The Church as a Saving Fellowship

HARVEY H. POTTHOFF

UNDER a grant by the Carnegie Corporation the American Association of Theological Schools carried on a recent study of theological education in the United States and Canada. In the volume entitled "The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry," Dr. Richard Niebuhr, chairman of the study-committee, reports that one of the dominant impressions emerging out of the investigation was that of widespread "uncertainty of purpose" in the church life of America. It appears that churchmen are exceedingly busy doing many things, but not always with clear purpose or within the framework of a definable theory of the church and its ministry. Obviously, good morale and good work in the ministry involve a theory of the nature and importance of what we are trying to do.

In this article I should like to develop the idea of the Church as a saving fellowship. I should like to contrast this image with two other views of the Church—the sacramental view and the view of the Church as a community of the elect. The distinction is one of emphasis. Obviously I do not mean to imply that there are not fellowship aspects of a saving character in communions holding to divergent theories of the Church. However, there are differences of emphasis worth noting.

One cannot function simultaneously in terms of two or three different theories of the Church without getting some sort of ecclesiastical indigestion. I suggest that for the sake of our physical, emotional and religious health, we try to come to some definable theory as to who we are and what we are in the context of a specific doctrine of the Church.

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I. TWO CHURCH THEORIES

A. The Sacramental View

In Roman Catholicism we find a sacramental view of the Church together with specific notions of church authority. Cardinal Bellarmine's definition of the Church puts it clearly: ". . . a body of men united together by the profession of the same Christian faith, and by participation in the same sacraments, under the governance of lawful pastors, more specifically the Roman pontiff, the sole vicar of Christ on earth."[1] In this doctrine, the Church is only derivatively a fellowship of people. Membership is atomistic. The sacramental function does not rest upon personal, fellowship relation. The Church is supernatural, hierarchal, sacramental.

When we turn to the Anglican communion we find no one clear-cut doctrine of the Church—there are differing points of view. Yet, here is another communion based on a sacramental concept. A characteristic conception of Anglicanism is the theory of comprehensiveness; the Body of Christ is thought of as including different types of members, each useful. Within this comprehensive fellowship, however, is deep conviction of concurrence in the main stream of Christian doctrine. The Church is an historic institution, the society of people, perpetuating apostolic teaching, worship, and prayer.

Definite spiritual authority resides within the visible Church, supremely in the liturgical tradition. While there are variations of interpretation of episcopacy within Anglicanism, there is general agreement that the episcopacy is the earthly source of ministration of the sacraments, understood as means of

[1] Joyce, G. H., *Catholic Encyclopedia,* "Church," Vol. II, p. 745.

grace, through the receiving of which God's power and help come to the individual. Some Anglicans think of the Church as "an extension of the incarnation."

Anglicans believe themselves to possess the true apostolic ministry, with the episcopate seen as the main guardian of the tradition. Speaking from the perspective of the Church of England, Hodgson writes:[2]

> Not by any merit of our own, but by the inscrutable providence and grace of God, the Church of England believes itself to have been privileged to maintain a ministry united to that of the apostles by unbroken continuity of ordination. Its desire is to share this privilege with all congregations of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments are duly administered.

Granted the presence of both Catholic and Protestant elements in Anglicanism, we do well to consider that emphasis upon apostolic succession in ordination, and the sacramental understanding of the Church go hand in hand.

B. Reformation Views

Out of the Reformation emerged another image of the Church. The Reformation principles of justification by faith alone, the direct authority of the Scriptures, the right and duty of personal judgment in matters of faith, had profound implications for the doctrine of the Church. Grace was now interpreted as favor, forgiveness as a personal act of God in relation to man. A rejection of the hierarchal and sacramental forms of the medieval Church was implicit in this approach.

Luther challenged the priestly conception of the Church's function, and maintained a sense of the fellowship character of the Church. The Church appeared to him more of a means than the end. Luther thought of the Church as "the people of God"—a Divine-human communion of believers. At first he thought of the Church as the totality of the predestinated, but he relinquished this interpretation in favor of the view that the Church is the community of all true believers, and since these are saved, it may be called the community of saints.

The Word of God—which is Jesus Christ—is the mark of the Church. Faith is the constitutive element. Authentic, biblical preaching is central in the Church's function of bringing the gospel to the people. The Word is given the primary place above the sacraments, important as the sacraments are as **testimonies** to the Word. These convictions are gathered up in Melanchthon's interpretation of the Lutheran doctrine of the Church as "the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered." (Augsburg Confession.) Apostolicity from this point of view is found in the continuing authenticity of the presentation of the gospel—rather than in "succession of inheritance."

Reformed theology, stemming from Zwingli and Calvin, has centered in the conviction of God's controlling will. A corollary of this is an emphasis upon the doctrine of election.

Confining our comments now to Calvin, we may note that he developed a double theory of the Church—on the one hand, as the "invisible number of the elect known only to God," and on the other hand, the visible institution which is an "external help to faith." Calvin placed great emphasis on ecclesiastical discipline. The Church is a body apart, a community of pure people, pure in doctrine and conduct governed by the word of God. Thus, for Calvin discipline was placed alongside preaching and the sacraments as the function of the Church. The Church likewise has a mission to Christianize the community, being a trustee of spiritual insight and moral judgment.

I trust it is obvious that the sacra-

[2] Flew, Robert N., *The Nature of the Church,* New York: Harper, 1952, pp. 143, 146.

mental theory of the Church, and the view of the Church as the body of the elect, involve theological presuppositions not always in harmony with those set forth in previous articles in this series. The views of man, God, and divine grace involved in a theology of Dynamic Contextualism or Dynamic Immanance, do not mix very well with dualistic, substantive, authoritarian approaches. There is need for a theory of the Church which gathers up the dynamic, developmental, and contextualistic understandings of man, the universe, and God.

Nothing is to be gained by trying to gloss over real differences, nor by trying to function in one context of thought while using the instrumentalities of another. There is room for more than one doctrine of the Church in Christendom—both in theory and practice.

II. A SAVING FELLOWSHIP

A.

In talking about the Church as a saving fellowship, I wish to make some introductory observations. One is that salvation is to be understood in terms of dynamic process. Salvation has to do with one's religious orientation, responses, adjustments, evaluations, and relationships in the context of changing life situations.

We are told in the second chapter of the Book of **The Acts** that "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were **being saved.**" Salvation is no once and for all time and for all places salvation. So long as life goes on and there are new experiences to be woven into the pattern of life, new healings to be effected, growth to take place, we are "in process"—"going on" in the perfecting process.

In emphasizing the idea of fellowship we are affrming that the nature of the Church is determined by the nature of the purposes and relationships which exist among the participants. The Church is not imposed from outside, it emerges out of the matrix of shared quests, purposes, discoveries, experienes. It is marked by concern with and for religious values. Its members seek the new life and hope made available through the living God—both for themselves and others.

The "Church idea" is the idea that in the religious life there are some values which can be found in association which cannot be found in solitude. Someone has observed that a person many be damned by a poor fellowship, but he is seldom saved in isolation. On the human level, the transforming power of God oftentimes requires the instrumentality of a fellowship.

In all of this, the focus is on the Church in your town, in our world in its concrete reality. A great deal of discussion of Church theory leaves one with the impression that whatever the Body of Christ may be, it is a very ethereal thing—with little connection with the Methodist Church in your town. I am concerned with the life of God in the souls of specific men, in specific, locatable fellowships.

B.

The Church as a saving fellowship is oriented to the present and future, rather than to the past. Yet, it draws strength and guidance from its heritage.

Consistent with the spirit and perspective of Jesus, it is theo-centric. In harmony with the Church of the centuries, it turns to Jesus and the fellowship which He inspired for insight, guidance, undergirding strength.

Its primary appeal is not to some one Christological theory—there have been many; neither is it to the kind of Jesusology which tries to derive from the Nazarene authority for all sorts of ideas he never expressed. Rather, it appeals to His life, His teachings, His ministry, His continuing presence in the Church in their transforming power.

Certainly this is not to say that this is the only place God is operationally present. But here the Christian Church

took its rise; here men entered a new life and hope; here they affirmed God has moved among us in a saving way. The Christian Church keeps pointing to the constellation of events surrounding Jesus and the history which grew therefrom, as its distinctive, originating point of reference.

Through this One who lived nineteen hundred years ago — and through His continuing ministry in the Church — multitudes have come to a quickened awareness and deepened understanding of God; they have been led to commitment of life; a transforming dynamic has been released making for newness of life and hope. Jesus is the central organizing personality of the Christian fellowship. Through response to and identification with Him, through participation in the continuing body which manifests his spirit, devoted followers are led into deepend and saving relationships with God.

Dr. Fosdick once preached a sermon on "The Peril of Worshipping Jesus." Someone might well preach a sermon on "The Peril of Worshipping Some Theory **About Jesus.**" The meaning of Jesus for the Christian fellowship of today is on the soteriological level of bringing men to a new awareness and understanding of God and to a new and more excellent life. He is the Christian prototype, in whom the fellowship finds its binding, personal center.

The Church as a saving fellowship is aware of the rich heritage which it possesses. Its organization reaches throughout the world, with agencies of preaching, teaching, healing. We have a deposit of literature, symbolism, art, music, liturgy—the fruit of centuries. Ours are great systems of thought, the examples of saints, scholars, heroes. We honor our heritage most, not by making relics of these things. Rather, remembering that they came out of experienced religion—it is for us to utilize our heritage in the nurture of the Christian life in our own time and place.

The acid test of the Church is in the kind of people it is helping produce—not in its particular manner of preserving the by-products of someone else's religion, no matter how vital it was. It has been said that the Bible did not first produce religion but religion produced the Bible. So, we might say, given creeds and confessions did not produce the Christian religion—it was the other way around. Thus we may go **to** the Bible and ancient expressions of faith, but to stop there is to miss the point. It is only as we go **through** them to the life behind them that we are able to discern their possible significance as we seek our own first-hand experience of God. Products of yesterday's religion may be **means** in many instances—but are not the end.

When we come to the Church we are concerned not only with ideas about God and Man—we are concerned with ways, methods, techniques of bringing men to more productive relationships in life—to new life and hope. It is on the important, practical level of appropriating the divine resources, that we find special help in the heritage which has been bequeathed us. But even here the question is pertinent as to what materials from the past are relevant today. We need techniques which are consistent with the most enlightened views of God and Man and religious hope which are available to us.

C.

The Church as a saving fellowship takes with utmost seriousness the teaching that love is of God—and that an authentic Christian fellowship is one in which the healing sustaining and redeeming power of divine love is mediated into needy lives. More important than conformity of thought or the niceties of liturgy, more important than anything else is what is happening in the lives of people through their participation in the Church. Is the creating, sustaining, healing agency of God being released through the relation-

ships which make up the Church? Does the Church help people to affirm life, accept themselves, and enter mutually productive relationships marked by tenderness, respect, hope—to live out the days of their years in hopefulness of spirit and mature responsibility in a social context? Does the Church help people to look beyond all this to God's larger destiny in praise, adoration, trust?

Nineteen hundred years ago Jesus talked of love of God and man. Centuries later modern research affirms that work and love are basic elements in the healthful life. Indeed, our linkages with God are built in part upon human relationships.

We confuse the issue by making too much of given theories of the divinity of Jesus. We need, rather, to recognize the divinity of that which was released through His life and ministry—making for newness of life and hope. The Church is a saving fellowship insofar as it is an instrumentality of that same transforming dynamic.

A basic human problem is that of growing into the maturity which is capable of mutually sustaining responsible, concerned relationships. Lacking this capacity, one is arrested in his capacity to worship and serve God on a mature level. The road to a growing experience of God for many a person is a fellowship manifesting respect for persons, reverence for life, and a concern which goes out to meet the individual.

To be known as a person in one's own right, to share with others in a sincere religious quest, to seek with others to be an instrument of God's whole-making spirit, is to grow in one's capacity for the worship and service of God on profounder levels. Our culture knows too little of fellowships of depth in which the individual knows and is known. The story is told of the lady who was approached following a service in a Boston church and asked: "Are you a stranger here?" She replied, "Why, yes, I've been a stranger here for forty years!" Being present in a group and being a participant in a saving fellowship can be different things. Just now the world is hungry for qualitative fellowships, centered in the ultimate concerns of religion.

Entrance into the life of the saving fellowship is not conditioned upon the assurance of one's election or even upon one's readiness to affirm a formal creed. Entrance is based upon sincerity of purpose in the quest for a new life and hope through a new relationship with God. That there must be a measure of agreement on procedural matters is obvious. The point is that the shared purpose is the important thing.

Formalized affirmations **follow** shared experience of meaning. A creed may conceivably mark a culmination of some group's shared experience; but for another group simply to repeat the statement without sharing a similar experience may mean very little. We can do with more first-hand religion, with affirmations coming out of the soil of our own experiences of meaning.

There is no disposition in the saving fellowship to insist on everybody having precisely the same religious experience. It is understandable that someone who has experienced devastating inner conflict—and who in time has come to a religious resolution of his problem—may feel that everyone else should follow his particular pattern. However, it is essential that each individual make his own spiritual journey; the thing which marks the saving fellowship is not the sameness of the journey for all participants—but the will to share and give help where possible. The priesthood of all believers has modern relevance.

Underneath it all is concern for the religious growth of persons. Thus, there is continuing self-examination going on in the life of the saving fellowship. Are we ministering to religious needs at all age levels? Are we helping persons to look beyond those needs to the vision

of the Eternal Greatness in the spirit which says,

> Our little systems have their day
> They have their day and cease to be
> They are but broken lights of thee
> And thou, O God, are more than they.

D.

There is a self-giving concern manifest in the saving fellowship. Bonaro Overstreet has written of how many unloving persons — feeling alienated from the world, make their way to the Church—desperately needing a healing ministry. Sometimes they work their way into positions of influence. Their deep hostilities become manifest in dogmatism, intolerance, resistance to change or social responsibility.

One of the greatest practical difficulties in the theory of the Church being presented here is that of the hostile person, emotionally incapable for the time being, of creative human relationships. How to minister to him, opening the fellowship without compromising the effectiveness of the group in helping some other persons can be a difficult question indeed. Perhaps every minister has thought at times that it would be simpler to function in a more authoritarian framework!

Yet, as the years pass, and one looks back over the time he has been privileged to serve, faces come to mind of persons whose lives have been changed; persons who came to feel enough security that they could let down some of their defenses and enter more fruitful relations with God and Man because of the ministry of a fellowship of the concerned.

Estrangement, of course, takes many forms. Recently I was impressed with these words from Winston Churchill, written in 1941:[3]

> The mood and temper of the public with regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilization of any country. A calm recognition of the rights of the accused . . . constant heart-searching by all charged with the duty of punishment; a desire and an eagerness to rehabilitate . . . tireless efforts toward the discovery of creative and regenerative processes . . . unfailing faith that there is treasure, if you can only find it, in the heart of every man. These are the symbols which . . . mark and measure the stored up strength of a nation . . . proof of the living virtue in it.

If this be the measure of a civilization —what shall we say of the Christian Church? Is there ever the danger that we shall forget who we really are—and what we are—slipping into something akin to a rather well-satisfied social club than a redeeming fellowship?

Having a cross for the central symbol of one's faith is a sobering thing. It will not do just to tell people about some formal doctrine of atonement, or regiment them into some sort of creedal or social conformity, or give them the best of all possible theories. It is at the point that one takes upon himself, in some measure, the agony of someone else's inner battle, that the healing ministry with which we are entrusted, can be carried on.

Although we speak with the tongues of man and of angels, and although we have orders of worship prepared with the greatest care and conducted with the greatest finesse—although we raise bigger and better budgets and build bigger and better buildings—but communicate not the kind of personal concern for persons that suffer at times that they may grow out of their self-imprisonment into the light of a more friendly and sustaining world—it really profits very little.

At the end of a pastorate there is really only one question that matters very much—whom have you helped? At the end of a church year there is only one question that matters — to whom have we ministered as a congregation?

If a sacrament is a channel of God's saving grace, then the saving fellowship is a sacramental Church in this

[3] Hocking, William E., *The Coming World Civilization,* New York: Harper, 1956, p. 186.

sense—it is entrusted with the sacrament of concern and Christian love—which are, indeed, of God.

E.

Again, a saving fellowship is a studying, learning, discussing fellowship. While concentrating on the processes of religious growth of children, as we must, we have sometimes neglected the adolescent and adult years. We have learned much about familism, dependence, authority, wishful thinking and magical practice—factors which loom large in the religion of childhood.

However, somewhere along the way, we owe it to our people to say to them in effect, "you are permitted to grow up religiously."

There is too much carry-over of childhood patterns into adult programming. Allport writes: ". . . in probably no region of personality do we find so many residues of childhood as in the religious attitudes of adults."[4]

Be that as it may, it is well to communicate the fact that developing religion moves from level to level. There is the essentially primitive level of religion—characterized by an almost overwhelming sense of dependence. Deity is regarded as all-powerful, capable of changing things. Considerations of protection and creature-comfort loom large.

Next, there is a level of "going along with things"—a kind of resignation to what must be. Deity is regarded as powerful and **orderly** on this level.

There is still another level—marked not only by awareness of the dependable factors in reality and the need of assimilating life's inevitables—but by a growing awareness of what is worthy of devotion and self-investment. The maturing religious sentiment provides motive power "to live in accordance with a more adequate frame of value and meaning, and to enlarge and energize this frame."[5] It is on this level that the vision of greatness exercises its luring and transforming power. A new dimension of motivation enters the picture. Man achieves a new sense of worth through participation in that which is greater than himself. He is helped to assimilate the difficult through dedication to the worthful.

We are told that psychologically it is impossible for one to feel himself meaningfully linked to the whole of being before adolescence. This means that from adolescence on there is a new dimension to the religious life to be achieved. What a tragedy when we miss this all-important point in our church programming!

The minister of a large church told me that he plans his sermons with the fourteen-year-old in mind. He said "If a fourteen-year-old child cannot understand everything I say from start to finish, I regard the sermon as a failure." Statistically his church is doing very well—but what a tragedy—confining a pulpit ministry to those phases of the Christian message relevant only to the first fourteen years of life.

Are you ever troubled by the large number of thoughtful, informed, religiously-interested persons who do NOT turn to the Church for the nourishment of their spiritual lives?

A saving fellowship is one in which there is study and discussion in the quest for new understandings of man, God, Christian hope—seeking to relate these understandings to life's unfolding experiences. There ought to be something exciting about such discussion if one is not under obligation to come out at some pre-determined point. Perhaps you have heard of the new gadget called the Harwald Group Thinkometer—which, by a series of buttons placed before each member of the group, permits group decisions without the trouble or embarrassment of discussions. You press a button—Yes, No, Maybe—

[4] Allport, Gordon W., *The Individual and His Religion,* New York: MacMillan, 1950, p. 52.

[5] *Ibid.,* p. 64.

and the machine calculates the total reaction. This may have its place in some situations, but it will never take the place of what goes on in the serious inter-change of persons, speaking out of their own life-involvement—seeking and sharing. There is an emergent quality in genuine inter-change. How pitiful if any adult goes to church thinking: "Today we shall hear just a repetition of what we heard last week and the week before that."

Like a mighty tortoise
Moves the Church of God.
Brothers, we are treading
Where we've always trod.

It need not be so! Somewhere in every saving fellowship, study and conversation are going on, mind meeting with mind, in the exploration of the meaning of Christian faith for life.

F.

The preaching function is recast in this frame of thought. Exhortation has its place, but a partial place. Teaching in the sermon has its place, but a partial place. There is much of the element of quickening awareness—a lifting up, a pointing toward—which says: "Wake up and look! Do you see it? Here is a splendor, here is a greatness, here is a profundity we cannot afford to miss!" There is a kindling quality in this kind of preaching. What are we lifting up in our preaching? To what are we asking people to respond?

At the close of a pastorate some years ago, Dr. Charles Milligan made available in mimeographed form, several of his sermons. In an introductory statement he said this: "The purpose of (these sermons) has not been primarily to urge people to be good and religious. It has been to illuminate the significance of life, the thought being that a value or an opportunity clearly pointed out, will do more to inspire and urge than any amount of verbal pushing or moralizing. If from these or any other of my sermons anyone has gained a deeper realization that it is God in whom we live and move and have our being, or that his life is richer than he knew, or that life is real and zestful and good if we have courage to make it so, or that wise men trust the Ultimate Destiny implicitly, then they have neither been spoken nor heard in vain." It would be difficult to find a better statement of the philosophy of preaching implied in the Church theory we have been discussing.

It is the privilege of the preacher to help reveal people to themselves, and to throw the light of our best understanding of God upon the fundamental processes and experiences of life as well as upon the seemingly commonplace occurrences of the passing day.

It is the privilege of the preacher to lift up the finer possibilities which life holds—showing forth unattained goals in the achievement of which we have a responsible and oftentimes difficult part.

Men come out of their dreary and difficult lives into the Sanctuary seeking a vision of Greatness and Hope. It is for the preacher to lift up an enlightened picture of what a man can be; of a better community and society toward which we may reasonably strive; a new vision of the greatness and splendor of the divine creative life of which we are a part.

Lacking this illumination, this beckoning vision, life tends to lapse back into dreary routine; the desire for creature comfort takes over. Lacking a future-oriented dimension there is the tendency to drift into pessimistic and fatalistic ways of thinking. Boredom, the sense of uselessness, and cynicism are symptoms of the spiritually empty soul.

There is a forward intention written into the nature of man and the universe. Someone must speak for that. The Christian preacher is called upon to save men from superficiality, mediocrity, complacence, boredom. It is for him not only to comfort the afflicted, but to afflict the comfortable as he

communicates the eternal greatness incarnate in the passage of temporal fact.

G.

Again, a saving fellowship is one in which **the basic experiences of life are recognized, celebrated, and dedicated.**

Suppose someone in your parish had lived through some profound experience last week—joy, sorrow, conflict, decision, forgiveness, temptation. Was your service of worship last Sunday one in which this experience could find meaningful expression and dedication in the life of this person? What connection did he find between the experience which reminded him so vividly of his involvement in life—and what went on last Sunday morning?

Hoffding relates that in a certain Danish Protestant Church well into the 19th century worshippers maintained the custom of bowing when they passed a certain spot on the wall. No one knew just why. But the reason was discovered when the removal of the whitewash revealed a Roman Catholic madonna. For three centuries people had been bowing before the place where the madonna used to be.

This, of course, is the danger in ceremony. It may simply recall someone else's experience of God. In the meantime, within the fellowship there is so much of life to be recognized, celebrated, dedicated.

Baptism is not merely a formality; it is the glad recognition, celebration and dedication of a new life coming into the Christian fellowship in which we pledge our responsible participation.

Communion is not only a memory of a treasured past—it is the solemn yet joyous recognition, celebration, and dedication here and now.

The marriage service in the sanctuary is not merely a legal or social transaction—it is religious in character (even though one would not always detect this by the music sometimes used). It is a religious service of recognition, celebration, and dedication of life's profoundest human relationship coming to expression.

A service of worship is not merely an opening exercise leading to the real thing. It is the recognition, celebration, dedication of life—in the context of life's ultimate dimension in God. Praise, confession, affirmation and dedication are the great themes of worship—but these have meaning only as the worshipper finds through what is said, a vehicle of self-expression.

Death itself is the occasion for recognition, celebration and dedication within the Christian community. To recognize and accept the fact of the passing of one who has been one of us —to celebrate the meanings which have gathered about his life and which live to bless—to dedicate his life to God in whom we find our final home—even as we make our own personal re-dedication—is our solemn privilege within the saving fellowship.

Those whose passing we note, even as we cherish their memory, minister to us in the hour of their going as they lead us to pray that in all our works, begun, continued and ended in God, we may glorify His holy name.

H.

The saving fellowship is a serving and sharing fellowship. To its participating members it gives help in the area of theology—providing a meaningful view of existence, helping people to see life's experiences within a religious frame of orientation and devotion.

It provides help in the nurturing of the religious life through shared practices and observances and in providing aids for private religious living.

It provides exposure to lived religion —through significant lives past and present. Someone has observed that great religion is like great music—it does not need defense so much as it needs rendition. Having heard George Whitefield preach, a listener said, "That man tempts me to be a Christian."

Within the Christian fellowship there is the uncoerced temptation to be more Christian. The best argument for Christianity is a Christian. A church is a place where Christians are being born and are growing. Thus, the saving fellowship serves on the levels of theory, practice, exemplification.

The saving fellowship is in society and its members go forth as citizens, serving in many relationships expressing their Christian vocation. To function as a leavening influence in the community—helping to bring forth the moral and religious strengths of the community; to inspire a constructive self-criticism; to encourage and nurture the humanizing influences of the community—is the responsibility of the Church and churchmen. The Church is not an island unto itself, but a community within a community.

Looking to the world of men and nations struggling for life and light, the Church as a saving fellowship serves through its will for understanding. It seeks to discern what is common to all men—the needs, hopes, fears that make us one.

It goes forth in the spirit of sharing its treasure—not radical displacement; in humility, not self-satisfaction and righteousness; in an awareness of the cultural contexts in which religious aspiration finds expression. Thus, the mission of the Church is world-wide—but not only in a geographical sense. It seeks a discernment of heart and mind which knows no boundaries of race or nation. And the best missionary—whether in Africa or Colorado—is always he who identifies with people—and then lives an authentic Christian life.

I.

The Church as a saving fellowship seeks cooperation with other groups dedicated to the religious welfare of mankind where such association gives promise of fruitfulness. However, it is not interested in artificial "togetherness." It is suspicious of forced claims to a unity which does not exist in fact.

Within Christendom are differing theories and expressions of the Church Idea—in faith and order. In many instances much can be gained through cooperation in matters where such cooperation does not compromise honest differences of opinion or approach. There are many instances in which Christian churches can and ought to make a united witness. Our councils of churches are rendering tremendously important work in this area.

In many instances there is much to be gained by continuing conversations through which, from time to time, actual union is indicated.

But there is a kind of diversity which is a good thing, too. The Church ought to be the last institution to get on the bandwagon of conformity.

Ernest F. Scott closes his book on "The Varieties of New Testament Religion" with these words:[6]

> The unity of the church was a dream, even in those first days, when the believers were a small company, all of one race and nurtured in the same tradition. In the world-wide church of today, no true unity is conceivable, and this is no matter for regret . . . Division is involved in the very nature of our religion, and this is the truth brought home to us as we study the writings of the New Testament. . . . If the unity of the church means anything, it must be grounded in Christian liberty. There will be endless differences as each one holds to the truth that is in him, but out of this division will come the only unity which is worth our struggle.

* * *

I would not wish to close these remarks about the Church as a saving fellowship without reference to the high privilege of the Christian ministry.

To be sure, we all have those moods in which we feel the frustrations of ecclesiastical system. There are times

[6] Scott, Ernest F., *The Varieties of New Testament Religion,* New York: Scribner's, 1944, p. 305.

when our very faith in human nature wavers. But over against this are the satisfactions which inhere in a Christian ministry of depth. Coming to the close of his ministry, Bishop McConnell spoke of the devoted servants of the Church and said: "It is a mighty procession. It is a joy to walk in it."

Ours is the privilege of human relationships which go deep—with each other in the ministry; with those it is our privilege to serve, sharing in the common and uncommon ventures of life.

When Albert Schweitzer first went to Africa, the missionary group which in a sense sponsored him, forbade him to preach. They thought his medicine was all right, but they doubted that his theology was orthodox. But once he was on the field, those to whom he ministered —physically—asked that he speak to them of the things of the spirit. Finally, the restriction was lifted. Schweitzer wrote: "To me preaching was a necessity of my being. I felt it was wonderful that I was allowed to address a congregation every Sunday about the deepest questions of life."

To serve in lifting the vision of greatness, in helping to draw from people their own inherent strength and resources, in communicating the reality of God—this is our privilege.

It is our further privilege to serve in an on-going institution through which our efforts are multiplied many times over. William James said the great use of a life is to spend it for something that will outlast it. The Church lasts on ministering to what is deepest, eternal, in the heart of man.

Several years ago, at the Missouri Pastor's School, we came to the Sunday morning service held in the Methodist Church on the campus of Central College at Fayette, Missouri. It is a lovely stone church—vine-covered. There is a tower from which sound the chimes—periodically announcing the passage of time.

On this Sunday morning, the minister of the church was officiating in the liturgy of the service and came to the Scripture reading just as the chimes in the tower sounded. And so it was that against the background of the chimes, announcing the passage of time, we heard the immortal words: "Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or even Thou hadst formed the earth and the world even from everlasting to everlasting Thou art God." This is our privilege—to speak of and for the Eternal God—the Eternal Greatness—incarnate in the passage of temporal fact.

CONCLUSION

We began this series of articles with reference to the space age. We come now to the importance of the Church in your town. And that is as it should be. The space age reveals insights with major implications for religious life and thought. We see new dimensions of greatness in our task as religious leaders. But our primary responsibility is close at hand. In dedicated work there, we take our place in the Church of the ages.

Perhaps it would not be inappropriate to close with some lines from Charles Kennedy's play "The Servant in the House."

Manson, the servant, keeps talking to the bishop about his church. Finally, in curiosity, the bishop says: "Tell me about your church." To which Manson replies:[7]

> I'm afraid you may not consider it an altogether substantial affair. You must understand this is no dead pile of stones and unmeaning timber—it is a living thing. When you enter into it, you hear a sound—a sound as of some mighty poem chanted. Listen long enough and you wil learn it is made up of the beating of human hearts—of the nameless music of men's souls—that is, if you have ears. The work of no ordinary builder. The faces of little children laugh out from

[7] Kennedy, Charles Ronn, *The Servant in the House,* New York: Harper, 1908.

every cornerstone. Up in the heights and spaces are inscribed the numberless musings of all the dreamers of the world.

It is building and being built upon. Sometimes the work goes forward in deep darkness—sometimes in the blinding light—now beneath the burden of unutterable anguish—now to the tune of great laughter—and heroic shoutings like the cry of thunder—and sometimes in the silence of the nighttime—one may hear the tiny hammerings of the comrades at work up in the dome—the comrades that have climbed ahead.