

Why Does One Go To Church?

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No Date¹

Last Sunday I said that the perfection of a living thing rests in its growing incompleteness, that the perfection of society rests in its growing incompleteness, and that the aim and purpose of its individual members is the service that he can render to the uncompleted growth.

It seems strange then, that if the glory of life rests in the service that can be rendered, that we should deliberately set aside one day in seven in which to relax from the service, to rest, and devote ourselves to things which seem quite apart from the ordinary channels by which we render our greatest service to the community in which we live. Why do we forget those duties, why do [we] even neglect the simple duties of our homes, and come to church for an hour or two of worship? Is it not true that such a course of conduct is a fine inconsistency? Are we not deceiving ourselves by this day of rest, and this hour of worship? Is not our day of rest and hour of devotion a wholly unnecessary thing, a mere fiction under which we would cover our weak desire to shirk the duties of service to which our uncompleted ideal calls? Why does one take a day of rest? Why does one go to church?

These questions are not asked in any trivial way, because their answer is of importance. If the day of rest and hour of worship are really unnecessary things in our life, think of the vast amount of precious time that is wasted in this day! Think of how much of service might be done in the 52 or 53 days that are given up to rest, and the several days that are given up to worship!

There are many who believe that the value and the usefulness of the church is past, that it is now upon the

¹ While this sermon is not dated, almost certainly it is from the period 1905-06 when Earl Davis hand-wrote his sermons. In addition to the hand-writing, the paper is consistent with other datable sermons from that time.

wane, and in time it will become unnecessary to all as it is now unnecessary to many. They hold that it is an institution which rests upon the imperfections of humanity, and that as rapidly as those imperfections are overcome, the usefulness of the church as passed, and the institution itself will disappear. The loss of ritual forms, the relaxing grip of the church upon people today they point to as evidence, and convincing evidence, of the decay and death of our institution, which has done a noble service, and is being left behind, a monument to the past, and a witness of growth.

In fact we might go even beyond that. I do not wish to be a defender of a useless institution. If I could see that its usefulness had passed, I would never darken the doors of the building again, yet my very presence here bespeaks my appreciation of the church, bespeaks my faith that the church rests, not upon the sins and weaknesses of human nature, but upon its growing and developing strength. Yet we cannot in justice to ourselves and to society of which we are a part evade such considerations as they [are] put before us, and cover up the weakness of our decaying fortress by cant and pious phrases.

Not only is the usefulness of the church waning, but a large part of its functions have long since been delegated to other institutions. The time was when the church was the agent of education, when the children were educated by the church, when universities were in the hands of clergymen, and the institutions existed as a part of the ecclesiastical system, and as a means for furthering the interests of the church. This function of the church is still retained in some countries, and to some extent it is in evidence in this country. But in this country, education has passed from the hands of the church. The two systems are entirely distinct, and so much emphasis has been placed upon the separation, that the church can hardly show a healthy and vital interest in the situation of the schools without rousing opposition. To be sure the church has in its Sunday Schools a small apology for its ancient function. But education today is in the hands of the State, and the church has nothing to do organically with the State.

But one step more, the church was once the oracle of wisdom. But upon its function as the center of culture, refinement and various other activities, the press has made great inroads. Books are in every household. Papers bring each morning and evening to us the news from all over the world. The magazines discuss with wisdom and reason all the burning problems of the day. We are aware of all that goes on, and we find in our books the treasures of literature, the gems of the ages. The march of facts, prophets and wise men are even before us in better form and in more impartial statement than we could even hear from the pulpit.

One step more then that, the church was at one time the chief center for administering those little benevolences by which we seek to alleviate the needs of unfortunate people, and minister for the sick, and care for the fatherless. But that is fast passing into other hands. Various organizations for purposes of that sort are now in full working order, and in no way organically connected with the church. People who are in a way associated with the church may make up the working force of the charitable societies, but the church as such has no directive influence.

So you see the people who look upon the church as a decaying institution have very good evidence to support their claims. One by one its functions are being delegated to other institutions, and in time the church will be left behind because it is a useless institution.

Now these are the facts upon which such conclusions are based, and they are facts, and while they disturb and discourage many, they produce quite the opposite effect upon me. I rejoice in them. They are evidences of progress, the milestones which mark the growth and development of the world. It is a great evidence of progress when people have become so interested in the problem of education as to take it out of the hands of the comparatively few clergymen, and take hold of it themselves. It is a wonderful step in advance when men and women so interest themselves in books and the great thinkers and writers as to read them, and make necessary the Public Library. It is a great witness of the spirit of human interest in ones fellow man when the

public at large takes into its hands the work of caring for unfortunate and the poor and needy. In these things I rejoice because they are the evidences of a broadening deepening interest in the deep things that make life rich and noble.

But you will go on to point out that while these facts are evidence of general progress, they tell a sad tale for the church. On the contrary, they bespeak its growth, and development, they point to its coming to its own. One more step nearer the time when the church can perform the function which is its own function. One day nearer the time when the church can be an institution of worship where it can enter upon its duty of transforming truth into life.

However obscure and undignified may be the origin of our Sunday, and our service of worship, it rests not upon the limitations, and the weaknesses of human nature, but upon its deepest and most far-reaching and powerful characteristics.

Back in the early days of Jewish history, when the uncultured uneducated tribes were wandering about the lands of the East, they developed among them the custom of festival days. Perhaps it originated in this way. They may have been without proper food for a long time, and then suddenly they were able to procure a great quantity and the entire tribe came together to enjoy the feast which was in this way spread before them to satisfy their wants. At least the three great feasts of Judaism bear marks of pointing to such an origin. The feast of weeks¹ is a harvest festival, and the feast of Sukkoth as is also the feast of tabernacles, and the feast of the Passover bears marks of being the rejoicing over the spring time, when the lambs are born and the prospect of new rejoicing is at hand.

Even in the records that we have of the dry narration of facts of these feasts there does not escape us some of the spirit of joy and good fellowship that takes possession of a body of people at such a time. "Thou shalt rejoice in thy feast, thou and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy man-servant, and thy maid-servant, and the Levite, the

¹ Shavuot

stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, that are within thy gates."² The festival was to be a great jubilation, a great rejoicing where all the differences of opinions, all distinctions of {??} were to be cast aside, all individuality was to be obliterated, and these untaught children of God were to give themselves up to that rich and deepening power of human fellowship, which takes possession of men when they come together in the fellowship of festivity. These early festivals of people of the plains were not without incident which we would no longer would [sic] tolerate. But they were a step of progress. The children of the wild had tasted the great intoxicating overpowering and all controlling power that takes each individual into its grasp and sweeps him along in its tremendous irresistible strength, as the wind takes the particles of dust and carries them where it will who has not felt the power of this domination of the multitude over the individual. We feel it as we walk the streets of a crowded city at night and the subtle spirit-of carefree, pleasure-seeking light-hearted takes possession of us, and even amid the throng of strangers we feel the power of the multitude over us.

It is the same power that carries the assaulting army into the very face of death, and transforms the thousand individual death-fearing self-seeking men into one army dominated by the spirit of self-sacrifice, and devotion to country, home and liberty. Whoever has tasted the inspiration that fills the man's soul when he is once within this fellowship of men, dominated by a common purpose, has felt the need of human nature upon which these days of festival among the ancient Hebrews was founded. Not upon weakness, not upon sins, limitations and imperfections, but upon the growing consciousness of fellowship rests this institution of a festival day.

Out of these natural and necessary, but ever increasing days of festivity, there gradually evolved a fixed and permanent order of festival days, and this system has been handed over to us in our custom of setting aside one day in seven as a day of festival, relaxation and rest.

² Deuteronomy 16:14

But you ask how came it to be a day of religious interests? The rude and untutored tribesmen did not overlook the fact that not alone through his own exertions did the bountiful crop and the multiplication of animals which made possible the days of feasting and rejoicing become possible. But everywhere he was overcome by the wonderful mysteries of nature, and life. The water springing up out of the ground, where he made his {???}. The tree growing up in oases of the desert where he found rest, and refreshment from his quenching thirst. On the mountain top, there he found the same mystery, and in the moon which shown by night and the sun which shown by day, he saw the revelation of the great unseen power of the Universe, whom he called Yahwey. Yahwey was with him at these feasts and entered into the fellowship of the joyous festivities, and for the joy of his Yahwey, he killed and sacrificed animals, and offered burnt offerings, and {???}{???}{???} into Yahwey, the things which Yahwey would render into him. Thus through nature the Hebrew came to God, and entered into fellowship with him and the festival day became not one of mere human fellowship, but a day of fellowship with Yahwey.

But one more element was yet to be added to make the spirit of this festival system complete. In the days of Israel's growing prosperity, when she had settled down in Canaan, and under Saul, David and Solomon, the Kingdom was established and Israel became a nation, yet a new idea was to find its way into her mind. Through nature Israel had come to God, but under the Kingdom we find the culmination of another idea that had been growing. Through man Israel should come to God. The Kings, and great leaders, who had brought Israel to its great prosperity, came to be regarded as the anointed one, the chosen one of Yahwey to do his bidding, and lead his Israel into greatness, and power. Thus it happened that they might {???} {???} {???} unto Yahwey, who through the hand of Saul + David had led them to such prosperity, they established by degrees the temple service in which they rendered unto Yahwey the favor and adoration that they felt for his overpowering majesty, just as David the [sic] payed [sic] homage and obedience. They had come not only to feel a sense of fellowship with this {???} power of the world, but they still acknowledged their dependence upon his overpowering greatness.

The forms were crude, the symbols were often gross. But beneath the forms and the symbols, which developed into the institution of the sabbath, with an hour of worship and upon which these great institutions rested there as they rest today, were two great fundamental truths of humanity. The first is this consciousness of fellowship with each other, and of fellowship with the source and author of all the mystery of truth, goodness and beauty, which far nourished the human soul since one first gazed with wonder and admiration upon the glories of the world.

The second truth upon which this institution of the Sabbath Sundays worship rests is this, that over and above that great power of coming through nature to God is the inherent feeling of man, that through man we came to God, that by the moral intellectual and spiritual power of many we came to know more and more of the mystery and the deep things of life and the world. And hence by moral, intellectual and spiritual communion, upon things that are concerned in deepest and most subtle relations of man to man and man to God.

Upon these two eternal and imperishable needs of the human soul, the fellowship of man with man and the fellowship of man with God, rests this great institution of the sabbath, and an hour of worship. You ask why we come to church, why we meet for an hour of worship, and I can only say that we must, our very divine human nature bids us come here or elsewhere for this communion of the spirit.

But all through the centuries the festivities of this festival day and the form of the service of worship has gone through a process of purification. Many things which belonged to the duties and the ceremonies of the days of the Lord of the Sabbath are now relegated to other duties of the week. The killing of animals for food was once a part of the religious service, and performed by the priests. But we have left that out of our service today. The harvesting of the grains was once connected with the religious service. But it is no longer. Education was once the point of the religious service, but it is no longer, and is fast freeing itself from its organic relation of the church. Philanthropy was once a part of the religious

service. But now it is severing itself from its relations with the church, and worship. The church is coming to its own, to its function of filling our souls with that great overpowering spirit of truth, goodness and beauty, which is in and through us all. We come here each from his own peculiar duties, his own peculiar work, his own peculiar problems, victories and disappointments; we come here each with his own past of experience, his own wisdom, his own hopes and aspirations. We come here that together we may bring into the presence of God that spirit in us which has been in the soul of every true and noble child, which has filled the soul of poet, prophet, and lover of life since man has breathed. Here in the presence of that great living spirit of truth goodness and beauty we enter into the fellowship of that spirit. Here in this common meeting place, to which we have brought the dead lifeless facts and truths of life, we await the power of that spirit of fellowship, and dependence.