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“The Church” in North America

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ANY one venturing to write on “the meaning of the Church”—a phrase which has doctrinal implications—is in for a frustrating time. Where can he go for a standard of judgment? Neither Catholic nor Protestant theological systems yield a “doctrine” of the Church. “The Reformation concept of the Church,” to quote Ernst Troeltsch, “arose not out of opposition to Catholic doctrine, but out of opposition to Catholic practice”.¹ Turn to the Catholic tradition and you meet an even more striking vacuum. An Eastern Orthodox scholar comments on this strange blank in the history of Christian thought: “It is impossible to start with a formal definition of the Church. For, strictly speaking, there is none which could claim any doctrinal authority. None can be found in the Fathers or in the Schoolmen, or even in St. Thomas Aquinas”.² The classic Reformation formula defining the Church as “a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered” has value, no doubt as a minimal touchstone of a true church, but (as Brunner and Newbigin, among others, confess) goes only a little way toward throwing light on the real mystery of the Body of Christ. Brunner speaks somewhere of the Holy Spirit as “the step child of theology”. He could well make the step child a twin, the Church, along with the Spirit, a kind of theological orphan. “The mystery of the Church,” says the “evangelical” Jesuit, de Lubac, “is deeper still, if that were possible, than the mystery of Christ, just as that mystery was more difficult to believe than the mystery of God, a scandal not only to Jews and Gentiles, *but also to many Christians*”.³ The scandal symbolizes itself in such doctrinal riddles as visible over against invisible Church, *Ecclesia* over against Church (Brunner), Church of Faith over against Church in history, *Corpus Christi mixtum* over against *Ecclesia in sanctis*, *virgo mater*, Church over against sect, with the modern “denomination” further darkening counsel.

Has the American scene anything to contribute toward clarifying an understanding of the Church and toward uncovering clues to possible corruptions of its meaning under the Gospel? One contribution meets the observer’s eye at once. We live in the midst of an ecclesiological pluralism, or even anarchy, the like of which Christianity has never known before. In such an environment contrasts and comparative value judgments are inescapable; hence out of a study of our denominational pluralism some insights should emerge.

In the European homeland of all but the newest of our denominations, the idea of the “Church normal” is still that of the national or regional church, all Christians in a geographical area constituting the people of God in that locality, although the free churches of England represent, in a

measure, an exception to this. The unit is still the parish, thought of as a neighborhood (with neighbors in the same church), and not as with us, a congregation formed on the basis of choice by a worshipper, a dozen "parishes" being superimposed, layer upon layer, one on top of the others, with identical geographical boundaries, the neighborhood on a Sunday morning being scattered literally to the four points of the compass.

The idea of a national Church is so alien to our American experience, with our revolt against State Church totalitarianism still in memory, that we scarcely ever give it proper attention. State Church Christianity may deserve some or all of our scorn, but the idea of the regional Church and the neighborhood parish does not. However successfully we may have avoided, in fortunate situations, cut-throat competition between denominations, the scandal of disunity remains. And this is not merely a nice theme for sentimental rhetoric. It can be judged by its fruits on any local scene. Bishop Newbigin, in his masterly opening chapter of *The Reunion of the Church*, pictures the devastating result of superimposed denominational parishes on the mission field; the Church of South India, as its very name implies, being itself a return to the idea of the regional church. His analysis condemns us also. "Where," so he puts it (page 15), "there is a multitude of competing congregations it is well-nigh impossible for their members to feel resting upon themselves the full responsibility for their neighbors. Inevitably each congregation becomes more concerned with the maintenance of its own distinctive life. But where there is only one congregation it is impossible for its members to escape from the solemn recollection that on the day of judgment it is they and they alone who can be questioned about their neighbors who had never heard the good news."

Denominational pluralism surely resembles what on the economic plane the churches repudiate—*laissez faire* competitiveness. A "free" ecclesiastical economy is not without happy results. It probably accounts, in part, for our American Church attendance statistics, which fill the European visitor with awe. But an unhappy result is also clearly evident—introversion. Time and effort, particularly on the part of the ministry, is monopolized by the struggle to remain alive, or, in more populous regions, to outdistance a rival denomination in architectural grandeur or parish house comfort. When I drive through Washington, I shudder at times over our mania for church building. Might our competitive Christianity deserve some day to be buried under brick and stone, as God once robbed the ancient *ecclesia* of its temple on His own holy mount? The phenomenal growth of the Pentecostal "sects," which ignore, for a time at least, the call to erect Gothic shrines, could remind us of the fact that "Church", in the New Testament, meant first of all a people of God united by a common faith and the living presence of Christ as Holy Spirit and not by institutional ambitions.

Such an argument needs footnotes, no doubt. Yet introversion is an ominous characteristic of our denominational rivalry, from which the Pentecostal groups are, of course, not exempt either. Consideration of introversion leads into a basic doctrinal question—one concerning the purpose of the

Church in God's design. We confront the biblical doctrine of election. "Churches" we know, but what about *the* Church? Christians are the chosen people of God, "a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people" (I Peter 2:9). Chosen *out* or chosen *for*? Is the Church the *result* of the proclaimed Gospel, or is it the *instrument* for the proclaiming? Is it end, or is it means for an end? Are its evangelizing efforts to point inward toward itself, snatching converts out of the "world," which is by definition lost and under damnation, or are these efforts to be directed outward toward the world, witnessing to a message of good news and to a covenant of grace not created by the Church at all, but "pre-existent" and embracing world as well as Church, and of which the Church is merely the custodian and outward and visible sign?

I am aware of my inability to formulate this question adequately. Even Frederick Denison Maurice, who spent his life trying to bring it into the open, is not easy reading. But evidence accumulates that one of the most important clues to the meaning of the Church must be sought in wrestling with this dilemma. Rome, with its self-divinization, sees a clear course ahead. Secular culture—the "profane," to use Paul Tillich's designation—is simply devoured and brought under totalitarian rule. Rome is under the illusion that she need not witness to a Kingdom or a covenant beyond herself, since she claims to be that Kingdom in incarnational form. The "sect," in turn—I am thinking of a genuine remnant sect like the Mennonites, though sect mentality is by no means absent from our larger communions—also finds in introversion its true vocation. The Christian congregation is an island of the saved in the midst of an alien world. Rome and the sects assume responsibility for the total life of the community under their control.

Neither of these ways of witnessing to the Gospel seems to be possible for the Protestant "churches." In dealing with them, however, we confront a complex phenomenon, partly symbolized by the fact that we often designate them by the novelty-word "denominations." (It is noteworthy that the Oxford Dictionary cites Benjamin Franklin as the first one to use the word as a synonym for sect, and that it derives from a Latin original meaning "calling by another than the proper name"!)

A complete analysis of our denominational pluralism would have to differentiate between the older Reformation communions (Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican), transplanted to America and those which have emerged from a more definitely sectarian ancestry. It would also need to trace the metamorphosis which occurs in the life of all but the most stubbornly "monastic" sects when the momentum of the first generation founding has subsided. Motivated at first by building itself up from below on the quality of its members' faith and holiness, the sect is soon compelled to build also from above, borrowing institutional forms and compromised disciplines from its older sister communions. One can think, to cite one crucial example, of the way in which a sect transformed into denomination creates for itself, as do the older churches, a ministerial succession almost as exclusively guarded and nurtured as in the Catholic tradition—an ecumenical scandal which Charles

Clayton Morrison excoriates as the root sin of our rival denominational imperialisms.⁴

But, whatever their origin and whatever baggage from the past they bring into the present, a score of Protestant "churches" dominate the American scene, each superimposed on the local level on top of rivals and each competing with its neighbors. These churches are no longer enclosed sects, having accepted, at times unwillingly, perhaps, the idea of a church as a *corpus mixtum*. They revolt against Romanist cultural imperialism. How do they solve their vocation of witnessing the Gospel to the world?

To many an observer it seems evident that their danger is surrender to the world. I recall a remark of Reinhold Niebuhr: "The great danger of Catholicism is mysticism; the great danger of Protestantism is secularism—and I do not know which is worse." Generalizations usually call for correctives, yet I venture to let the generalization stand. I know that it applies with humiliating force to my own Episcopal Church. The truth of the generalization can be tested by listening to the non-church citizen's appraisal of his neighbors. How are they different from their secular environment, except by the observance of a few remnant ascetic taboos, sporadic attendance on Sundays at a peculiar pious exercise, and an offensive moralistic self-righteousness? The church on the local scene often resembles a club competing with a multitude of rival community sodalities—Rotary and Kiwanis, Parent Teachers Associations, the labor union cell, the American Legion, let alone the Country Club for the Cadillac worshipper. Even within the churches the secularist often notes the same competitive success-worship that he meets in business or sees written large on the society page of his newspaper—the commercialized bazaar, the fashionable wedding, the treadmill of guilds and men's clubs, each spending its energy in encouraging the members to attend the next meeting, why, no one quite knows. On the university and college scene the denominational church club is often the last refuge for the "squares," the social misfits on the campus, its mission important, no doubt, but frequently not differing significantly in kind from that of the fraternity or sorority next door.

Now, it is surely one of the glories of the Reformation churches that they broke down the iron wall between the sacred and the secular and hallowed the layman's vocation in the world. The Church's calling could again be seen, when truly apprehended, not as one of totalitarian rule over the state, but as that of proclaiming the free grace of God (justification by grace through faith) and mediating the unmerited love of God to the world, transforming its environment in place of subjecting it to condemnation or the status of inferiority. Can anyone doubt that when our American churches were thus a true leaven of the Gospel in secular society they went far toward transforming their cultural surroundings? Protestant America is still living on the spiritual capital which the Great Awakening and the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries left as a priceless deposit in our midst. One need merely think of the hundreds of church colleges which have moulded the mores of our people. Even the

Kinsey reports cannot obscure the fact that there is a great remnant of God-fearing moral restraint in our land, even several generations after the evangelical revivals have spent their force.

But there was, and is, a flaw somewhere in our American Christianity—possibly in Protestantism itself—which has allowed it to fall victim to "profane" secularization. Of the fact of a large measure of such surrender there can be little doubt. Convincing evidence lies ready to hand in the very college and university life which was, only a short time ago, the seed-plot of Christian social grace and moral discipline. By and large, our colleges and universities are today a mission field and not a witness to the faith of their founders. One keen observer comments on this amazing debacle,⁵ contrasting it with the parallel process of secularization taking place in Catholic countries, as follows: "When Jewish and Catholic expressions of the Church in its cultural dimensions decay there is ossification; in Protestantism there is evaporation."

The word evaporation is suggestive and deserves illustration.

If the Church is the Body of Christ elected to witness to a Gospel of grace, something tragic results when this "good news" is transformed into "sad news." Yet this is precisely what has happened in the ministry of the American pulpit. In our seminaries the Gospel may have been rescued out of the bog of humanitarian Liberalism, but the sermons preached in our Christian assemblies are still to a surprising extent in the slough of the Pelagian heresy. Justification by faith has been replaced by justification by works alone. We manicure morals. *Didache* divorced from *kerygma*, the legalisms of sanctification in place of the glorious liberty of the children of God, a few more publicans being turned into pharisees, rivalry in self-righteousness instead of the true fruits of the Spirit, ascetic taboos, proper for life in a monastery or a walled-off sect, perhaps, but now a moralism universalized, a sentimentalized perfectionist imitation of Jesus as First Christian substituted for a dying and rising again with a Savior Christ—the dismal catalog could long continue. Nor are churches like my own, with their liturgical safeguards, exempt from the indictment. And the results are frequently devastating. When sentimentalized and turned into "ideals," this moralism merely flatters the listener and evokes the defense of comparative self-righteousness. When taken seriously, it can result in the neurotic despair or the suppressed rebellion which is the hunting ground of the psychiatrist and turns him often into an enemy of the Church as an authoritarian monster. Not that ethical precepts and disciplines are alien to the life of the people of God. One could defend even some strict sectarian legalisms as proper for Christian witness, as the Roman Catholic cherishes his symbol of "fish on Friday." But when the *oughtness* of the Gospel is divorced from its *isness*, sentimentalism and secularization are bound to result. The secularists can confront the churches with the question: "What, a little Jesus admiration apart, do you really have that we do not have? Moral idealism? We have it too, and in realistic form, without perfectionist illusions, and with social science at our call."

Concern over our sermons is this writer's stock in trade, and I spare the reader further wailing. I turn to another corruption of the Church.

This is American Protestantism's trust in verbalism and the consequent withering away of the Christian sacraments. Here I may be accused of Anglican (or even Catholic) prejudice. But voices from within Protestantism are also aware of this deflection from the New Testament norm or that envisaged by the Reformers. Ernst Troeltsch speaks of the "dying of the sacraments" on Protestant soil, and Paul Tillich⁶ declares that Protestantism has never yet solved the problem of how, in its resistance to the sacerdotally monopolized cultus of Rome, it is to avoid yielding to secularism (Profanitat). "This resistance has attained such dimensions that the Cult has almost become a hidden-in-the-corner affair (Winkelangelegenheit)". European Christianity is guilty on this issue also, but a dying of the sacraments has probably gone farther with us. Verbal proclamation of the Gospel, granted its incomparable power, is after all a report about grace. It must be experienced as a power unto salvation in community before it can be fully known for what it is. How far would Alcoholics Anonymous succeed in its saving ministry if it limited itself to verbal proclamation? *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. All Christian experience validates this truth, even though we have to leave defining of the limits of the *ecclesia* to God. And Community life demands sacramental forms. We can pay high tribute to the typical American parish or congregation as a mediator of fellowship and acceptance. Our European brethren could profit from seeing it at first hand, since they lack, for the most part, "parish house Christianity." But a flourishing parish house, subject to the poisons of competition and secularization, can empty the sanctuary.

The Body of Christ is something more than genial sociality. It stands under the judgment of holiness. It is called to corporate repentance and a renewal of its corporate unity and power. The Church, as new covenant, is a divine, not a human creation. It must meet as the Body of Christ at the *Lord's* table, as well as at one which *we* spread for one another. Baptism, in the New Testament, is a realistic incorporation into the Body of Christ, a dying and rising again, and not merely a public testimony of a convert's individualised psychological experience. The Lord's Supper, in turn, is an action, a "showing forth of the Lord's death till he come," a corporate self-offering and a becoming one in Christ, and not a mere meditative memorial on the part of individuals attending an occasional and slightly archaic ordinance.

The point of all this—whatever be the delicate involvements of sacramental doctrine—is that the withering away of the sacraments in our American Protestantism, unless checked, can have serious consequences for an understanding of the Church. Our Protestant cultus should not for ever find its meaning in a revolt from Rome. The Catholic cultus does give to the individual worshipper a sense of belonging to the Church of history as well as the here and now, the Church itself part of a given Gospel. When the Catholic listens to prayers and joins in litanies and rites coming out of

the long past of the Communion of Saints, he cannot possibly remain under the illusion that he, with his fellow worshippers, is creating the Church even by ever so genuine a conversion experience or gathered assembly of believers.

I heard a story, in Geneva, during a recent summer, illustrative of my thesis. An American visiting a French Protestant pastor was given a tour of the pastor's church. The American deposited a lit cigar outside the door, the French pastor continuing his smoking in the church itself. When the American expressed shocked surprise, he received the reply: "This is not a church until the Word is being proclaimed to an assembled congregation." A Catholic hearing this story could, to be sure, profit from it in his turn, since there is a truth in the French pastor's paradox. At a Catholic Mass the living congregation is at times merely an embarrassment. Worship could go on very well without it—a corruption of the understanding of the Church which the Liturgical Movement within Rome is trying to uncover and correct. But two wrongs do not make a right.

On this issue of the Protestant cultus, I am tempted to speak for a moment as an Anglican (I shall place us under judgment later). Half of the clergy of the Episcopal Church are converts from other communions, hundreds of them undergoing reordination. They testify to two main enticements—the appeal of the cultus of the Book of Common Prayer and liberation from the tyranny of church polities in which "church" has come to mean an institution motivated by secular power drives. They soon find that the "demonic" is not absent from their new allegiance. But their testimony does deserve recognition in ecumenical discourse. Recovery of Catholic traditions in our Protestant cultus is going on. Some of it, however, fills me with foreboding. Mere prettification of choir vestments, chance prayers and litanies culled out of the past, Latin anthems—this is not catholic worship at all. It is precisely *not* "Common" prayer or the rediscovery of sacramental corporateness. It is very *uncommon* (un-communal) prayer, often sentimental and creative of a further chasm between ministry and people, which is precisely what cultic recovery should avoid. The clue to cultic reform in our Protestant worship, rescuing it from secularization and from individualism on the part of minister and people alike, lies elsewhere.

In the foregoing paragraph I cited a second indictment voiced by Anglican converts against the communions from which they transferred—namely, that "church" was there experienced as secularized institution; its promotional drives, even when aimed at membership enrolment, turned inward, its goals size and power, the church's hierarchy burdened with administrative technology. The Anglican's self-righteousness needs the humbling of Judgment Day. His drawing a contrast between Catholic and Protestant church order, however, does call attention to a real issue. Institutionalism and order of some sort (Emil Brunner's *Misunderstanding of the Church* to the contrary) is inevitable in the historic life of a corporate body which does not wish to fall victim to disruption or to an anarchic unitarianism of the Third Person of the Trinity, which is what Brunner's

argument seems to picture as norm. But it does make a difference whether the "overseeing" ministry in a church is sacramental and placed under the church's own doctrinal disciplines, or merely labelled doctrinally indifferent and thus an easy victim to secular power drives. An overseer called by his flock "Father-in-God" or Chief Shepherd is less likely to be a symbol of administrative tyranny than one who wields authority on the analogy of a factory manager.

But I present this ecumenically explosive issue merely by way of a parenthesis. The problem of the Church as institutional Leviathan confronts all of us, even though there may be differences in the degree to which it has become demonic and a substitute for the Church as a fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Bishop Berggrav⁷ accuses the American churches of being "ingelatinised". We can soften the indictment, but we can profit from it also—as we can from Brunner's placing the modern institutionalized church under the judgment of the New Testament norm. In the volume of the Oxford Conference dealing with the Church,⁸ American Methodism is defined by one European observer as "an attempt to combine institutionalism and individualism." The church-name of any one of our denominations could be substituted for Methodism in this description. A vacuum of some sort exists in our American church life between impersonal institution and atomized membership, and nowhere more conspicuously, despite its sacramentalized church order, than in my own Episcopal Church, and indeed in the Catholic tradition generally, though on this issue our Protestant churches seem to have imitated their ancient rival. Because this vacuum is most obvious in Catholicism, the clearest descriptions of it may also be found in contemporary Catholic reform literature. I, at least, know of no more penetrating analysis than that found in *Revolution in a City Parish*, by the French Roman Catholic Abbé Michonneau.

To define the vacuum in a simple sentence or phrase is not easy. Possibly the best approach to an understanding of it is by way of two concrete allusions: (1) What has happened to the Methodist "class meeting", or its correlative in the churches of the Congregational tradition? (2) What is the secret of the appeal of the Pentecostal sects? To put the question in another version: Where does the average member of one of our churches ever experience fellowship on the deep level of shared submission to the judgment of the Lord, or of confession of failure, or of the need for brotherly help in our personal and corporate warfare against sin, the world, and the devil? Where is the Church as Fellowship of the Holy Spirit? An acquaintance of mine who had been permitted to visit a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous and there saw something resembling what an early church *ecclesia* might have been like, came away with the cry: "Show me the quickest way to a whiskey bottle!"

We speak of the Church frequently enough as the Body of Christ. We know it as institution. We know it as a collective of individuals. But where is it as a living body with living cells, as a fellowship intimate enough or personal enough to permit "I-Thou" encounters? St. Paul describes a

first century Christian fellowship as one in which "everyone hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation." And he ends his little sermon on "spiritual" fellowship with the plea, "Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy and forbid not to speak with tongues" (I Cor. 14: 26, 39). Where have most of us experienced anything like this? We encounter in our churches in its place a ministerial monopolizing of prophesying, of counselling, even at times of witnessing in the social dimensions of a church's life which is little less stifling of the priesthood of all believers than the sacerdotalism of Rome. It is surely significant that hundreds of American Christians, if privileged to attend one of our "new life" centers (Kirkwood, Parishfield) or a summer church conference, experience for the first time the meaning of the Church as Fellowship of the Holy Spirit and its miraculous powers of healing the deep hurts of loneliness and of our depersonalized secular culture. Individualism is caught up in life-in-fellowship, and the "person" is born.

Emil Brunner balances his phobia against institutionalism with a helpful exposition of the problem we face in our time of rediscovering the right relationship between person and community: "You may call the Gospel existential truth, because it cannot be grasped objectively but only in an act of total personal surrender; you may call it community-truth, because it cannot be had outside the community with Christ and His people. . . . It seems to be the task of us Christians of this age to rediscover the unity of truth and community, of truth and existence, in the sacramental existence in Jesus Christ."⁹

The Gospel transformed into moralizing legalisms, justification by grace replaced by justification by works, a secularized competitive parochialism, merely remnant sacramental corporateness, and a demonic institutionalism—these may well be corruptions of the meaning of the Church on the American scene. For some standards of correction our churches could look to their Catholic neighbors; for others to the regional churches of Europe and of the lands of the younger churches; for still others to the norms found in the New Testament itself and recovered in part at the Reformation. But not least they should look to their own past and the little Spirit-empowered fellowships across the street from our pillared shrines which are reduplicating that past, but whose isolation needs redemption in the Great Church of tradition and order, yet without loss of the fruits of the Spirit manifested in their warm personalized fellowship life.

NOTES

1. Article "Kirche", in "*Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*".
2. G. Florovsky, "*The Universal Church in God's Design*", p. 43.
3. "*Catholicism*", p. 28.
4. See "*The Unfinished Reformation*".
5. J. Coert Rylaarsdam in "*Christianity and Society*", Autumn, 1953.
6. Essay "Natur und Sakrament" in *Religiöse Verwirklichung*, Berlin, 1929.
7. "*The Christian Century*", September 16, 1953.
8. "*The Church and its Function in Society*" by W. A. Visster t'Hoof and J. H. Oldham, p. 42.
9. "*The Church in the New Social Order*", pp. 27, 28.