

The Nature and Function of the Church

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

April 4, 1909¹

I wish to state as clearly and as forcible as I may what seems to me to be the true nature and function of the Church. What I shall say is indeed not a mere personal opinion, but is a restatement of the essential principles and purposes that have been stated time and time again during the history of human progress. It is the task of each generation, and of each group of people, to state these principles in such terms and such language as best expresses the thought forms of that group and generation.

Religion is a natural function of the human soul. In every stage of human development, so far as our information carries us, we come upon the evidences of the inevitable and natural expression of this religious attitude of the human soul. Man has not been able, thus far, to flee from the presence of that deep feeling that allies him to the unseen. In fact, he has not been able to escape the various historical witnesses that remain to us as evidences of the natural and the sincere expression of the feeling, that thought, that mystery of life that we call religion. In spite of all the arguments of philosophers, and theologians, historians and whatever other type of man we may consider, the fact remains that the human personality has always manifested the evidence of a feeling aroused by the consciousness of a presence greater than itself, to which it is akin, and with which it makes a common cause.

That fundamental fact in human nature, arising because of the very nature of man himself, has in all ages and under all conditions, produced certain individual and social habits, customs, and institutions, through which the individual and social groups give expression to, and an interpretation of, this natural religious characteristic, and its significance in human life. It may be that this religious impulse will express itself

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

in that custom which sends the Indian warrior off to some distant mountain alone, and there in the solemn silence of the forest to stand for hours in communion with, and in meditation about, the Great Spirit. Perhaps it will send some tired and weary soul to the protecting arms of a great institution, where he may feel the comforting assurance of personal security, or again, it may send some devoted group on a great pilgrimage to a holy shrine. Still others interpret the feeling into [the] terms "freedom" and "heroism." Others into inspiring and uplifting literature, art. While to another the appeal is to a quiet and simple life of love and tenderness and affection. Whatever the form, the institution, or the custom may be, they all bear witness to the essential fact that the human soul is incurably religious. That it does feel the eternal relationship which it bears to the Infinite, and to the best of its ability, and in the light of its experience and capacity, interprets that relationship in terms of human life and thought.

The particular form in which the religious spirit of our western civilization has interpreted its religious experience is the Christian Church. Within the scope of this body we have an almost countless variety and diversity of manifestations, but we assume that they are all dominated by the one spirit. In each one of these numerous forms we furthermore observe that moral character and the spiritual vitality of the Church varies directly as the moral character and the spiritual vitality of its constituency. Thus the Greek Catholic Church upholds and supports the religious and social standards of Russian civilization. While the Churches of this country reflect the state of civilization in which we live, and in its ideals, forecasts the directions in which we are progressing.

But in all this wide diversity of forms there are three essential principles to be observed as the fundamental principles of the church and the church life. I wish to speak of them. In them we can see the true character and function of the church.

Worship is the first and the fundamental principle of the Church organization. And the true meaning of worship is suggested by the words of Jesus. God is a spirit, and those that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.² That is to

² John 4:24.

say, worship is not a ceremony, or a form which people perform to tickle the vanity and appease the wrath of some potentate. It is not a system of court manners by which we are ushered into the presence of some great high priest, and there to ask and receive favors. It does not consist in ceremony or in ritualistic forms. On the contrary, it does consist of an experience of communion in which we feel our relationship as finite beings to the infinite. In those moments of communion, which are sometimes called moments of inspiration, there surges through our whole being a deep sense that we are a part of, and an agent of, the great unseen in the midst of which we live and move and have our being. We are conscious of a power and a relationship that is quite beyond our words to express.³

³ Here, unfortunately, the manuscript ends, incomplete.