The Church and The Crisis
In Religion*

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Nearly two thousand years ago when the destinies of the infant Church seemed to be at a very low ebb, Christ uttered a prophecy which for sheer audacity is perhaps unmatched in all literature. By any pragmatic test, the future of the Church at that time was very unpromising. And yet in its darkest hour Christ spoke the words of the text, “I will build my Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Matt. 16:18-19. Twenty centuries have passed, and here it is, the most vital, persistent and dynamic force in the world. Through the vicissitudes of the centuries it has endured, ever transforming the crude, intractable milieu of the world into steadily improving patterns of practical expression and idealistic conception.

Today, I want you to think about this divinely commissioned institution, the Church. I shall discuss its nature, its place in history, and the present crisis in which it finds itself. In so doing I hope to make clear the part we ought to play as individuals and as an institution in the present, confusing scheme of things.

I

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

The New Testament term for the Church is Ekklesia, which means a called-out assembly of men. The word is used 111 times in the New Testament. The term has at least four uses or applications: 1. the universal Church formed of regenerated persons vitally united to Christ; 2. the local church; 3. a group of churches; and 4. the visible church without reference to locality or number.

It is the larger and more comprehensive meaning of the Church which will occupy us here. By this I mean the concept of the Church as the whole body of the redeemed in this age. This implies not an organization but an organism. It is the “body of Christ,” a distinct “mystery,” according to Ephesians 3:1-11, the unfolding of which was committed to the Apostle Paul. This universal, redeemed brotherhood of man is mentioned three times in the Gospels, nineteen times in the Acts, and sixty-two times in Paul’s epistles.

This Church, “which is His body,” is revealed in its varied relationships and missions. It is a part of the Kingdom of God, but not the whole of it; for the Kingdom includes all moral intelligences in every age and sphere which are subject to the divine authority. Corporately, it is “His body, the fullness of Him that fills all in all.” The body is for service and manifestation; and so this Church is charged with the marvelous privilege of making Him visible to men.

The text reveals the two-fold function of its nature and office. The Lord’s confession concerning His Church, “Upon this rock I will build my Church,” was made in answer to Peter’s confession that he was the

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Messiah. "Thou art the Messiah" is the eternal fact upon which the Church must forever rest. Emil Brunner is exactly right in his great book, *The Messiah*, in making the messiahship of Jesus the central fact in the entire moral universe.

The function of the Church is implied in these challenging words: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." This reveals the nature of the Church as a conquering army, leading an exodus out of all bondage, even death. The figure is that of an army marching forth to war. The conflict is against the opposing forces of evil in our world. Christ's description of His Church is that of a glorious, militant, aggressive, victorious host that storms the very gates of hell, and wins. The Church in our day, when measured by this standard, seems to leave something to be desired. It looks more like a force that has been routed and has hought shelter within its citadel. It seems to be fighting a defensive battle rather weakly. To this extent it violates its own nature and betrays the confidence of its head and Lord.

"I will give thee the keys of the Kingdom." This speaks of the office of the Church as the repository of a true, a moral, authority. It is entrusted with responsibility concerning the ethic of heaven for the government of earth. Therefore, its witness should be clear, positive, and uncompromising. The present weak, confused, vacillating attitude does not comport with the high, divine destiny of the Church of Christ.

A very exalted view of the nature of the Church is set forth in Ferre's recent book, *The Return to Christianity.* He develops the thesis that the Church is the "Kingdom of God on earth"; "it is the extension of the Atonement"; it is "the embodiment in history of the Holy Spirit"; and it is "the end for which God made the world." He is definite and specific concerning the Church's relation to the world; yet he is very positive in asserting that "the first function of the Church, nevertheless, is making God known and effective in the hearts of men." Incidental to this is the obligation of the Church "to condemn all evil," "to offer forgiveness, pardon, and healing to confused and weary men, and to indoctrinate its members, especially the young, not only with the faith that in saving gives steadiness and creativity to human lives, but also with the ideals of a Christian society and a Christian world."

This view would seem to hold the individualistic and the social aspects of the Gospel in proper balance. It is in line with the great declaration of Christ in Mark 12:30-31: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength—and—Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." It is needless to remark that the Church of the past has been chiefly concerned with the piety of the law (relationship to God), but now the morality of the law (relationship to man) is receiving great consideration. That is well; for we cannot be God's children without sharing God's concern for the world. In short, the Church is one of the redemptive agencies of God in the world.

**II**

**The Church in History**

The Church has proven to be the most adaptable, the most resilient, the most tenacious and the most aggressive institution in the history of western Europe during the past two thousand years. Its conquest of the Roman Empire in three or four centuries is one of the greatest exploits in all history. Without a king, army, captain
or sword it went forth to conquer by force of ideas alone.

I know it is the fashion to condemn the Church of the past as an obscurantist, reactionary impediment in the march to progress. It is popular to condemn it as the foe of every man of science who dared to suffer for the truth. It has been charged with fomenting and waging unholy wars, of supporting corrupt political systems, and of defending iniquitous social and economic systems.

Now one wonders just what theologies and creeds these critics have been reading. So far as I am able to discover, no church of the past or present has ever made a creedal statement on political theory, economics, social theory or natural science. Not even evolutionism, which is admittedly revolutionary and disruptive of faith, has evoked official dogmatic or creedal statements from most of the churches. Nor has any Church, excepting the Quakers, Mennonites, Brethren and a few others, made a creedal statement on such a burning issue as the nature of war.

We are ready to admit that there have been men in the Church who did all the things these critics charge. But very often they were the immoral, simoniacal politicians and demagogues who have been sharply condemned by the spiritual men in every age. So far as my information goes, Roger Bacon, Galileo, Kepler, Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, Millikin and Jeans have been sons and, for the most part, loyal members of the Church. Why not recognize these as valid representatives of the Church as well as the corrupt politicians who might have dominated its machinery? I prefer to believe that the true Church has always been abreast of the intellectual advance, if not in a leading position. It has been foremost in the conquest of truth, and the material forces of each age; yet the symbol of her unity as the seal of her conquest is the abiding Christ in the human heart, in human life, and in human society.

No, I cannot accept the pessimistic view that the Church has been a stumbling-block in the path of progress. I am sure the story of history will not sustain that thesis. History will tell us that idolatry and bloody sacrifices perished from the vast domain conquered by Christianity, and the nameless vice disappeared with heathenism. It will tell us that marriage received a new sanction and sacredness, the home a purity, and woman a position of honor before unknown when the Church triumphed in the world. History will tell of the introduction of a thousand philanthropies unknown in a heathen world. Mercy came into public law and civil society through the Church. Children, widows, orphans, slaves, prisoners, the sick and the maimed, the wretched debtor and the outcast, were to know a new compassion and sympathy when the Church won.

Let us not disparage the role of the Church in our civilization. What we call modern life and modern civilization rests definitely upon it. The conversion and training of the Germanic peoples, the builders of this western culture, was the work of the Church. Through it were mediated the arts and culture of the ancient world. Our civilization does not draw its principles, or methods, or inspiration from heathen sources, whether of the orient, or Greece, or Rome; nor from Mohammedanism, infidelity, or atheism, but from western Christianity. Our democracy is solidly based on the idealism of the Sermon on the Mount and the Golden Rule, which has been fostered by the Church. When that idealism goes, democracy will become untenable and we will have the "man on horseback."

It requires only superficial insight to see that redeemed men who have
become the sons of God have been the “salt of the earth” in every generation. It is certainly becoming increasingly apparent that it is folly to expect deliverance from the menace of the impending crisis of this hour from United Nations Organizations, Security Councils, communistic millenniums or penny- wise” politicians. Our hope must be in the Christ of history. He said, “I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” That glorious destiny divinely foretold has not yet been realized. Our help must now come from this source, or it will not come at all. It is preposterous to look to God-denying, Christ-rejecting political, economic or social systems to save us.

III

The Present Crisis

Within the past one hundred years a revolution profound and far-reaching has precipitated the greatest crisis in the history of the Church. This revolution has challenged the very fundamentals of the Faith. The Protestant Reformation had gone deep, but the identities between Protestants and Catholics were deeper still. The world of Luther was not materially different in its basic conceptions from the world of Athanasius and Augustine; and the world of Jonathan Edwards was substantially the same as Calvin’s. That is to say, western civilization was essentially Christian in outlook.

The point of departure for the forces which have so greatly modified the modern outlook may be taken as the year of the publication of Darwin’s Origin of Species, 1859. This achievement suggested the formula by which science and history have been restated; and the physicists, chemists, biologists and psychologists have been quick to relate their theories to the new viewpoint.

Among others who contributed to the revolution the following may be named: James Hutton, in his Theory of the Earth, was the first to question the Genesis cosmology. Lyell, in his Principles of Geology, attempted to show how the earth was molded; he also developed the theory of the sequence of fossils, and he formulated the doctrine of Uniformitarianism in place of the doctrine of Catastrophism as taught in the Bible. Herbert Spencer developed a cosmic evolutionism by advocating a general evolutionary system in all branches of human thought. Laplace produced the Nebular Hypothesis which enabled the scientists to discard neatly the doctrine of Creationism. The results were so startling that William James was led to observe at the turn of this century that a revolution had occurred in a single generation which was so profound and transforming that the old truths, which had spoken so savagely and livingly to our fathers, now seemed as strange and outlandish as if they had come from another planet.

This revolution along with the scientific front was paralleled by the rise of the “Higher Criticism” on the biblical front which produced a further reaction upon faith and caused the average man to lose his bearings. On the psychological and philosophical fronts, materialism influenced the attitude of multitudes, and Pragmatism, with its relativism in ethics and morals, destroyed the faith of men in the finality of Christ and Christian truth.

The upshot of all these profoundly disturbing theories has been to plunge us into an age of confusion. Science, Biblical criticism, psychology and philosophy have all had their share in making people impatient with the inherited systems of belief, or doubtful or defiant of them. Dean Inge has described the situation thus, “The Industrial Revolution has generated a
in the past. An unnatural and unhealthy mentality has been developed, whose chief characteristic is a profound secularity and materialism. Men are impatient of discipline, scornful of old methods, contemptuous of experience, and unwilling to pay the price of the best.

This scientific revolution produced a serious rift within the organized Church itself. The modernist-fundamentalist split is familiar enough to all. The present state of that problem is cogently analyzed by Dean Willard L. Sperry in his recent book, Religion in America. He finds our theological world sharply divided, with our most vocal and assertive leaders ranged either at the humanistic left or the neo-orthodox right. Between these extremes he sees a great middle group which is without effective spokesmen and candidly perplexed and inarticulate.

The Dean describes the theological left as “a group of resolute persons who are convinced that we should accept the full logic of our liberalism over the last century and a half, and go on to an unashamed humanism.” He also points out the crisis among the liberals. He says many of them are “tired of the summons to self-reliance.” They are looking for some spiritual and moral power not themselves to which they may give themselves. They find it increasingly difficult to hold the blandly cheerful view of human nature which was once the fashion. Even Bishop McConnell, writing in the Church School Magazine at the time of Pearl Harbor, said flatly that we have been too optimistic in our view of human nature. We have refused to recognize that there is something demonic in human nature, which thing was then finding expression in German and Japanese atrocities. Although he would not go back to the orthodox doctrine of original sin, his inference was that we must develop a modern equivalent of that doctrine. Walter Lippman expressed the very same ideas in his column at the same time.

At the theological right is neo-orthodoxy, headed by Karl Barth. This movement advocates return to the theology of the Reformers; as such, it is crypto-Calvinistic to say the least. From our local viewpoint, it over-emphasizes the divine sovereignty at the expense of human responsibility, and it unduly disparages human nature. But it is the most challenging movement on the theological horizon at the moment, and it definitely spearheads an international theological advance in the direction of an evangelical Christianity.

There are also evidences that the theological right is at a cross-roads—it has its crisis. An editorial in United Evangelical Action for August 15, 1946, is an arresting article. Editor Murch tells of a meeting of young evangelical scholars in a conference “with the express purpose of discovering the weaknesses of evangelicals and possible ways and means of overcoming them.” He says these young evangelicals discovered that there are two kinds of evangelicals. One group crystallized and solidified its creed and practice at the 1880 level, the time when liberalism began to make great inroads upon the Church. The other group seeks to be modern without being modernists. These are not afraid of an intellectual approach to the problems of our day.

Editor Murch gives us this soul-searching criticism, and, since he is talking about his own family, his criticism must be regarded as purely constructive:

Even in evangelism, the pride and joy of fundamentalism, there is a serious lack. Evangelists of this type place a premium on ignorance. Their sermons are so lacking in intellectual content that they fail completely to challenge thinking

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people. These sermons are aimed at the emotions, not the mind. They consist of jargon so stereotyped that when these evangelists hear a thinking evangelist preaching New Testament doctrine in our modern-day English language they suspect that he is a modernist. . . . It is small wonder, under this type of evangelism, that thousands are lost as soon as the wave of emotion has passed.

He points out that too often these churches are a thing apart from the community.

There is little personal witness or testimony as to the position of the church in the world, little discussion between individuals concerning the bases of Christian behavior. Sometimes the avoidance of lipstick, bobbed hair, wearing of jewelry, lodges or movies marks the church members from others in the community, yet these same people may be guilty of sins of hypocrisy, bigotry and a Pharisaism far more serious in the eye of God and man.

IV
A CHALLENGE

In the stirring book previously referred to, Return to Christianity by Ferré, the author sweepingly indicts science, traditional theology and modernism. He calls them all “cracked bells.” Our task, he says, “is to melt down these cracked bells and to forge a Christian bell that will ring true enough to be convincing and loud enough to be heard.” He proceeds to show in vigorous detail how and why these bells have cracked.

Science is the bell to which this age has listened most intently. It revolutionized our world by making it richer and more comfortable and by forging new and sharper weapons of truth. But it failed because it became materialistic. It has nothing to say about ultimate reality. It has chosen to delimit its sphere to the purely physical-historical world. Men are beginning now to understand that its naturalistic metaphysics is not scientific. By leaving out all moral purpose, science has failed, even practically. In the brightest day of scientific achievement civilization has been more broadly and deeply threatened than ever before.

Traditional theology has failed, according to the author, “because, instead of believing in the power of God’s love (as shown in the life, teachings and death of Jesus Christ) to transform both man and society, it merely projected actuality as it now is, with its good and bad, into an intensified eternal dimension.” The result has been to lower the demands on conduct, particularly on that of society, almost to the point of the prevailing conventional standards. Too often it became allied with the status quo of the world, compromised its spirit and message, and failed in its true mission as the herald of a daring prophetic power for the transformation of all the relationships of men.

Modernism failed because its standards were not primarily religious. It claimed to be a religion, but its standards were those of positivistic science. It became overly intellectualistic, whereas faith appeals to the will and to the emotions. “Although its Christian sensitivity gave it a social concern, it tended to lose both religious and social force because it was all the while blind to the fact that an adequate religion must have its source, standard, and dynamics in a power primarily not of this world.” His general conclusion is that traditional theology, while it is very religious, failed because it was not Christian enough; and modernism, while it was basically Christian in thought, failed because it was not religious enough. One gets the idea that the ideal type of Christian would be a modernist imbued with the ardor and zeal of a fundamentalist evangelist. Up to now those two things have seemed to be mutually exclusive.

Dr. Ferré is severe and caustic in his criticism of things as they now are. And well he might. His criticism is not merely negative; it is end. He goes on...
to expound his views as to what real Christianity is and how it should perform. He defines true Christianity as agape (Christian love). To those who are familiar with Wesley's teachings on perfect love, the author's exposition has a very familiar ring. But for loftiness of ideal and exalted standard of conduct there is nothing in holiness literature which surpasses it.

A few quotations will suffice to show the author's general view. It is to be observed that he is dealing with the positive, objective aspects of Christian love, whereas the Wesleyan school has, perhaps, been more concerned with the negative, subjective aspects.

Christian Agape is complete, self-giving concern for others.

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In such community all selfishness is gone; all indifference is gone; all ignorance which springs from individual and social inertia—is gone.

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In it there is no suspicion, no envy, no evil imagination of the heart.

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The individual finds himself in a friendly, appreciative, helpful fellowship, which brings out the best in him in terms of growth, creativity, and spontaneity, for in the finding of this fellowship he has also found his deepest self.

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The will to live has become a will to love; the will to power, a will to fellowship; the will to superiority, a will to service; the will to social recognition, a will to social responsibility and concern.

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In Agape, man wants to be used by God, his heart overflows with gratitude and joy for what God is for the whole world, and he longs to serve his fellowmen better and to become a better member of the Christian fellowship.

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Live religion lives by worship, by prayer, by fellowship, by obedience, by service, by personal vision, by walking with God.

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Radical Christianity is needed 'that unmistakably shows the signs of the Spirit, that is no vital, that has such insight, power, concern, wisdom, and victorious enthusiasm, that it shows in short, such adequacy of spirit that men will own the source because they cannot deny the effects.'

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We cannot be God's children without sharing His concern for the world.

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Christian Agape is never fanatical, never merely tolerant, and never in the slightest sense negative.

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Christian Agape always strives for the truth, but is always humble, never quarreling, never offensive, never domineering, never defensive.

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We need men whose will to live has been freed from the will to power, to success, to superiority, to social recognition, to possession, and to pre-tense.

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We must have indispensably a new, sweeping Christian revival which is bigger than the old conversionism and deeper than the old social gospel.

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There must also come a new prophetic preaching deeply rooted in the Christian Gospel which will show the Church and the world what Christianity really is.

V

A LOCAL APPLICATION

No one can read the author's moving evangel without being deeply stirred. Here is a standard that is higher in some respects than Wesley set. As followers of Wesley, we are in sympathetic accord with the author's earnest appeal, and in my opinion we are in a position to do something about it. To put it in a hackneyed American phrase, "We are in a scoring position."

The question may be raised, "Is the ideal of Christian character and conduct herein delineated too lofty?" May it be that the author is pleading for something which our fathers described as Adamic perfection and which is unattainable in this life by poor, ignorant, deranged, fallen mortals? The complaisant thing, perhaps the instinctive act of self-defense, might be to dismiss the whole thing as the impractical dream of a visionary. In all probability the rational thing to do is to accept the challenge of it and make a supreme effort to do something about it.
If the author's standard may per-chance be out of our reach, may it not be true that we have been content to live by a standard that is indefensibly low. Perhaps we have been too ready to say that perfect love is a thing purely subjective, that it is a matter solely of motives, purposes and intentions; and that action, performance and conduct can never be brought into line because of infirmities and the weakness of the flesh. This excuses a lot of miserably poor living on the basis that our hearts may be pure and holy but our heads are uneducated and unlightened, therefore there must always be a disparate lag between purpose and performance.

It is indeed heartening to hear men from a totally different theological climate from ours begin to emphasize the things in which we have been traditionally interested. I have quoted largely from Sperry and Ferré, not because they have introduced something new and unheard of, but because they are speaking a language that has long been familiar to us. It should stir us to greater diligence in our efforts to more fully comprehend the great truths to which we stand committed and to increase our energy to more effectually make them known to others.

It has been shown that the major theological camps are in crisis. Perhaps it may not be amiss to say that the cause of Wesleyan perfectionism is also at the crossroads. It is this writer's opinion that the teaching on this great doctrine was largely crystallized and stereotyped by Ralston's Elements of Divinity, a magnificent work in Biblical Theology, three generations ago. Most of the literature which has appeared on the subject since has been purely inspirational and hortatory, and of the proof-text variety of exposition.

Needless to say, great disturbing problems in science, philosophy and psychology have emerged of which neither Wesley, nor Watson, nor Ralston ever dreamed. The need is for some frontier thinkers to take new ground for us and bring this basic truth up to date. The line of the new advance may be indicated in such a book as Dr. E. Stanley Jones' Christ of Every Road. I would particularly emphasize the splendid lectures on the subject by Dr. Paul S. Rees which were delivered here last year. I am sorry I have not had time to examine our own Dr. Turner's monograph on the subject. It does seem clear, however, that more light must be shed on the psychological factors of the sanctified life, and certainly more attention should be given to its ethical and social aspects.

The standard must be clearly and unequivocally set. There is nothing to be gained, however, by putting the standard too high and preaching something that we cannot experience. On the other hand, we must not lower the standard so that we condone wrong-doing of any kind, or tolerate an unchristian attitude or spirit. Both are enemies of the truth: they who make the way of salvation harder and straiter and narrower than the Bible does, and they who make the way too broad and easy.

CONCLUSION

We face a world that is in confusion. That goes for the religious situation quite as much as for the political, philosophical and scientific. Asbury Theological Seminary seems to have her work pretty well cut out for her. She has no denominational axe to grind, so she may serve the Church universal. Her aid is not needed in disseminating German rationalism and destructive criticism. The possibilities of that have been explored by others, and they have shown quite convincingly that vital godliness withers
in that climate. She need not major on the social implications of the Gospel. Too many seminaries have become lop-sided and have lost their vital, saving message to the world.

Dean Sperry gives us this illuminating analysis of the situation:

The idea of religion presupposes the paradox of God and man met in one experience. When either seems to monopolize that for which religion is supposed to stand, the dual quality which we associate with the experience is impaired. Neither the absolute sovereignty of God nor the final self-sufficiency of man preserves that which the idea of religion requires.5

I believe we may boast that this locates us. We have always maintained a position which may be called a synergistic essentialism. This is a median position between the theological left, humanistic liberalism, and the theological right which is crypto-Calvinistic neo-orthodoxy. Let us develop this field.

A critic says of theological seminar-

5 Sperry, p. 157.