The subject of my address and as printed in the program looks overly ambitious. To began, I want to make it clear that I am not going to try to be a Mr. Pearson and give amazing predictions of the week of things to come. I haven’t any crystal ball - and the present scene is too complex to evaluate adequately in the few minutes.

What I should like to do is to think over with you a subject of interest to all of you - the position of liberal religion in the present world scene in an attempt to evaluate its true nature and function today.

There is no need to tell you what is meant by liberal religion. As members of this church you share in a glorious tradition of free, progressive liberal thought, a tradition which I am sure you are aware of, which you remember with pride. But perhaps you are not so well aware of the general attitude toward liberal religion coming from the outside. I am referring not to the irresponsible criticisms of misinformed people, but to the serious criticisms made by those who have honestly evaluated liberal religion from a philosophical point of view and found it wanting.

We must realize that today not only liberal religion but liberalism in general is facing a hostile world. Conservatism and its extreme reaction always have their innings in times of crisis. The decline of interest in liberal religion can be seen from a study of enrollments in theological schools. The liberal schools of the nonconformist churches are not filling their classes while the conservative schools are full. The growing popularity of revival programs on the air attests to the nostalgic longing for the good old religion and a weariness with problems of modern society.

This is happening, the critics of liberal religion tell us, because it can no longer meet the needs of our day.

Let us face this criticism honestly and see how we can meet it. Only in this way can we see the future of liberal religion. The most serious criticism from the point of view of the philosophy of religion is this: the teachings of liberal religion concerning the nature of man are false. They are naive, overly optimistic, unrealistic. Liberal religion teaches that man is essentially good. He is a little rosebud that needs only to unfold and scent the air with his sweetness. Two world wars have shown us, the critics go on to say, that man is essentially evil - when the little rosebud opens we find the heart of the rose blackened by an evil blight. The sadism of Buchenwald, the cruelties and atrocities of men, show beyond any doubt that man is essentially evil, full of sin and guilt. He is motivated by a blind pride and ruthless egotism that make it impossible for him to be moral by himself. Man is a monster who can be saved from his monstrous actions only through the divine intervention of the God-man, who intercedes to carry our guilt and save us from sin.

This is the criticism - and I think it is well made. Liberal religion has tended to be overly optimistic with regard to human nature - not only liberal religion, but liberalism in general. The
economic and political developments of the last century show the same error. Laissez-faire in economics and the development of the sovereign, national state show the same mistaken assumption that man is all good.

In defense of liberalism, we can say the error is due to overemphasis. This emphasis was needed to free men from the negative dogmas of a conservatism which hampered progress. But, more important, this criticism of liberal religion is guilty of the same error which it charges - the error of overemphasis. In stressing the sin of man, and the complete dependence of man upon God for his salvation, man is in a subtle way excused from his share of the guilt in making the world the mess it is today. The Neo-orthodox religious thinker takes great pride in laying bare his pride - he makes a picture in vivid detail of the loathsome worm that is man while the groans of a suffering humanity and the explosions of wars and rumors of wars provide the sound effects. But notice the subtle excuse - if man is so corrupt that only God’s mercy through the Atonement of His Son can save him, man cannot be held morally responsible, and can do nothing to salvage the wreck he has made of the world, but pray for divine intervention.

Let me illustrate this by reference to a famous sermon called “Of Guilt and Hope” written by Niemueller. (I think this name is of more than casual interest to you assembled here.) Niemueller represents the evangelical church in Germany under the influence of the modern Neo-orthodox theology. The sermon seems designed to ease the conscience of the Germans. One sentence, in particular is hard to swallow. It reads “You know our Lord Jesus cannot ask us what we cannot do, for He bears our burden and our guilt.” Without making any judgment on the intention of the statement, I would like to point out the danger of such ideas being used to wipe out moral responsibility. The conclusion may follow: if man is this vile worm unable to help himself, why should he bother to try, why should he fret himself about the guilt he cannot eliminate?

If liberal religion tends to have a naive view of the nature of man, the other emphasis is defeatist. The nature of man should be re-evaluated today, but not at the expense of destroying the moral activism which is his essential characteristic. Liberal religion should recognize the evils in man - his greed, egotism, and hates, - but must reaffirm in these difficult times the hope of man’s conquering his inhumanity through moral action. Certainly the liberal religious spirit which lies at the roots of our democracy recognized the egotism and selfishness of man, but it had the courage to envision a moral man living under mutual obligation in a society to promote the good of all.

We need not be crushed by this criticism, then. Liberal religion’s future will depend on its ability to keep the vision of moral man in society and to make constructive suggestions on how the ideal can be realized. This is not the time for a gloomy defeatism, which in effect sanctions existing evils. The peoples of the world caught in the despair of a war-scarred civilization need the bright hope of a better world of better men. No need to tell them men are evil - they know all too well. What is needed is the moral conviction that men can be good. This is the real task. It is not naive optimism, but a stubborn will to believe the highest ideals of our religious faith, what is highest in thought, deepest in nature. The task of liberal religion is to supply this hope - I see no other source for it.
The second serious criticism of liberal religion is often stated in this way: In throwing aside the basic theology of Christianity, the liberal church is left with no symbol of loyalty powerful enough to attract allegiance. When the old symbols are destroyed, spiritual force is dissipated like water poured into a desert. Liberal religion finds itself in a state of deterioration in which religion becomes the equivalent of good citizenship. What people really want and need from religion is a basic faith and comfort, not the raising of intellectual problems on current affairs which serve only to augment anxiety. [Story of little boy.]

This is the criticism. It is this which has frightened many liberal churches back into the right-wing of their denominations. And so we returned to formalized religion. The church is redecorated - the communion table placed in the back of the chancel to form an altar. The minister studies the new theology. Everybody is happy - especially the people, for now they will be freed from the obligation to think, but can depend on the comforting faith to solve the world’s ills.

This, then, is the kind of solution being offered. It is based on the simple fact that in times of crisis man naturally turns to the old loyalties; when the mind is burdened with the troubles and fears of the world, he does not want to have to think about them - he wants to be told what to believe. This is why conservatism emerges after every period of crisis. This is why liberal religion is criticized and threatened today.

The return to the old ways is, of course, no solution to the weakness of liberal religion, but a recognition of its defeat. We should not make this admission of defeat and we need not, if we can strengthen liberalism where it is weak. This can be done - we can reevaluate the nature of man and save religion from a secular deterioration by reaffirming the essence of liberal religion which is a fervent, honest faith in the possibility of moral man.

This seems to me to be the task of liberal religion today - to reawaken the moral consciousness to a dynamic faith. This is the need today and liberal religion’s future lies in filling that need. If it cannot, it is doomed - along with liberalism - and civilization.

It is this moral earnestness which has made liberalism great in the past and which is its strength today. The task is great.

We live in a society weakened by cynicism, defeatism and fear, a society which is tired of thinking, tired of trying, content to be told what to do. We are standing at the threshold of a new world, but we stand trembling - instead of moving forward in confidence; we are insecure, and so we seek to preserve the status quo, preferring the known to the unknown. Moral leadership!

We stand a favored nation in a world of suffering and want - but our moral conscience is dumb - while thousands starve our papers report record earnings in our industries. We become wakened to our duty only when we see that our blindness is forcing peoples to turn to a rival foreign power. And then our dollars are spent to preserve the status quo. When will we learned that the enemy of freedom is poverty and oppression!
Our papers see red and scream about our threatened liberties - while we watch, a quiet Supreme Court decision threatens our treasured freedom in education by providing funds for transportation to parochial schools. We huddle together in our insecurity pointing out demons while our real enemy is a lack of honest moral consciousness.

This is the task ahead -

Moral leadership in individual life.

Moral leadership in political life.

- Reach behind headlines -

- Don’t be afraid to think -

- Avoid hysteria -

- Honesty of thought -

- Don’t move with the crowd -