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THE DOMINANT FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH IN THE LIFE OF TODAY

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THE DOMINANT FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH IN THE LIFE OF TODAY

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As I try to make a thorough and fair inventory of human wealth in individual and social life, it expresses my own judgment to say that the dominant function of the Church today is to teach and practice high spiritual and ethical ideals, personal and social. This very general statement contains discoverable, living, practical, and timely particulars.

Ideals are the most perfect possible mental pictures of the best things in any department of human action. We stay on the lower levels of moral excellence not so much from intention as from lack of spiritual insight.

Moral poverty must climb toward riches of ethical and eternal value; the incomplete must climb toward completeness of moral being, on ideals as on the rungs of a ladder.

Feeling, thought, and choice, have for their field of exercise three great realities,—Man, the World of created things outside of man, and God. Religion, although it may begin, as Schleiermacher teaches, with a feeling of dependence on God, means a right inner, energizing attitude of reason and conscience toward these realities, expressed in outward act. The Sabbath, baptism, church-membership, the Lord's Supper, prayer and praise, the family altar, as forms,—such things as these are not the essence of religion. They are important helps to religious expression and growth; but the religion of ethical monotheism demands of believers ethical character and conduct. A supreme need of the Church today is higher spiritual and ethical standards. The white plague, white slavery, all sickness, sinning and evil are signs of yet existing cosmic disorder, due to our failure to choose only the best things; and it is a supreme function of the Church to promote increasing cosmic harmony through ceaseless struggle against all wrong, and growing obedience to universally reigning law.

We need to remind ourselves often that one personality is worth more to itself than the whole world would be. The eternal and creative Word became flesh in order to reveal a God of redeeming love; and there is joy in heaven when one sinner repents.

A neighborhood, a community of near-by dwellers, is a place and opportunity for the realization of the idea of social solidarity. To love one's neighbor as oneself means the absence of impurity, enmity, strife, jealousy, divisions, drunkenness, and such like; and the presence of joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control, and such like.

I am no anarchic economist; accumulated and controlled wealth is essential to great and prosperous industries; but if the captains of industry are to continue, without guilt, to compel the armies of hand-laborers to toil seven days each week for months and years; if the hand-worker is not to have a chance both to earn fair wages and to feed and clothe body and soul, then Jesus perjured Himself before the high priest when he cried, Henceforth ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven; and Our Father who art in heaven, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, are empty words.

I shall not undertake the impossible task of pointing out the exact border line, in matters of religion and morals, between Church and State, and the individual and society; but the State cannot, by statutes, make good citizens. Undoubtedly it may say, and with authority, Thou shalt not murder; or steal; or swear falsely; or commit adultery; or be an incendiary; or be a drunkard; or make drunkards; or unjustly rob others of liberty and opportunity; otherwise there could be no stable government. But the State may not say, Thou shalt worship the Christian's God; own the Lordship of Jesus; regard the Church's "Lord's Day;" be baptized; attend church; celebrate the communion; and so on.

It is only the Church that can say, and with spiritual not with external authority, "Serve God, Love one another, Be pure in heart, Keep the Sabbath, Drink not wine nor do anything whereby thy brother stumbleth." The Church, not the State, must be the source, ground, and inspiration of good and Christian citizenship, which is the true basis of good government.

The dominant function of the Church in the life of today, of a Church clothed with more than human power, is to seek, by precept and example, to bring individuals, families, neighborhoods, trade, industries, citizenship, and international relations, under the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, and under the control of the ethics of Jesus our Savior and Lord.