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The Place of the Church in the Life of the Individual and in Society

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THE PLACE of the CHURCH

—IN THE—

LIFE of the INDIVIDUAL

AND IN SOCIETY.

SERMON PREACHED BY

EARL C. DAVIS,

AT UNITY CHURCH, PITTSFIELD, MASS.,

JUNE 21, 1908.

THE PLACE OF THE CHURCH IN THE LIFE OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND IN SOCIETY.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE EARLY CHURCH

The early Christian Church had its origin in a group of the followers of Jesus, who voluntarily joined themselves together for the purpose of living and teaching more effectively Jesus' "way of life." Whether you think of this fellowship as having its origin before or after the death of Jesus, the fact remains that it was a free and voluntary association of those who had gathered about the person of Jesus during his ministry and wished to continue the work that that he had begun. This is typical of the beginning of any organization, religious or otherwise,—a free voluntary association of people working for a common purpose. Before the Christian Church had become crystalized into an institution of authority with forms, ceremonies and creeds, it was a free voluntary organization, founded on the rock of a high moral purpose. To go on, at whatever cost, with the work presenting to the people of Palestine, and, indeed, to the world, and persuading them to adopt "the way of life" that Jesus had lived, and had convinced them was the true way to live,—that was the large purpose of this early fellowship. Whatever else may have been added to this early and simple organization, it was a voluntary

association, for the distinct purpose of doing a specific thing. This is the rock upon which it was founded.

QUESTIONS OF TO-DAY CONCERNING THE CHURCH

To-day men are asking the Questions,—“Of what value is the Church?” “What is its function in the life of the individual and in the common life of man in society?” “Why should a man enter the fellowship of a Church?” “It is evident that these questions are very searching. But before a man can come to any clear understanding of the questions themselves, or frame a just answer to them, it is necessary to get back to these elemental facts of the nature and the purpose, moral and spiritual, of that early fellowship. For it is evident that the value and the efficiency,—the worth of any institution, is determined, not by its origin, nor indeed by its history, but by its purpose, by what it proposes to do; and, by virtue of the moral vigor of its constituency, it will do. To determine our attitude towards the Christian Churches to-day we must have some clear idea of the fundamental purpose of the early church; we must know to what extent the purpose has been dominant in the history of the Church, and to what extent it is dominant to-day. We must determine the ethical and spiritual values of this purpose to human life; and we must determine whether or not these ideals are of any value to human life to-day. Upon the answers that may be given to these questions, depends our attitude towards the churches.

TWFOLD PURPOSE OF EARLY CHURCH.

The people who made up the early Christian Church had seen the ideal of a world of men in whom the prime motive of life should be the recognition, and the effort to realize the high moral and spiritual possibilities of human personality. It was not so much the duty, as it was the satisfying function of life, to make the realization of these possibilities,—in the life of others no less than in one's own life, the dominating purpose of man's thought and activities. This is the central idea of the Sermon on the Mount. "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." "Be ye perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

But this is not an exhortation to self-culture for one's own interest alone, but quite as much that one may become the efficient servant of those with whom he comes in contact in daily life. "But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be humbled: and whosoever shall humble himself shall be exalted." To state the principle in other terms it is simply this,—Whatever work a man does or whatever business a man is concerned with, that work or that business must contribute to the moral or spiritual wellbeing of all, directly or indirectly connected therewith. Whatever a man does, the dominating and regulating purpose must be that of realizing the highest possibilities of the human personality.

Thus the purpose of Jesus; thus the purpose of his

followers; and thus the purpose of the organization that grew out of this ideal of life.

There is, however, another aspect to this ideal. In the evolution of society, there is a constant birth of new customs and institutions to meet the changing needs of the times, and there is the constant death of old traditions and old institutions that have served their use and fulfilled their purpose. Sometimes we forget that these institutions are but channels for expressing and media for assisting the realization of human life. At times they become so arrogant that they are virtually a hindrance to the moral and spiritual life of man as a whole.

Having seen what the purpose of life in the individual must be, we will now note what must be the place and purpose of institutions that represent the conventional standards of the times. Jesus' attitude on this point is very clear. Where ever any custom or institution, that interferes with or renders impossible the realization of the high ideals of human life, still asserts its right of existence, that institution must give way to the demands of human life. For example the Sabbath was regarded as an institution to the obedience of whose laws men must submit. When Jesus and his disciples picked ears of grain on the Sabbath, he was called to account for doing that which was unlawful to do on the Sabbath. His reply is very much to the point. "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the son of man is lord also of the Sabbath." The interests of the human personality must not become subservient to

the interests of an institution. The right of personality is supreme. In the same way he ignored the conventional laws of fasting, and when taken to task gave substantially the same answer. Institutions must serve men. His attitude towards the ecclesiasticism of his time is very much to the point. "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because ye shut the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye enter not in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering in to enter." Also,—“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he is become so, ye make him two-fold more the son of hell than yourselves.” Jesus saw that these institutions had lost sight of their moral purpose, and were no longer any help to men, but were a positive injury, therefore they became the objects of this scathing denunciation. Again when he drives the money changers from the temple, the point is the same. The temple had been erected to give to man moral and spiritual help in seeking the kingdom. Because it had been turned to the use of money making, he hurles at them this stinging rebuke, as he drives them from the temple,—“It is written that my house shall be called a house of prayer, but ye have made it a den of robbers.” The kingdom of righteousness must not be interfered with.

It must be remembered that this kingdom of God of which Jesus taught was to be a kingdom on this earth. Whatever may be said of his teaching concerning the Messiahship and the coming of the kingdom,

it must not be overlooked that the place of the kingdom was to be in the hearts of men and in society on this earth. It may be true that Jesus had rather wild ideas as to the method by which this new dispensation was to be ushered in, but the fact remains that the great moral purpose at the bottom of the teaching concerning the kingdom and the Messiahship was to establish on the earth a rule of righteousness. The conditions that hindered the rule of righteousness in human life, the principles and the individuals that fostered those conditions, must be relegated to the outer darkness of oblivion.

As these facts point out, it was not only the purpose of Jesus to touch the hidden springs of human life in the individual, and cause them to break forth into a cool and sparkling stream of noble human conduct, but quite as much was it his purpose to see to it that customs and social institutions should contribute to that same end. When such institutions are no longer vitalized by such a purpose, it is time for them to repent or take their place among the relics of history. Their right to exist is determined by their power of ministering to the moral and spiritual welfare of man. All institutions must work for the coming of the kingdom.

Such was the life purpose of Jesus; such was the purpose of the early Christian Church. Its right to come into being, and its right to continue its existence rested upon the rock of this high moral and spiritual purpose.

FAITHFULNESS TO THIS PURPOSE.

Of course it is evident to any one who is familiar with the history of the Christian Church, that this fundamental purpose, which alone gives the churches a legitimate place in the life of the individual and in society, has not always been the commanding voice in its affairs. Not always has the church measured its strength and asserted its reason of being according to the standards of this purpose. The followers of the churches have gone in search of false gods, and made their sacrifices at the altars of other gods than the God whom Jesus worshipped in spirit and in truth. Always this deviation from the true and essential purpose has resulted in the loss of influence and respect. When the church during the middle ages lost sight of its true purpose, and the glory of the God of truth and service was hidden from the eyes of men by the dust clouds of temporal power and the lust for wealth, then its moral and spiritual power was lost, and it sold its true influence for wealth. Not alone in the middle ages, but in fact in all ages the churches have been slothful and negligent in this supreme task of following, with neither variableness nor shadow of turning, their essential purpose, not only of reaching the depths of human nature and disclosing to men and women their highest possibilities, but also of making the world in which we live a place where moral and spiritual values of human life shall be supreme. Witness the feeble conditions in many churches to-day.

But just as the darkness has seemed most dense, and the whole atmosphere most sultry and depressing,

the wind has suddenly changed. The breath of new life, wafted across the whole of Europe in the Reformation, dispelled the fog and the mist. Again man saw as with the naked eye the glory of the free life of the human soul. Again he straightened his shoulders, threw back his head, and declared for the freedom with which he had been endowed by nature. Again he asserted the right of man as against the authority of an arrogant institution, broke up the feudal system of Europe, and threw off the immoral authority of the Mediaeval Church. Thus man started on another day's journey towards a social order of justice and moral right.

The man of the Reformation was responding to the same ideals of human life that ravished the mind of Jesus; that gave to the life of Paul its significance and and its worth. It was the same purpose that brought to these New England shores the Pilgrim and the Puritan; that has maintained in this country an irrepressible demand for the recognition of the worth of the human personality.

That purpose which was so clear and precious in the early Christian Church; that freed the serfs of Europe; that declared its independence from the authority of an ecclesiastical hierarchy; that brought the Pilgrim to America; that freed the American negro from Slavery, is still the supreme purpose of man, and still has before it the supreme task of making better men and a better social order. Wherever you find a group of people that see the glorious possibility of human life; wherever you find a group of

people trying to realize those possibilities, both in the individual and in society; wherever you find a group of people that are seeking for truth and for light, and are eliminating error and falsehood from their life;—there you find men true to the essential purpose of human life, there you find the essential church of the human soul such as the early church centuries ago was. That is the church of the spirit. It ministers unto the needs of men, touching the secret springs of human conduct, and, in the fellowship of a common purpose, working for the realization of the righteous democracy in the life of the individual and in society. The church of the spirit recognizes the supremacy of the human personality in all the conflicting interests of life.

That is the only church that has any real existence, that has any real value. The early Christian Church was such, and the succeeding generations of churches, in so far as they have been vital and of positive value to human life, have been such. That is the only kind of a church that is worthy of the name Christian.

PLACE OF SUCH A CHURCH IN THE
LIFE OF THE INDIVIDUAL.

You ask me now,—“What is the place of such a church in the life of the individual?” And I say to you, not in apology for the Churches, not in defence of their existence, that such a church as I have described is the natural and the inevitable necessity of man's very nature. Those men who have seen the meanness and the hideousness of the selfish life that

crushes under its feet the dignity of the human personality, and soils and stains the temple of the Living God in its man passion for greed,—be it the greed of sensuality or of wealth, or of power, or of culture, it matters not, those, I say, who have seen that reality, and have also seen the possibilities of a noble life as it has been lived and is being lived to-day, do not ask the relation of Churches to their lives. They demand the necessity of fellowship. They demand the necessity of companionship with those who seek a great common purpose, and they will have that companionship. If they do not find it in the churches already existing, they will, by the very strength of their passion for their ideal, create a new fellowship, in which they shall find the moral vigor and the singleness of purpose that they demand, and must have. It must be said, frankly and openly, that when men, who have passion for the noble life, find it necessary to keep away from the organized Churches, let the Churches listen with a humble and contrite spirit to the old words,—“Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand”, Churches, real churches, built on the foundation of a high moral and spiritual purpose,—such churches are the inevitable necessities of the human personality. If organized churches are not that, if they are simply conventional things, maintaining a dignified existence among conventional people, let them cease. They have no vital place in the life of man. But real fellowships of men who are alive to the moral problems of all times must always be a part of our social economy.

PLACE OF THE CHURCH IN COMMON LIFE

On the other hand, given the fact of a church of the spirit, of a fellowship of men and of women who have seen the great possibilities of human life, and then ask,—“What may be the place of such a church in the life of the community?” Your answer is already on your lips. What did the fellowship of people in Palestine do? What did the churches of Luther and Calvin do? What did the little church of Scrooby do? What did the followers of the Wesleys do? What did the followers of Channing, or Theodore Parker, or Phillips Brooks do? Did they have to spend their time explaining their right to exist? Such Churches, such fellowships of men and of women filled with the enthusiasm of a high moral purpose, are the very life and the breath of the community. They are at once the heart that supplies the motive power for the community’s moral activity, and the lungs that supply the life giving oxygen of truth, and the arteries that carry into every part of the community body the pure red blood of moral purpose.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING THAT IS WORTH WHILE?

I ask you to bring this home to yourselves. Do you not see that the Christian Churches have forgotten the foundations upon which they rest? Do you not see that a deposit of forms, apologies, and platitudes have hidden from our views the real foundation of high intelligent moral purpose which has ever been the vitalizing power of the churches of the spirit? Do you not see that the desire for endowments and large

plants is overshadowing the worth of persons, and ignoring the true foundations upon which the real vitality of the church depends? Do you not see that the reason why men of strength and power keep away from the church, and shun the work of the ministry, is because the bodies of the churches have lost the moral and spiritual vigor that comes of a great purpose? They are on the defensive. The church as an institution which men must, in some way or other, obey, has usurped the church of the spirit in the fellowship of which men work for the coming of the rule of righteousness.

Why are you living? What thing, great or small, are you doing that will be a force in touching the secret springs of noble conduct in the lives of men? What thing are you doing at this moment, that is a vital force in the lives of men to-day, revealing to them the latent possibilities of life? What are you doing to-day to clear away the underbrush of human passion that men may the more effectively regulate and guide those terrible and wonderful powers of human life? What are you doing towards clearing away the rubbish heaps of superstition, ignorance, greed, and cruel selfishness that make the dark places in our civilizations at this moment? Are you paying for your passage or are you stealing a ride in this world of moral progress?

"We are doing nothing," you say. Not so. Already in your deeper selves the spirit of the new life is being nourished. Already you are beginning to feel subtle demands that are being made upon you by the

spirit of the times in which you live. The organized Churches, in so far as they have lost sight of the one true foundation of moral purpose, are already dead. The churches of the spirit, the churches in which the moral and the spiritual ideal is still clear and commanding, are to-day face to face with the same great moral problems that have forever confronted it. In the thin vapory clouds of the horizon there is already forming the image of the call of the Spirit to the sons of men. One often hears it said that the churches are being tried to-day before the court of mankind. I am sure that this is true, and we must remember that in the long run the voice of man proclaims the truth of God. But this trial of to-day is not passing judgment as to the truth or the falsity of certain old creeds or doctrines. Judgment has already been passed upon these in no uncertain terms. They are left behind. The question of to-day is one of moral purpose and spiritual efficiency in meeting the demands of our life to-day. Have the churches the moral courage to assert themselves and crush the evils that exist in our social and personal life to-day? Have those in her fellowship the moral courage and the strength to defend the weak, to take up the burden of the oppressed? Do they see the moral and the spiritual value possibilities of human life? Have those in the churches the moral vigor to lift men out of vicious conditions? Have the churches the faith to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,—in the life of the individual and in the social order,—and, let all other con-

siderations minister unto this end? This, I say, is the point of the trial.

Already I feel your answer coming. You have heard the call of truth and you will not refuse to answer.

“Though love, repine, and reason chafe,
There came a voice without reply,—
‘Tis man’s perdition to be safe,
When for the truth he ought to die.”

These sermons are printed as occasion demands from private contribution. Should anyone care to contribute to the expense, they may see or send to Mr. Joseph E. Colton, 768 North Street, Pittsfield, Mass.