

The Work of a Church Today<sup>1</sup>

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In much of the discussion that one hears concerning questions of various and sundry "crises" that "The Church" is facing, the mind unconsciously imagines a street scene of a June evening when some vender of "choice wares," by the light of a flaming torch, expounds the particular virtues of his brand of collar buttons. I came across a passage of such suggestive qualities the other day. It discloses unconsciously the real situation, and in reading it, one is not certain whether it is written in dead earnest by a man who sees not, nor hears, or in a humorous bantering strain by some wag:

The average Protestant layman, though he may be a nominal church member, does not realize the importance of the church. He does not clearly see or fully appreciate the fact that it provides the chief motives, ideals, restraints, and discipline of life; that it stands guard over the sanctities of the home; that it safeguards property with protection that no police force provides; that it contributes to the market-place the moral influences most needed there; that it equips the court with principles of justice without which human society would dissolve; and that it constantly replenishes the enthusiasms that support education.<sup>3</sup>

While hardly intended as such, this is the most cruel criticism of the Church that I have heard from friend or foe. To make the

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<sup>1</sup> This manuscript and another, "Churches for Truth and Justice," bound next to each other, are clearly closely related. Both start with the same quotation from a February, 1910 issue of *Unity*, and both concern the place and role of "the Church," or churches, in society.

<sup>2</sup> While there is no explicit date on this manuscript, it can be dated both by the date of the publication of the first quote—see next footnote—and by the fact that it is among a group of manuscripts from 1909-11.

<sup>3</sup> J. J. Crooker, "The Crisis in the Church," *Unity*, Vol. LXIV, No. 25, February 17, 1910, p. 810.

Church positively responsible for "the chief motives, ideals, restraints, and discipline of life" is really too much. Up to this time, the most brutal criticisms that I have heard, have condemned the church more for neglect of duty, or cringing subserviency, than for aggressive and constructive work in producing the conditions of our social order today.

Yet right here, can we not put our finger upon one of the greatest sources of weakness, one of the greatest causes of embarrassment, in all this complicated "crisis" of the Church? These pretentious claims of the Church, to be what no one institution of society can be, to have what no institution can have, to do what no one institution can do, make any institution seem ridiculous in the eyes of the world. Modesty may at times be a virtue. This assumption, that "The Church," or "a church," has some monopoly on the "motives, ideals, restraints, and discipline of life" and that it can grind them out and furnish them ready-made in standard sizes to all comers, is an unworthy survival of Medievalism. To use a phrase once used by John Wise, "It smells of the Pope's kitchen."<sup>4</sup> Much nearer the truth is it to say that the Church, with all its values and limitations, is not the cause but the product of "the chief motives, ideals, restraints, and discipline of life." The contribution of the churches that is, and the Church, that has been to humanity, that shall be, will be made, and can be made, only as its wisdom gleaned from human experiences, can throw light upon the tasks that are before us, and only as the noble lives, whose very souls have gone into its tremendous structure, become

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<sup>4</sup> John Wise (1652-1725) was a Congregational minister and political leader in Massachusetts during the colonial period. He is notable for asserting the principle of no taxation without representation many years before it became an central issue in fomenting the Revolution. Earl Davis did his STB thesis at Harvard on John Wise. This turn of phrase about "the Pope's kitchen" was part of John Wise's response in 1715 to a proposal to establish a "National Church" as part of an attempt to revive the waning influence of the clergy—the "New England Theocracy"—in colonial New England. As John Wise put it, these attempts to revive the clergy, "smells very strong of the Infallible Chair, ... smells of the Pope's cooks and kitchen where his broths and restorations are prepared." See J. H. Allen, "What New England Congregationalism Really Meant," in *The Unitarian Review and Religious Magazine*, Vol. XXII, No. 5, November 1884, 392-400, this quote, p. 398.

strengthening helps to those who, today, in {??} to the "motives, ideals, restraints, and discipline of life" are building the church that shall be. Last year's foliage becomes, through disintegration, a fertilizing feeder for this year's beauty. So also in human life. Thus the institutions of the past assist today. Thus, what we are building today, shall assist in the work of tomorrow. The real vital historic continuity is not a continuity of form, nor of institution, but of spirit. That which has been produced is now dead. The vital living force that produces our "chief ideals, restraints, and discipline of life" is not in the institution, but in the human life that supports, and builds the institution.

Why not then, do away with this "cure-for-all-ills presumption" and state openly and frankly what a church is? It is an organization of men and women, who came together for the purpose of learning, conserving and vitalizing the higher and nobler values of human life. This fellowship of people has no special monopoly upon either truth, goodness, or beauty. They do not speak by any special prerogative, with any special authority. The vitality, the worth, the efficiency of this fellowship, depends entirely and solely upon the moral and spiritual esprit-de-corps of membership. A hundred pleasure seekers and mammon-worshippers do not and cannot make a church to which they happen to belong a spiritual and vital organization, essential to the life of humanity. Even the glorious tradition, which many a dying church enjoys, is lost when entrusted to such hands. Not presumption, not poverty, not ritualism, not wealth, not tradition, nor any other external thing constitutes the vitalizing life of a church, but just the intensity, and nobility of its moral and spiritual purpose, registering the moral and spiritual purpose of its living members, determines the value of "The Church," or a church, to human society.

Human society does not carry dead values very long, and it does not cast aside real live values. If "The Church," or a church, is not fulfilling a vital function in society, no amount of patent medicine advertising can preserve it. By no means can it be said that the "crisis" that confronts "the Church" involves the destinies of civilization. The same God spirit that produced the churches in the past, is working even until now. The task is not to preserve the church, but to discover, vitalize, and conserve the enriching values of human life. If

men attend to this nearby task, the organization through which that work is done may be called a church, or it may not. Whatever its name, it will perform the function that the churches at their best have performed in the past.

Now all this has been said not to criticize or extoll, condemn or praise, "The Church," or a church, but simply to present a point of view. From the point of view thus suggested, I want to make one or two observations. Those who may chance to read this are presumably related in some way with churches. They believe in the value of the vital church life to the community. They believe that society would never have produced such a stupendous institution as the whole church system is, unless there was a valid human need for it in the social economy. Not alone, their loyalty to an institution, but also their deeper conviction that the real foundation of the Church is that of human necessity, brought home to them with great acuteness in these days of criticism and crisis, the task of determining just what that great human need is, and how it may be satisfied. The question is two-fold. First, what is the function of "the Church," or a church, and second, how may "the Church," or a church, fulfill that function?

In the above phrase, "The Church," has been used frequently. It seems to have been assumed by many that "The Church" is an organization that is in the world, and not of it; that it is a homogeneous entity that can have a complete program and clearly defined purpose, that it can at will direct all its tremendous constituency with a unanimous consent upon any given task, and solve it as it will. A slight bit of reading in history, or even a few moments of careful reflection, will serve to show that there never has been, and can hardly, in the nature of things, ever be, such an institution as above contemplated. Churches are a part of the social economy. They enjoy the same advantages, and the same limitations as the society in which, at any given time and place, they exist. "The Church" as a organized entity does not exist. There are churches. These individual churches constitute a group of men and women, more-or-less like-minded and on substantially the same plain of moral, intellectual, and spiritual development. Perchance, many of these churches are grouped into a larger fellowship, more-or-less organically related. In the individual churches, changes are constantly going on. New truth, new experience, new values are constantly

coming into focus. Old forms, old values are constantly on the wane. The same is true of groups. There is a constant tendency to regrouping. At times the tendencies become very active, and old relations are severed, and new ones are made. Amid all the changing of the scenery, it seems to me that the great underlying function of the church is to seek for the true values of human life, to search for and discover, and conserve those pursuits, and the ideals of life that are worthwhile. This is the unifying function of the church; this is the great need of human life, for which the church exists in the social economy. At one time, the society, speaking through the church organization, has said that the great pursuit of life was to secure the goodwill for God through various sacrifices; at another, through formal praise and its sacraments, at still another time, through the pursuit of eternal felicity. In our own time, great values are the higher attainments of human life in this world.

If two or three, or a dozen, or a hundred, men and women enter into a fellowship for this purpose of determining, and realizing the deeper and abiding values of life, there is a church. But this is not a mere intellectual statement, or speculative investigation. It is not to determine in an abstract way whether or not it is better to serve God in this manner. It is merely for the purpose of propounding the ideals of life, but much more of making those values vital everyday aims. I may intellectually assent to the proposition that it is right and just to love my neighbor as myself, but of what value to either myself or my neighbor, or the world, is that intellectual assent if I spend all my active hours in a merciless effort to gain advantage over my neighbor. The values approach zero in their value if they do not become the real dominating guides and directors of practical conduct. There seems to be a notion abroad that any attempt to put a great value into practical operation, to make a serious attempt at realizing the ideal, is to desecrate that ideal. So the function of learning, and conserving the values of life, has its *terminus ad quem* not in the ideal, but in the real: to make the word flesh that it may dwell among us.

This task there involves the fulfilling of the function of the Church.