic and social pressures exerted at each stage in that transition.

Wesley saw that a revival movement carried within it the seeds of its own declension unless there were adequate correctives to these economic and social pressures. "I do not see," Wesley said, "how it is

possible in the nature of things for any revival of religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase so will pride, anger and the love of the world in all its branches."

Richard Niebuhr, the sociologist, has said that a sect-type organization, by its very nature, is valid for one generation only, as the forces that brought it into existence would be largely dissipated by the second and third generation. The wife of General William Booth saw in her own lifetime the Salvation Army become a respected institution with positions and places of preferment, and on her deathbed she said to her daughter: "Katie, why is it that God can't keep a thing pure for more than one generation?" That is, admittedly, pessimistic; for there have been churches which remained true to their doctrines and evangelistic commitments for several generations.

But we are living in accelerated times. And these economic and social pressures are more quickly and more devastatingly felt today. With our increased affluence and social acceptance there is too often a corresponding lessening of the spiritual intensity, with a decreasing concern for souls -- and an increasing concern about our image and our denominational profile.

William Warren Sweet, writing in 1944, placed the Nazarenes among the churches of "the disinherited," or "the churches of the underprivileged." I wonder what he would say if he were writing today. We certainly are no longer "disinherited" and most certainly are no longer "underprivileged." An evangelistic singer told me that the song "Zion's Hill" no longer brought shouts, and the words, "A tent or a cottage, why should I care?" brought mostly boredom. But we do care -- terribly! All of us do. And the implications of that more substantial investment in the status quo, economic and social and religious, give substantiation to the inevitability of the crisis in our evangelism.

Dr. Eric E. Jorden, writing in the Preacher's Magazine of May-June, 1952, in an article under the title "Problems in the Growth of a Sect into a Church," wrote these words: "The spiritual need and economic forces which in one generation drew the sect out of the church turn about to

transform the sect into a church. The last century witnessed the completion of the process in the case of Methodism. The Church of the Nazarene is now in the period of transformation.

"A sect may be further distinguished from the church in that the sect is a conflict group, whereas the church is an accommodated group. A sect is a religious organization that is at war with the existing mores. It seeks to cultivate a state of mind and establish a code of morals different from that of the world about it, and for this it claims divine authority. A sect in its final form may be described as a movement of social reform and regeneration that has become institutionalized. Eventually, when it has succeeded in accommodating itself to other rival organizations, when it has become tolerant and is tolerated, it tends to assume the form of a denomination.

"We may as well face fact;" Dr. Jorden concludes, "the Church of the Nazarene has reached such a place."

It is Elmer Clark who states that all denominations began as sects, and the sect is born out of a combination of spiritual need and economic forces.

"The sects themselves," Clark affirms in his *Small Sects in America*, "do not recognize the economic factor in their history, though it stands out plainly in their protest against the elements which only wealth can

secure -- fine churches, organs, costly raiment, indulgence in worldly amusement, etc. It is the growth in wealth and culture that brings about departures from what the sects feel as primitive Christianity. Increase in wealth eliminates the frontier simplicity and creates an atmosphere of affluence uncongenial to simple souls. Fine edifices appear in which well-dressed and bejeweled congregations worship to the accompaniment of instrumental music and salaried choirs. Class distinctions emerge, and social life within the church partakes of the spirit of 'the world.' The favorite taboos of the poor against the theater going and similar exercises weaken; the difference between the 'saved' and the 'unsaved' becomes less apparent. In the minds of the conservative element the church has become apostate and worldly. Revolt ensues, and a sect is born."

Clark sounds like he is writing a sequel to "the formative years" of any church. "Then as a church increases in wealth," he continues, "there accompanies it an advance in education. A sect starts out with a ministry by and large untrained except in the leadership of the Holy Ghost. Bible colleges develop into colleges of liberal arts. And the advance in education has an inevitable effect upon doctrinal emphases, modes of religious expression, and methods of propaganda within the church. Among the students of theology there comes a divergence of opinion concerning traditional theology. This modification in belief is accompanied by the gradual elimination of emotional expression, less emphasis on radical conversion experiences, the lessening of the revival method of adding members to the church. Advance in the educational life of the church inevitably is followed by a growing emphasis on religious education; thus the frontier religion dear to thousands of souls is gradually eliminated."

Liston Pope, in his book, *Millhands and Preachers*, gives essentially the same analysis of the economic and social pressures exerted on a people in transition from movement to institution. He lists these stages in that development:

- from economic poverty to economic wealth, as disclosed especially in the value of church property and the salary paid to ministers.
- from a psychology of persecution to a psychology of success and dominance.
- from emphasis on evangelism and conversion to emphasis on religious education.
- from a high degree of congregational participation in the services and administration of the religious group to delegation of responsibility to a comparatively small percentage of membership.
- from fervor in worship service to restraint; from positive action to passive listening.
- from reliance on spontaneous "leadings of the Spirit" in religious services to administration procedure.

Who is there to say definitely just exactly where we are in that transition -- but who is there so blind that he cannot see the possibilities of that pattern emerging?

And how does all this relate to revivals and evangelism? Most directly and inescapably! For whatever affects the spirituality of a church affects vitally its evangelism and, as we have seen again and again in this study, effective evangelism is the result of revived and renewed and Spirit-filled people. When there is a secular sag in the hearts of the people, there will be a spiritual sag in the life of the church; and unless that spiritual sag is corrected by revival and renewal, there can be no effective evangelism.

A secular-minded, materialistically oriented church may talk much about evangelism, and even engage in it; but it will be a sterile evangelism, powerless to produce spiritual results and a mockery of its former glory. As Samuel Chadwick said of that kind of evangelism: "There may be noise; there may be crowds; there may be high emotion; but there is no Shekinah."

It is inevitable that any church will have problems with its evangelism when it becomes more concerned about status than about souls.

It is inevitable that every phase of a church's life and outreach will be affected when its people are moving from underprivileged to affluent, from Fords to Cadillacs, from three-thousand-dollar homes to thirty-thousand-dollar ones, from "glory barns" to million-dollar edifices, from grade-school diplomas to university degrees, from unskilled laborers to professional men, from the wrong side of the tracks to suburbia.

It is inevitable that any church, Nazarene or otherwise, undergoing such changes, will find its evangelism affected and will need to guard against the cooling of revival fervor and the erosion of its mood for evangelism.

Although it is inevitable that these economic and social pressures that have come to every church should come to the Church of the Nazarene -- and they are upon us -- it is not inevitable that we should be swamped by them, or swerved from our original mission because of them.

The crisis is inevitable, yes; that we come to a crossroads in our evangelism is inevitable, yes -- but that we take the wrong road in this time of crisis is not inevitable! Therein are the hope and the challenge.

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