

Dynamic Christian Living

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT -

The True Mission of the Church

"As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you" (John 20:21)

THE Church is the greatest institution in the world. When we say that we are not contradicting what we have been saying in previous chapters about the home. The home is fundamental in human life and in that sense is more important than the Church, state or society itself. But the home, while we sometimes call it an institution, is not one in the same sense that the Church would be so classified. The home is largely a matter of individual relationships and not one of official organization.

We say then that the Church is the greatest institution in the world, having the most widespread membership and influence. That is true from a purely secular standpoint. Then when we realize that in the church we have more than a human organization, (it being in fact a divine organism; a means through which GOD is manifesting His power among men) we see at once the supreme importance of understanding the church and our relationship to it. This is the first of three studies on that general subject.

First we stress the mission of the church, by which we mean its purpose and sphere of usefulness in the world. What does the church contribute to Christian living, and thus to the life of mankind in general?

The church should welcome a careful study of its purpose and its place of service in the world. Any institution or organization (or, as we have said of the Church, organism) should welcome a scrutiny of its work; and we as Christians ought to make such a careful study.

Unfortunately, there is much careless thinking about the Church. Many regard it as only incidental to their spiritual life. Even some supposedly spiritually-minded Christians seem to think of the Church as a sort of luxury in which they may or may not indulge, as they see fit.

As a matter of fact, the Church and our relationship to it is not something incidental - it is fundamental and vital to ourselves as well as to others. We note seven things which should be true about the Church.

I. Holiness of Life (Matthew 18:15-17)

In a time when general standards of decency and honesty are notably low, when no one wants to be his brother's keeper, the Church needs to be reminded that part of its mission is to maintain holiness in individual lives and in their relationships to one another. The church is the keeper of the good conduct and good name of its members.

Notice that in going to an individual to deal with him on a spiritual matter in which there has been delinquency and failure, we are to tell him his faults. That, of course, is not to be done in any "I-told-you-so" or "holier-than-thou" attitude. It is to be done in all humility and spirituality. But we note that it may need to be done for there is occasion for straightforward dealing with sin within the Christian community. We will only have it as men and women dare to go to each other in the Spirit of CHRIST and definitely deal with spiritual shortcomings.

The modern approach to such things is to be so tactful and so indirect, and so psychological that the one dealt with hardly knows what it is about and if there is any repentance or restitution - it is vague and without any real value. We are to be direct and clear and restoration is to be definite and sure.

Observe from our Scripture what man's attitude toward such matters is to be.

It is first of all something calling for personal attention. The individual is first to go alone to his brother. But the loss of fellowship which has come about through his sin is more than an individual matter - it concerns other Christians. So if the erring one will not listen to the individual, he is to take one or two others with him to establish the truth in the hearing of several witnesses and also to bring to bear the helpful influence of several friends coming together to counsel with the erring individual.

If he will not listen to them, then it becomes an object of concern to the church which ought then to promptly, and along Scriptural lines, deal with the situation. There should be no evasion of duty because of embarrassment or difficulty. The pastor should set the example of willingness to deal with difficult problems even though he would personally prefer not to touch them. This is not easy but, after all, a man is not called into the ministry to have it easy.

It is a sad thing that church discipline has become such an ineffective thing. Leaders in the church are apparently afraid to follow the plain teachings of Scripture. I know of a church, fundamental and evangelistic, which stands for the best in doctrine and life, but it has been defeated at this point. A small group of young people constantly disturbed church services. They had not responded either to pleading or admonition. Finally the church board decided to take action. At once the parents of these children (who were the inevitable "leading" members of the church) said, "If you touch my boy - we will leave the church - and take others with us." So the matter was dropped - and that was that!

It is sad but it is also pathetically weak. Are we cowards and weaklings in this day when we should be strong?

We have seen that after the individual dealing with the problem and the rejection of the counsel of friends, the erring one is to be taken before the church.

If no response is received to the discipline of the church the offending individual is then to be excluded from its fellowship and put into the hands of GOD for His discipline. We can trust GOD to be absolutely impartial and kind in His judgment, at the same time very faithful and definite in dealing with sin.

It is well to observe again that all of this is to be done to "gain" a brother, that is, to win him back. The purpose is not to obtain revenge or to display bitterness or unkindness toward him, nor is it to show that we are holier than the one who has offended. The purpose of all such dealings with sin in the life of the Church is to win a brother back to fellowship.

That suggestion needs emphasis. The only instances of church discipline with which the writer is familiar were carried out with a sense of finality which left one with the feeling that the disciplined one was outside the fold once and for all, world-without-end, amen! In fact, efforts to get back were received with suspicion and came to naught.

Scripture clearly teaches that the purpose of all such dealings with erring ones is their correction and restoration, and that such a result should bring joy. This was the attitude of the apostle Paul. See II Corinthians 7:9-10.

We stress the importance of discipline in the Church, for only as the spiritual life of a Church is pure and holy can there be true spiritual development. That is true in the Church as it is in the life of the individual.

Such trimming and pruning will yield a worthwhile harvest. We recognize that in the culture of plants. In the fall of the year in a great many communities we enjoy seeing the showing of beautiful chrysanthemums. A visitor at such an exhibition asked one of the gardeners, "How do you manage to produce such marvelous blooms?" "Well," said the gardener, "you see, we concentrate all the strength of the plant on one or two blooms. If we were to allow it to bear all the flowers it would, no one of them would be worth showing. If you would have a prize bloom, you must be content with one instead of a score."

Even so in the life of the individual GOD may strip away popularity, comfort, ease, self will, pleasure, wealth or success so that he may bring to perfection the blossom of holiness. Applying that thought to the Church as a whole it is far better to have a smaller membership which is clean and strong and eager for holy service to the Lord than a large membership which is worldly and indifferent. This is quite contrary to all modern tendencies both in theory and practice, but is it not the true attitude and the Scriptural one?

The mission of the Church is to produce holy living. That leads most naturally to the second point - the Church is here to give.

II. Witness in Divine Power (Acts 1:8)

A witness bears testimony to that which he has experienced, and in the case of Christian testimony he is assured of divine power in carrying out his sacred task.

The world would have laughed (and possibly did) at the idea of a small group of humble

believers, a few disciples, making the Gospel effective by the simple method of telling others about the Saviour - but it worked, because GOD's power was in it. It works now because He still blesses such a witness. The power is not in us - but in the One who speaks through us.

We are told that a visitor to a museum was shown the sword of Sir William Wallace, the great Scottish hero and patriot of the 13th century. "I do not see how that sword could win such victories," said the visitor. "Ah, sir," replied the guide, "you do not see the arm that wielded it."

The secret of the power of the Church is not in the arm of a man, but in GOD. It is "**the Sword of the Lord and of Gideon**" which prevails. (Judges 7:18) It is not our power at all - for we have none - but as we wield the sword, the Word of GOD, it is the power of GOD which is back of it and which brings the results. Surely we need more of that kind of Christian witness in our day. We lean on scholarship, eloquence, position, cleverness, and what not, when the only real power is GOD's power through His Holy Word.

It is so easy for us who work in the things of the Lord to begin to feel our own importance or to think of our service in the light of what men may desire, or perchance to be caught in the subtle temptation of substituting scholarship for the Gospel.

You may remember the story of the brilliant young preacher who went to his first congregation very proud of his two degrees and of his oratorical ability. At first the people were impressed by the marvelous gift of language and expression of the young man and by his fellowship. But soon they realized that something essential was missing. Then one day when the young preacher entered his pulpit full up to overflowing with scholarship and rhetoric and pride, he found a note on the pulpit which said, "Sir, we would see Jesus."

That morning the young man hastily tore down the altar which he had erected to scholarship and oratory and built another altar where the Son of GOD and Saviour of man had the highest place. He began to preach JESUS and Him crucified, yes, and risen again from the dead. It was not long before another note made its appearance on the pulpit quoting the words, "**Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord.**" We, too, have that kind of response in the hearts of those who truly love Him, yes, and in our ability to win people to Him if we will preach the word.

It is a mark of greatness "**to do and teach**" the law of GOD (Matthew 5:19), and of pathetic smallness to break His commandments and to teach others to disobey GOD. Some of the supposed great men of this world are mighty small when they are measured by GOD's yardstick.

Sometimes I wonder whether that is why some of these great men neglect the Word of GOD or stay away from the church, especially a church where the Word is preached. It may well be that it does unpleasant things to an inflated ego to find out what the Lord really thinks about worldly greatness.

Notice that it is important that we do and then teach the Word of GOD. Those things come in that order if we are to be successful. The man who doesn't keep the way of GOD is not going to be used of the Lord to teach that way in any worthwhile way. It is the example of the teacher or preacher in life in the community which makes his or her work effective in the pulpit or the

classroom.

Next we note the need of

III. Unity in Faith and Practice (Acts 2:42)

The early Church had not yet been split up by the philosophies of men and all the vagaries of doctrine which have since divided GOD's people. It was His original purpose that His people should be one in Him, something we should recall before we willingly divide them just to promote some theory of interpretation, to provide ourselves with a place of leadership or to satisfy our hurt feelings.

Unity within the Church is GOD's plan and purpose, but that does not mean that man-made plans for unity are either scriptural or desirable. There is much pressure being exerted now to unite the Church on the basis of a vast ecclesiastical organization, quite apart from any doctrinal or spiritual unity.

Dr. W. R. White well says, "The continuing, continuous hammering away at a mechanical union wrought by compromise creates more division; and wherever successful in achieving a considerable unification, presents to the world a group weakened in Christian vitality. It is self-defeating. It may get the applause of the press and radio, but for some reason the people drift to those who have a vital message which they will not compromise."

Such outward unity was not primarily in our Lord's mind. He wants spiritual unity, and in such fellowship the Church will find its only real bond of united life and action.

Even an effort to draw the Church together on the ground of spiritual unity sometimes runs into difficulty because those who express a desire for that kind of unity really want it to be along the lines of their own theological or denominational thinking.

Some unidentified friend in another state sent me a tract entitled "*How All Churches Could Unite*," evidently thinking I needed help on the subject. I read the tract and soon found that it had a very good spiritual tone and was loyal to the Word of GOD. But then I came along to the place where the writer indicated the basis on which all churches could come together.

The first point was that the church must not be dependent upon any man's opinion about spiritual things, but must be based on faith in the Word of GOD.

So far-so good!

The second point was that the churches which were to unite would have to set aside all man-made creeds and doctrinal statements which were not in accord with the Word of GOD. Still good; but then what?

Ah! The third thing was that the churches which were to come together must have a name; and what name should they have? Oh, they should have the name that this man's denomination had. They were sure that their name was the only Scriptural name. Then, this united church must have

one view on baptism. But what view was that to be? Oh, of course that would be the view of this church. Yes, I know, they contend that their view is the scriptural view and the only scriptural one; but others would not agree with that.

So, you see that even in an effort to achieve unity on a spiritual basis, immediately denominational interests and enthusiasms come forward, and the plea is that all must unite, but unite in OUR way.

How blessed it is to turn from all such arguments and efforts to the fact that we are all one in CHRIST, if we are truly "**in Christ**", and that there is a spiritual bond of fellowship between us, no matter what the name of our church may be, or our opinion about some particular doctrine may be. If we hold the truth as it is in CHRIST, we are one, and we are one in Him.

Unity is not only a matter of belief, it must reach into the practice of daily life. We read of these early Christians that they were steadfast not only in doctrine, but in communion and prayer. A bit more unity there might serve to bring us closer together in belief.

We need to study doctrine in the Church. We emphasize that point for we know that only as there is the solid structure of an intelligent doctrinal understanding can there be true spiritual development. We are too weak at that point in the life of a Church. But we are also to study other things. For example, we are to study - that is, give thought to - the peace, the quiet, the purity of the Church. Some of us forget that among the important doctrines of Christianity are those that deal with fellowship, communion, humility, service, purity, peacefulness, prayer.

Let us stress all the doctrines of GOD, not just some which have become a bit of a hobby with us. So we have holiness, power-filled witness, and unity as part of the mission of the Church.

Next we have

IV. Service, Spiritual and Social (Acts 6:1-4)

The early Church rightly put the emphasis on the spiritual. The leaders in the early church who had gifts for ministry of the Word did not permit themselves to be diverted into social service. Too many in the Church have failed at that point. This is one place where even the good may be the mortal enemy of the best. For example, this is the danger of some activity in the field of temperance. We can quickly go astray at this point. We need to stress over and over again that being zealous for some social reform like prohibition is not a substitute for spirituality. It is sad to see an individual who is utterly taken up with and zealous for such causes, but who is lukewarm in Christian faith and worldly in life. There is no power in such a testimony and very little real usefulness even in the matter of social reform.

First things must come first. Right spiritual attitudes make for effectiveness in social reform. The early Church did not neglect social needs. We need to stress that, too. Men were appointed to care for the widows who were in need. In all too many instances the modern church has failed to minister to the social needs even of its own people and has weakly (and one fears a bit gladly) turned them over to social agencies. What a pity!

The Church ought to do its proper work in helping the poor, particularly of its own group, though not limiting it to that, and it must all be done in the proper spirit. We are told of a rich woman in Boston who was almost dragged by a friend to see a poor widow who was sick. The woman was shocked when she saw the suffering and the poverty.

She did not care for the widow particularly but she could not stand to permit such suffering to go on. So she said, "I shall order the charity organization to come up and help you." The widow promptly responded, "Thank you, ma'am, but although I am poor, I cannot take charity." "But," said the rich woman, "you have just told me that your neighbors help you. You take things from them." "Yes," was the reply, "but that is not charity. They are my friends. They care. They know that if they needed help I would do the same for them."

Gifts from a loving heart are welcome, but from a cold heart they mean nothing. Of course true charity, carried on in the Spirit of CHRIST, is helpful even though organized. All too often, though, it deals with "cases" instead of people, and "case numbers" instead of individual souls. The Church ought to correct that situation by caring for its own who need help and doing it in a loving, Christian spirit. But that is our next point.

V. Love - in Deed as Well as in Word (Acts 11:27-30)

Talking about the need of others, wishing them GOD's blessing, or saying a desultory prayer asking GOD to bless and help them, is not sufficient, in fact, it is not Christian at all. What did James say? (James 2:14-17) **"What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone."** That puts loving helpfulness in the high place of an evidence of Christian faith. In fact, it is a God-like quality. (See Psalm 103:4)

- Love acts.
- It gives.
- It serves.
- It proves faith by works.
- It translates the Gospel into a language that an unbelieving world can understand and appreciate.
- It makes the world say, as did the heathen of the first century when they observed the Christian, **"Behold how they love one another."**

Let us get a bit more of that blessed spirit of love at work in the Church of today.

Failing to serve in sacrificial love means that we are not only denying an essential of our Christian faith, but that we are losing a great blessing for ourselves.

An ancient legend tells of a king who, seeing that his people were becoming selfish, decided to teach them a lesson. One of the roads leading into town came along a hillside. At a narrow spot in this road the king came late one night, scooped out a hollow in the middle of the cart track,

took a small bundle from the folds of his cloak and put it in the hole and then loosened a large stone and rolled it so that it completely covered the hole he had dug.

The next morning a farmer, driving his cart along, noticed it and although he was very bitter about the laziness of people who would permit a stone to be in the middle of the road, passed along on one side. He almost upset his load in doing so, but somehow he got by. Then came a company of soldiers. The leader, seeing the stone, halted them, ordered them to break ranks and pass around the stone. Before doing so he made a little speech to his soldiers about people's carelessness, but he, too, left the stone right where it was. One after another, day by day, did the same thing. Finally the king sent word for all the people living nearby to meet him at the stone.

He said, "I put this stone here and for three weeks everyone who has passed by has blamed his neighbor for not moving it." Then he lifted the stone and showed them the hollow place underneath in which lay a small bag labeled, "For him who lifts the stone." He untied the string and to their surprise a rich stream of golden coins poured out.

Well, we do not seek gold for our service to our needy brethren, but let us be careful lest we miss a great blessing by being careless, selfish, and by trying to pass off our responsibility on someone else.

Next we note:

VI. Obedience to the HOLY SPIRIT (Acts 13:1-3)

GOD has certain plans for the work of the Church in the world. Be sure that they are no small or indifferent plans. His mighty agent and executive in bringing His will to pass in the world is the third person of the Trinity, the HOLY SPIRIT. If the Church will respond to His guidance and be subject to His control, the work of GOD will go on unhindered. But just there, Christian friends, the Church has most ingloriously failed.

The early Church was directed of the HOLY SPIRIT to set apart Paul and Barnabas for the work of missionaries and evangelists. Knowing as we do the marvelous results of their ministry, we shudder at the thought of what might have happened if the Church had disobeyed the HOLY SPIRIT that day! What if it had listened to the voice of some unspiritual member who felt that these men were not properly trained or not "qualified"?

But do we also shudder at the thought that we may now be disobeying the HOLY SPIRIT in His work in our Church, among our young people, yes, even in our own home? Are we ready to recognize, approve and send them out to serve GOD?

By the way, I wonder if it has ever occurred to you to raise the question, "Where does GOD get His missionaries?" I fear that as a boy growing up in a Christian church and hearing missionary speakers, sometimes dressed in native costumes, I fell into a way of thinking that assumed that missionaries were not ordinary people, but rather that they were some strange and unusual group who came from somewhere - I wasn't just quite clear about it - but it never entered my mind that either I or my friends in the local church were limitable or expendable material for missionaries.

The fact is, of course, that GOD gets His missionaries out of our churches, Sunday Schools and young people's meetings. He calls them from large city churches and small country churches; He reaches them in the Missions, in Youth for CHRIST gatherings, in Sunday School classes, and in personal conversation with faithful Christian friends - all these make up the field from which GOD calls His servants. I wonder if we are alert about helping Him to touch the right hearts, and to lead them out for His own glory?

It may surprise some to know that one of the hardest problems to overcome in the life of a young person who has made a decision to give his or her life in full-time service is to triumph over the unwillingness of parents to approve. Particularly is this true of students who decide that GOD wants them on the foreign field: Parents who have themselves been giving to missions for years, and who have ostensibly been eager that the Gospel should go out, are very sure that their daughter or son should not go to China, or Africa, or India.

We need to be careful lest we bring down the judgment of GOD upon us by thus resisting the HOLY SPIRIT when He speaks to our boys and girls. Oh yes, we love them and want to keep them at home. But GOD loves them even more, and if He wants them to go then we ought to want them to go too.

How much better to encourage them to recognize and respond to the leading of the Spirit. Then we, like the early church, should set them apart for their ministry. Encourage them, help them with funds if necessary, strengthen their faith, and send them on their way rejoicing to obey GOD even as you have obeyed GOD in sending them forth.

There would be no shortage of missionaries and no shortage of funds to support them if we were always obedient to the Spirit's voice.

VII. Fellowship (I John 1:3)

What a sweet and precious word! It betokens all that we hold most dear in our relationship to fellow Christians, and above all, to GOD.

Such fellowship is precious indeed. A happy Christian one day met a peddler on the road and as a means of giving a testimony, he said, "It's a grand thing to be saved." "Yes," said the peddler, "but I know something better." "What can possibly be better?" "Why the companionship of the Man who saved me."

Here is the great secret of spiritual life and growth Christian fellowship. (See Malachi 3:16) And notice with care that the place for it is in the Church. If we do not come to the Church, we deprive ourselves and others of the opportunity for fellowship. The matter of church attendance (and twice on Sunday is not too much) needs to be put on our conscience lest we by our absence bear an anti-church testimony before our neighbors. But even more important is our own need of fellowship. Being in GOD's house, with GOD's people, to read GOD's Word, to sing His praises, means spiritual strength, enthusiasm and usefulness for GOD. Why not try it?

May I stress the importance of being consistent in practice at this point. There is a great danger of Christian workers, ministers, Sunday School teachers, leaders in the Church, of urging upon

others the necessity of being faithful in Church attendance and of then excusing themselves on the ground that they are very busy about the Lord's work. Such leaders lose a measure of effectiveness for CHRIST. What happens when a well-known Christian leader admonishes others to be faithful in church attendance but seldom darkens a Church door himself unless he is there to preach? Well, you know that such a man cannot exert any influence on your life or mine in connection with his teaching. May GOD help us that we do not set such an example before someone to whom we minister, in the Church, young peoples' society and Sunday School. Talk is so easy that it betrays us into a cheap imitation of real Christian living if we are not careful.

We have seen these seven things which should be true of the Church if it is to fulfill its mission in the world. Are they true of our Church? Are they true of us, we who make up the Church?

~ end of chapter 8 ~
