

The Church as a Social Institution

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Text: Matthew 7:16, "By their fruits ye shall know them"

Under the soothing influence of a summer vacation, after a year of hard work, how easily do we change from an atmosphere of work to one of leisure. Almost unconsciously do we relax from the strenuous life of activity to one of quietness, rest and ease. Like a boat becalmed, we remain idly floating, now and then roused into lazy action by a swell coming from some distant storm. We are in a state of relaxation. We think little of the past. The story of our own life is of little interest to us. Now and then we turn to it for an idle story which happens to suit our mood. We have a vague indistinct idea that there has been a past, but its details we do not care to recall. We are fully satisfied in the dim consciousness of our existence. We have relaxed, and from our relaxation even the future with all its delightful uncertainties of aspirations, hopes and ambitious fails to rouse us. As the haze, which gathers on an inland lake in the quiet of noonday, hides the detail of the shores, so does the quiet and rest of summer make dull to our vision the past with all its precious moments, and the outline of daydreams that are all a part of our lives. Thus, do we rest, thinking but little of the past, and looking but indistinctly into the future. Thus, do we rest, conscious only of our present surroundings, and fully satisfied with our existence.

In this mental condition, in which neither the wonderful past quickens our mind to action, nor the alluring future inspires us to work, we are best able to stand aside from the world of activity, and examine some detached fragment of art from the past which made it and and the future towards which it is tending. It is in this frame of mind that we can take one little quiet work of art from the world, and live contented and satisfied. We are content to say, "It is." Without asking, "How?" "When?" or "Why?".

One ought to be in just such a condition of mind when attempting to estimate the value of the Church as a social institution. In such a frame of mind one is able to overlook the struggle of 1,900 years of Christianity, which has resulted in the various branches of the Christian Church. In this frame of mind, one can refrain from looking into the future and speculating upon the great possibilities there outlined. In other words, one can take the Church as "It is," without asking the "How?" "When?" or "Why?". Without considering its beginning, its history, and its struggles, which have made it an expression of the vitalizing religion of the world; without considering Christianity, which is behind the Church, we simply stand aside to look upon the Church as a Social Institution in a social civilization, and to think of its value as a social factor in a social world.

We are a social people first and above all else. We may be religious; we may be intellectual; we may be moral; but we are social. We are social physiologically; we are social psychologically. We began the history of man as social beings. Our first social ties were weak and easily broken, but the keynote to our development has been that first and most sacred of social groups of people, the family. From the simple fragile family organization of early man, we have developed into a most complex social system, whose members are bound one to another by countless powerful social ties. We have grown beyond that period in which we are bound by natural relations. Now innumerable ties which have developed artificially in our form of civilization, bind us all into one great family. No longer can one man say of another, "I have no need of thee." As a result of our economic condition, you and I are dependent upon people in every country upon this globe. No longer are we independent individuals, but we are interdependent members of a great social organization, the complexity of which defies analysis. We are a great social humanity, social by nature, and by training.

In the midst of all this complex organism, do we find the Church. The very fact that it has lived and grown through 19 centuries proves that it serves a purpose and meets a demand, as a social organization. In as much as it has survived the ages, we are justified in asserting that it stands for some great principles which are required by one great social organism. What are they? This is the question that we want to answer.

"Thou shalt not" is really one of the characteristic ideas associated with people of the Church. For those who know but little of the meaning of Church life, association with the Church means a deliberate narrowing of one's life, or deliberately cutting out from one's life a vast part of it that is pleasing and beneficial. Their ideas make the Church a moral prison, in which one is clearly told what he can do and what he cannot do. So then the Church is an enclosure bounded by the fence "Thou shalt not." While this conception is wrong, yet it is interesting because it tells us something of ourselves. It tells us plainly that we stand for a high type of morality.

After we have been told that the Church stands for a high type of morality, we begin to look at some of the Church movements to see if it is true. Do we not everywhere meet the demand for high character in those connected with the Church? Is not that idea either an expressed or implied characteristic of every church? Beyond all this, look at the representative organizations in churches in large cities. What does it mean to a section of a city for a college settlement to take up its work there? What does the floating hospital mean? Children's Day Nursery? Sailor's Homes? Open Air Societies? What do all these mean to the poor of Boston? It means simply a higher type of morality. Every movement of the Church among the poor, every movement of the Church in any community, is a step towards a higher plane of morality or high character. For this, the Church stands. Wherever there is Church influence we expect to find and do find an atmosphere of morality.

But morality is apt to be a sort of negative goodness, that type which simply says, "Thou shalt not." Somehow a purely moral person thinks that he is doing his duty by simply refusing to do certain things that society has declared immoral. Such morality is really pitiable. We are gratified to see that the Church stands for more than a mere negative morality. Not only does it say, "Thou shalt not" but also it says, "Thou shall." Not only refrain from evil but do good is the command of the Church. This spirit of doing good manifests itself in many directions, but most conspicuously it is shown in the attitude towards the community, in Good Citizenship. While the Church has passed beyond that condition in which it was identified with the State, yet today its influence is even greater than of old. As a class, men who are connected with the Church are superior as citizens to those who are not connected with it. But whatever may be the

attitude and the interest of men towards the question, it is evident that there is yet work to be done. Before the Church there lies a field for work extending the length and breadth of this country and every country in the world. Everywhere comes the cry for purity in politics. With greater energy should the Church respond to this call. Next to man's duty to his family comes his duty to the government. Whoever shuns his duty as a citizen, like Peter of old, denies his master. But still for good citizenship does the Church stand. And to morality may be added good citizenship as an influence of the Church as a social institution.

Thus, is yet another great social factor which the Church has developed. Historically our educational systems belong to the Church. The beginning of education in almost every country has been associated with the Church. Especially has this been true in this country. In the early days it was the Church which met the demands of learning in the youth. As a memorial of the spirit of education in the Church recall to your mind the large number of secondary schools which are still under the control of churches. Supplement this by the American college system, and you have the memorial to that spirit of education which has characterized the Church. For the purposes of economy, the educational system has passed into the hands of the State, but still the church stands behind it and influences it. In short, education is one of the factors which the church as a social institution stands for. To our morality and good citizenship, we now add education.

All these characteristics may be selfish virtues. A high standard of morality is necessary for selfish purposes. Good citizenship gives us the pleasanter community in which to live and is therefore selfish. Education reacts in favor of those who promote it. So, these influences may exist for selfish purposes. But there is a spirit in the Church that is not selfish. It is that which says, "I am my brother's keeper," the spirit of fraternity, of brotherly love. How changed is the present spirit of fraternity from the early days of historical knowledge in which the watch word seems to have been, "I am my brother's robber." Even now we see some of that early savage spirit manifested, but it is for the most part outside of the Church circles.

We began with but the germ of this spirit of fraternity in us. We have developed it through sorrow and suffering of which we can have no conception until today it stands out as the most characteristic element of the Church. It has taken centuries to develop that whole-souled attitude towards life, which says, "I am my brother's keeper." It has taken ages to produce such characters as Clara Barton, Jacob Riis and Helen Gould. These don't represent a large class of people who are devoting their lives to the uplifting of their less fortunate fellow men. The whole world is a field with this spirit of doing for others. Have any of you been sick or been in trouble? The little acts of kindness simply reveal to you the extent to which this spirit permeates society. The Church cannot claim all the honors for the good done unto others. In fact, a great proportion of this social kindness is outside of the Church. Yet the Church is foster mother of it all. At least the church stands for this spirit of fraternity. Now the list is completed, morality, good citizenship, education and fraternity. Those are the influences which the Church as a social institution exert on society. For these the Church as a social institution stands. They are the outward expression of a great inner power. This is what we have found the Church to be, as we have stood aside and examined it as a social institution. What lies back of this outward phenomena is beyond the scope of this topic. We have found out "What is" without asking "How?" "When?" or "Why?" Our answer to "What is?" is that the Church is a social institution, which is doing a powerful work in uplifting the standard of morality, good citizenship, education and fraternal aid in this great social humanity.

Now that we have found the value of the Church as a social institution, what does it profit us? It seems to me simply this. We men and women, who say to ourselves or our friends, "I do not believe in the church. I do not attend Church, because I think that I can be just as good a Christian outside of the Church. There are just as good people out of the Church as there are in it." It is true, too true, that there are just as good people out of the church as there are in it. But those same people would be better if they associated their efforts with the Church. They would be better, stronger and nobler by associating themselves with that institution which is most powerful of all associations of men. No longer is the Church regarded as a necessary step in the process of salvation, it is an association of individuals who are working for a great purpose and who find

union gives them power and strength to accomplish their end. The man who refuses to associate himself with the Church on the ground that he can be just as much of a Christian outside as inside, is like the man who would prefer swimming to being carried in a steamer. He is simply refusing to accept a whole-hearted aid that is being offered him as help in his struggles. On the other hand, the man who does not associate with the Church is deliberately refusing to assist in the work of the association which stands for the highest type of social life. He is, in a cold-blooded manner, refusing to do his part towards the realization of that which future generations of right demand. He is refusing to do his share in making the world better. The man who refuses to unite in Church movement is injuring himself, his fellow men and his God.

Almighty may we always be eager to do those things which make for the comfort, purity and happiness of those into whose lives we enter. May all our deeds of love and kindness be done in the name and spirit of Him who went about doing good.

Amen.