

The Adventurous Task of the Church

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

May 16, 1909¹

I wish to present for your consideration this morning this stupendous and perplexing question as to the task of the church in our modern life, having in mind the specific application to our own work in this church of the great principles involved in the religious and ethical evolution in the midst of which we find ourselves today.

I wish to preface what I have to say by stating again the fact of the sweeping significance of the change through which we are passing. We are in the midst of a revolutionary movement which is fast establishing certain truths and principles that are the product of the thinking and experiences of life for many hundreds of years. The modern world which is establishing itself today in the thought and experience of our religious, intellectual and social life, is indeed a world clearly distinct from the ancient world with which it is often compared and contrasted. The common ties between the fast vanishing remnants of the ancient world, and the rapidly growing products of the modern world, are to be found only [in] the common spirit of all life. The forms, the conventions, the customs, even the moral and ethical sanctions of conduct that were the natural and logical expression of the idealism of the ancient world, find no sympathetic atmosphere in the modern world. Every fact, every experience, every problem of human life presents itself to the man and woman in whom the subtle spirit of modernity is at work, in an entirely different clothing and with an entirely [different] significance than it presented itself to the man and the woman of the ancient world. Ask your man of the ancient world about his idea of God, his idea of man, his idea of truth, his idea of the universe, his idea of life, his idea of the state and government, his idea of the church, his idea of moral evil, of sin, of death or indeed of any other vital fact or problem of human life. Then compare his answer with the answers

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909.

that appeal to the modern man as being true, and you will find that there is nothing in common between the two. To say this is not to condemn or to criticize those who have lived before, but simply to recognize the apparent fact that in the course of seven or eight hundred years the life of humanity has produced revolutionary changes in our whole attitude toward the universe, life and its diversity of problems.

The commanding splendor and power of the Holy Roman Empire with its sword of state and its keys of the church mark the zenith in the development in the life of what we call the ancient world. At the opening of the thirteenth century the Catholic Church, through the Pope, was the ruler of the world. But here, as always, the spirit which a great institution had developed, proved itself greater than the institution, and came into conflict with it. In the dramatic conflict between Frederick II and Pope Gregory the IX,² we see the first events of the long warfare and struggle which has characterized the slow death of the ancient world, and the correspondingly slow but determined growth of the modern world. Frederick had promised to go to the East and rescue the holy city [Jerusalem] from the hands of the infidels. He took his own time about going, and Gregory issued an edict of excommunication against him for his delay. Frederick paid no attention, but in due time after he had completed his arrangements, he set out on his journey without asking permission of the Pope, or attempting to have the ban of excommunication raised. Gregory, having once excommunicated him for not going on the Crusade, now excommunicated him for going. Frederick again paid no attention, but continued on his way. The Pope was wellnigh exasperated at this, yet he had another bitter pill to swallow. Frederick, instead of attempting to exterminate the infidels, made a treaty of peace with them. For the third time, Gregory excommunicated the obstreperous ruler. This is the

² Pope Gregory IX, born Ugolino dei Conti di Segni (c.1145-1241) was head of the Catholic Church and ruler of the Papal States from March 1227 until his death. Frederick II (1194-1250) was King of Sicily from 1198 and King of Germany from 1212, King of Italy and the Holy Roman Emperor from 1220, and King of Jerusalem from 1225. The confrontation with Pope Gregory IX concerned his leading the fifth crusade in 1217. Earl Davis has a history manuscript that covers this controversy, "Lecture Two: Late Medieval Period, Frederick II, John Wyclif," see <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/dbaird/lecture-two-late-medieval-period-frederick-ii-john-wyclif/>.

first open and defiant conflict between the old world with its standards of authority, and the new or modern world with its element of commonsense.

Frederick has been called the first modern man, and the assertion of fact against fancy in his relations with the Pope marks the beginning of that whole movement of modern progress whose growth the churches have been unable to stay, and, in the face of which, they have conducted a sullen and defiant retreat from that day to this. One after another of the medieval claims of a supernatural authority exercised by the church over the affairs of men, and their temporal and eternal destiny, has been questioned and found wanting. In each successive stand taken by the church against the progress of modern thought, and the development of the interpretation of life and the universe, based upon observed facts and human experience, the principles for which the ancient church of supernatural authority stood have been compelled by the very weakness of their claims to give way to the growing convictions of the modern world. To be sure, many of these ancient claims still press for recognition, but the recognition which they receive is little more than formal, and for the most part all of those ancient claims ask only for the recognition of a place in some museum, or a decent quiet burial among the beautiful and inspiring things of the past. Let the dead past bury its dead. The world of today cares nothing for the pasteboard armor of the claims of the church to a supernatural authority over the affairs of human life and the destiny of the human soul.

In this fact are to be noted the two determining factors in that which I have called the adventurous task for the church today.

With increasing frequency our attention is being called to the fact that the church as a whole has lost its grip upon the affairs of man, and is becoming but a parasite, subsisting upon the generous and indulgent benevolence of the community. In support of this position men tell us that not only does the church fail to touch the pressing moral problems of modern life, but that it does not attract within its doors even a majority of our population. A large proportion of those who are attracted, we are told, are held only by the slender and selfish ties of conventional customs. To but a few does the allegiance rest upon a consecrated passion, and the convictions of a high moral

purpose. Still further, men point to the fact that the ministry no longer attracts men of strength and capacity, and even those to whom it does appeal, the appeal comes to decreasing numbers. Fewer and fewer men of strength, character and capacity see within the church, and its possibilities, the opportunity for a noble manly service in the affairs of human life. All in all, we are told, the church is fast losing whatever grip it may have on the moral and spiritual life of man. It is becoming simply a place, an institution of consolation of those whose selfishness and greed are so keenly developed that they not only demand a full satisfaction of the desires of the body, but even their selfish hunger and thirst for the satisfaction of the cravings of the soul, lead them into a sickly sentimental religious formalism, in which the pre-digested food of sacramentalism is offered in place of natural food of a rich moral and spiritual purpose. With great keenness and pungency, Professor Harald Høffding states the relation of the church to modern life.

But the fact that religion is becoming increasingly significant as a means of consolation and that this point of view is so strongly emphasized are signs of its altered position in the spiritual life. Religion was once the pillar of fire which went before the human race in its great march through history, showing it the way. Now it is fast assuming the role of the ambulance which follows in the rear and picks up the exhausted and the wounded. This, too, is a great work. It is, however, not sufficient; ...³

In view of the fact of the long centuries of retreat of the church in the face of the establishment of the modern world, to which I called your attention a few moments ago, it is not difficult to understand why the church has come to take the place which Professor Høffding says it takes in modern life. For hundreds of years now it has been on the defensive. Its claims to a supernatural authority have been questioned, and in the face of this increasing opposition, century after century, it has fought a losing battle against the rising tide of the modern world. The struggle begins with the conflict of Frederick II and Gregory IX over the question of the authority of the church over the state. The church lost. Then comes the question of the

³ Harald Høffding (1843-1931) Danish philosopher and theologian. This quote is from his 1906 *The Philosophy of Religion*, translated by B. E. Meyer, London: Macmillan and Co., p. 346.

authority of the church. The church lost, and in the development of Protestantism, we have the establishment of the authority of the Bible over the church. In due time, the authority of the Bible was questioned, and under the fire of historical and scientific investigation, its claims to a supernatural authority have been tested and found wanting. Today within the most advanced and modern representatives of the ancient order, the question of the supernatural authority of Christ is being defended. This is the last stronghold of the old breastworks of supernaturalism behind which the ecclesiasticism of the ancient order has been fighting for its existence. The outcome of this last skirmish is to be read in the records of former struggles. It has been a long defensive losing fight. The reason why the church as a whole today has little insight into the problems of modern life, and but a slight grip upon the men and women who breathe the spirit of the modern world, is to be found in this fact, that for hundreds of years it has been on the defensive, fighting for the very life of its ancient dogmas and principles, and finding itself defeated in each struggle.

This retreat, within the church and without the church, from the ancient idea of a purely supernatural religion entrusted to a supernatural institution, to the idea of a natural religion, naturally revealed in the experiences of human life, has been conducted by the great heretics of humanity. Today we find ourselves shorn of all that ancient armor. The church of the modern spirit finds itself today in the midst of the modern world, face to face with the great and pressing problems of the moral and spiritual life, armed only with the power of eternal truth, disclosed in and through the experiences of life, crystalized into wisdom by the remorseless logic of human history. In this situation the dynamic of our activity, and the assurance of our efficiency in the service of human life today, rests upon the only foundation that has ever been effective in the constructive moral and spiritual work in human history, upon the foundation of obedience to naked truth, and an indomitable passion for justice and righteousness in the affairs and relationships of human life. Before us, beginning at our very feet, is the vast expanse of [the] future. What that future shall bring forth, human minds cannot determine. But I hear the voice of the human soul, still hungering and thirsting after righteousness and justice, coming to us from out of the Macedonian of futurity, asking us to come and help. Herein lies the adventurous task of the work that is before us. What

specific thing that voice asks of us, we do not know, what we shall be called upon to do, we do not know, but we hear the voice of truth and human love asking us to come and help. We have the sublime faith that to him who has the single-eyed will, the way and the truth shall be disclosed.

So nigh is grandeur to the dust,
So close is God to man,
When duty whispers, "Lo thou must."
The youth replies, "I can."⁴

At this point I wish to complete the quotation from Professor Høffding. Consolation is great work, but it is not sufficient, he had said. He continues as follows,

... and when religion has disburdened herself of all her dead values, she will once more in intimate association with ethics, rise to be a power which leads men forward.⁵ That is the keynote of the situation. For so many long years on the defensive, the church has lost its grip upon the ethics of life. In intimate association with ethics, says Høffding; not sacrifice, but justice, says the prophet; not a formal, but a living worship, says Jesus. Not ecclesiasticism, but righteous purpose, says the modern world.

The church has often been compared to an army. Let it be so. But we must remember that it is not a standing army, maintained at great expense in idleness for the ostensible purpose of keeping peace and order. If it is an army, it is an army on the field, fighting for justice, for righteousness, and for the realization of the divine possibilities of human personalities. Its value in society, its effectiveness in human life, is not determined by its dress parade efficiency in terms of formal piety, and conventional goodness, but by the pluck, and the courage and the persistency with which its fights on the battlefield of common human life for the establishment of truth, and justice and honor in human relations, and for the extermination of injustice, error, and inhuman degradation of the human soul. Let us take it home directly to ourselves, in

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) American writer, poet and founder of the Transcendentalist movement. These lines are part of stanza III of his poem "Voluntaries" in *Poems*, Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1883, p. 207.

⁵ Harald Høffding, 1906 *The Philosophy of Religion*, translated by B. E. Meyer, London: Macmillan and Co., p. 346.

this little church in Pittsfield. Rightly you love and cherish this church. Let the feelings of love and devotion deepen and become enriched even beyond the best of your lives that you have yet given to it. But in all that love and devotion remember that it is in reality, not the church itself as an end in itself that you love, but the church as the institution through which you hope to see realized the highest intellectual, moral and spiritual possibilities of human life. In the real fighting army the man in the line loves the honor and the fair name of his company, the colors which float above it will carry him into the very jaws of death. He feels a deep and satisfying interest in the wellbeing, in the appearance, in the parade efficiency of the men. But his love is so deep and so true that he sees that the moral integrity of the company depends not upon the full company before the battle, but upon the depleted group that raise their shout of victory in the triumphant vindication of the success of the principles for which they have been fighting. Man after man, for the love and the honor of the company, and for the principles for which the whole army is fighting, will go into the fray, little knowing, and not much caring, what becomes of him so long as the fight is won. For that adventurous task in the presence of which the church of the modern spirit stands today, we need and we must have that same heroic spirit. You need it. I need it, that we may make full response to the call of the modern world to come and help in the great adventurous task of giving to the modern world its true moral and spiritual values.