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On: 05 February 2015, At: 19:46

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/urea20>

THE DOMINANT FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

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Published online: 10 Jul 2006.

To cite this article: Washington Gladden D.D. (1913) THE DOMINANT FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH, Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association, 8:2, 149-158, DOI: [10.1080/0034408130080203](https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408130080203)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0034408130080203>

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organizations meet in churches. Christian Association officers direct the play and recreation work in schools. But the more important co-ordination is that which comes unofficially by the voluntary exchange of school- and church-workers in the enterprises of playgrounds, Boy Scouts, moving-picture regulation, school theatricals. It is no uncommon thing for a movement for a school social-center to be born in a church.

We must take into our view and recognize the religious educational value of every attempt to give a child all his world. We would labor almost in vain holding forth the flame of life if the eyes are dull with childhood's sad toil, if the life is shut in by squalid walls; in vain do we appeal to moral heroism when all the vital powers are sapped by malnutrition or by vice. When the city opens parks and tears down tenements, when the state protects child life it means that men set human values first, that a public conscience demands the right of lives to develop and the foundations are made possible for the house not made with hands.

In the light of such progress who dare turn back or even doubt that the eternal purpose runs steadily forward and we needs must follow? Who seeing what yesterday's toil and sowing has brought forward can count any cost too great for today's service?

THE DOMINANT FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

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The dominant function of the church in the life of today, and of every day, is the Christianization of society, or the establishment, in the world, of the Kingdom of Heaven. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness," is the mandate which defines the church's primary obligation. Its business is to leaven human society with Christian ideas and Christian motives; to organize society under the Christian law.

It must be admitted that this idea of the function of the church has not been the prevailing idea for the last century in America, and that it is not the prevailing idea today in the majority of American churches. The idea upon which the work of most churches is carried on, is that their one great business

is the conversion and salvation of individual souls, in preparation for a future state of existence. It has always been assumed, of course, that the conversion of individual souls would result in some incidental and temporary improvement of social conditions; but that was a secondary consideration; a church which put any emphasis upon it was regarded with suspicion as failing in its chief function.

I have been listening to the appeal of the church now for seventy years, for when I was seven or eight years old I was as keenly alive to what was said in the pulpit as I have ever been; and while I might not have been able to comprehend all the metaphysical distinctions, I know that I did understand what the main objective of the preacher was, and it was always, in my earlier life, individualistic; the one sentence into which it could be condensed was, "Prepare to meet thy God." Such was the dominant function of the church when I began to preach and for a good while afterward. Mr. Beecher was, indeed, beginning to broaden the preacher's function, somewhat, and to give it some ethical and social significance, and there were a few who followed him afar off, but they were all suspects; what was commonly said about them was that they were not evangelical.

It is not many years ago that the possibility of social regeneration began to get some hold on the thought of the church, and that the gospel of the Kingdom began to be preached with conviction. This was the doctrine that Jesus "began to preach" as Matthew tells us, and it would seem that the emphasis which he always put upon it should have commended it sooner to those who were speaking for him; but it has had to fight for its life in the last generation, and it is still under suspicion in a vast majority of American pulpits. The centrality of the individual is so firmly established in the Reformed theology that any consideration of the social aspects of the gospel is grudgingly conceded.

To seek first the Kingdom of God, as I always understood it, in my boyhood, was to seek first of all, to get myself ready for heaven. Never, I think, was my mind turned, by any interpretation of this text, to consider the conditions of the life of men in this world. The one voice that was always sounding in my ears was this: "Seek first, to get into the Kingdom of God; seek first your own soul's salvation," and the

inference was that all these social conditions about which mere moralists are concerned would take care of themselves.

Well, they have been taking care of themselves; and, if we may trust the reports which we hear from Akron, and from Lawrence, and from Pittsburgh, and the findings of the legislative probes which have been investigating social conditions, and the statistical reports of the churches for the past decade, the results are not wholly reassuring. The church is beginning to ask whether a change of emphasis in her appeal is not needed; whether some essential part of her dominant function has not been aborted; whether she has been giving full value to the petition which for nineteen centuries has been upon her lips. Dr. Rauschenbusch tells us of hearing Father McGlynn in a speech at Cooper Institute in 1886 repeat the words of that prayer: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth," and he tells us that "as the great audience *realized for the first time the social significance of the holy words*, it lifted them off their seats with a shout of joy." Isn't it pathetic to think that a great audience of Christian people should have been praying that prayer all their lives and never understanding what it meant? Isn't it a commentary on the way in which the real business of the church has been ignored in our one-sided devotion to an individualistic pietism?

Note that this devotion has been one-sided. The Christianization of the individual is not a matter of no concern; it is an integral part of the Church's dominant function; for society is composed of individuals, and society cannot be Christianized without the Christianization of the individuals composing it. The mistake is in the assumption that the regeneration of society will follow from the cultivation of a piety which is primarily and essentially self-regarding. The mistake is in concentrating the thought of the individual upon himself, and expecting that a community composed of such self-centered saints will be a Christian community. The defect arises from the failure to grasp the truth that it is just as absurd to try to produce Christian individuals apart from a Christian society as it would be to try to form a Christian society without Christian individuals. The conception has been that the individual is primordial, and that society is secondary and derivative; but the biological fact is that every individual of us is the product of society,—owes his individual life to a social fact. And it is equally true of our moral and spiritual life that the virtues

which are characteristically Christian, which are even distinctively human owe their existence to the society in the midst of which we have lived. No solitary individual can be a Christian, any more than a single note can be a melody, any more than a single petal can be a daisy. In truth, there is no such thing, in strictness, as an individual; our life is in relations: what we call an individual is not all there unless there are numberless "organic filaments" binding his life to other lives; and his character is perfected in the fulfilment of these relations. It is in these relations that God is revealed to him; it is in the terms of these relations that his life finds its expression; his own soul's salvation is realized through the social conditions that surround him.

What happens to a man when his soul is saved? Is he by that fact separated from the social life by which he is surrounded? That has been a too prevalent conception. I think that we are now able to see that the soul is saved only as the man enters as a vital, salutary, life-giving force into all his social relations; that his salvation consists in his being a better husband and father, a better neighbor, a better employer, a better citizen. Is the church looking for evidence that its convert is really a saved man? It has nowhere to look except in the society round about him, to see whether he is helping to Christianize it. And if the church is really concerned about this man's soul, it is tremendously interested that the society round about him shall be filled with the Christian spirit and ruled by the Christian law, so that its reactions upon him shall be stimulating and invigorating to the new life into which it has sought to lead him.

If, therefore, the dominant function of the church were what is commonly described as the saving of individual souls, it would still be a matter of deep concern to the church what were the social conditions of the community surrounding it. Its work can be but feebly and imperfectly done, if its converts are poisoned by social malaria, or stifled by a depressing social atmosphere. We honor the men and women who prosecute the work of evangelism in the slums, but we cannot help knowing that the chances of life are poor for those who are born, whether of the flesh or of the spirit, in such surroundings. God's grace can work miracles, but it is tempting God to ask him to keep our bodies or our souls from infection which it is within our power to remove.

In truth the church which concentrates all its energies on a pietistic evangelism, and has no interest in the Christianization of the society in which it stands, is pretty sure to suffer in its own life from the neglected environment. The deadly atmosphere of the Mammonism which it has ignored invades its own enclosures, and perverts its standards and paralyzes its message. Its moral sense is blurred; its prophetic function is lost; it comes to be a negligible factor in the life of the community.

In fact it is just as true of churches as of individuals that they that will save their lives shall lose them. The church whose ruling motive is self-aggrandizement, which is eager to build up its own life out of the life of the community, will find its spiritual power steadily dwindling; the church which lives to serve the community, to fill its life with light and love, will find its influence and power steadily increasing.

It should not be difficult for the church to realize that the law of its life must be the law of service and sacrifice; that the only way to keep its own life is to be ready always to lay it down for Christ's sake and the Gospel's. And yet that seems to be a lesson which the church is slow to learn. That individuals must accept this law is not disputed; but it sometimes seems to be considered that institutions are exempt from it. I once heard a learned professor of International Law say that nations and churches *must needs be egoistic*,—must make their own interest supreme. My mind revolted at the statement. I could not think that it was true of nations, and I have lived to hear John Hay declare that the United States meant to govern itself by the Golden Rule. I am sure that it cannot be true of a church. The body of which Jesus Christ is the head cannot intelligently base its organic life on an egoistic principle. Yet I am bound to say that churches, in their relation to each other, do often ignore and trample under foot the Golden Rule, pushing the interest of the organization with a cynical disregard for the interest of neighboring organizations. And the weakness of the church in America today is largely the result of this unbridled selfishness of the churches. There are many residence districts in the cities in which the churches are terribly crippled by this cause, and there are very few rural communities, anywhere, east or west, in which the churches are not simply strangling one another in their ungodly competitions. All this grows out of the exalting of the

ambition to multiply converts above the desire to Christianize the community. If the service of the community had been the uppermost concern these destructive competitions could never have appeared. There are thousands of rural districts where the facts warrant us in saying that the dominant function of the church is to de-Christianize the community. That may not be its purpose, but that is its indubitable and inevitable result. For the statistics show that, as a rule, where the churches are most numerous, the percentage of the population in the churches is smallest. There is a village of 300 people twelve miles from Columbus, where nine months ago there were three churches, and where now the three are one. And there are today twice as many members in that one church as there were nine months ago in the three churches, and such a community feeling, and such good will and cordial co-operation among neighbors as never before existed.

The first need of the church in many places is to Christianize itself. A touch of divine self-forgetfulness, a little careful and prayerful study of the Sermon on the Mount to find guidance for its own policy, a frequent and humble recalling of the apostolic injunction that it look not always on its own interests but sometimes on the interests of others, would result, I am sure, in conduct on the part of the church which would greatly advance the Kingdom of God.

The dominant function of the Church is the Christianization of society. To Christianize, not to reform. Reform has a political connotation; it suggests methods which the Church may sometime use, but on which it had better not put its main reliance. I do not think that the dominant function of the church is opposition, antagonism, prohibition,—not even to the evil. It must not be overcome by the evil, but it must overcome evil with good. May we not say that, among our zealous American Christians, the prefix "anti-" has been greatly overworked? I sometimes resolve that I will never join another organization which makes use of it. I know that there are things which we have got to be against, that resistance to evil is one of our duties which we must not shirk. I have had to do some fighting, of that kind, in the course of my life, and may have to do more; but after all the main business of the Christian church is positive rather than negative; not so much the repression of the evil as the promotion of the good. We have a gospel to preach, and if our hearts are full of it we shall find

less room in them for "the hate of hate" and for "the scorn of scorn," than for "the love of love." The world will not be Christianized, I make bold to say, by preaching whose distinctive note is "bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and ailing." "Evangelized" it may be, for I do not know what that word has come to mean; but it will not be Christianized.

The Christianization of society is in part an educational work. Jesus himself was primarily the Teacher. That was the name by which his disciples always called him, Rabbi, Master. The work of teaching must always be the central function of the church. "To this end have I been born," said Jesus, "and to this end came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth." The importance of this function has not always been grasped. The first word of the gospel is, "Change your minds." Get a new idea. The fundamental trouble with society, with civilization, is that men have got wrong ideas of what life means, of what is worth while. What they need most is cogent and convincing teaching of vital and fundamental truth. The church has been quite too well content, of late, to appeal to the will through the emotions without enlightening the reason. Their business, of such vast importance, is largely in arrears. It is appalling to discover how crude and primitive are the theological ideas of the multitude. As a rule there is nothing in their minds about theology except what has dribbled down, in a traditional way, from their grandfathers. Nine-tenths of them suppose that the doctrines of all churches are now what they were one hundred years ago. Few of them have any conception of the newer theological thinking; of the rational and ethical ideas of modern religious teachers they have not heard. It is this vast ignorance of the multitude which makes possible the success of an obscurantist semi-pagan Evangelism which is ravaging the country and planting the seeds of fanaticisms whose harvesting will be a thorny task.

The church in this country has a large obligation on its hands, to bring home to the minds of the people the vital and inspiring truths of religion, the truths of today, the best results of the brave and reverent thought of this generation. There is a great hunger in the hearts of men for thorough and frank discussions of these themes. If I may speak of an humble experiment of my own, I have given, since the beginning of this year a course of nine Wednesday evening lectures on Present Day Theology, including such titles as God and Man, Nature

the Supernatural, Sin and Salvation, Heaven and Hell, The Incarnation, The Atonement, Forgiveness, and The Life Everlasting; and they have been listened to by audiences which, most of the time, filled the large Auditorium of our church, many of them strangers to me. I am perfectly sure that nothing which I could have said about sociology, or literature or politics, or current moral questions would have drawn half as many people. And the grateful words that have been spoken to me about these attempts to give the people clear ideas on questions purely theological have been most rewarding. It has all evinced a most pathetic eagerness on the part of the people to know what to think about religion. It is a clear indication of the call there is for constructive teaching on the part of the church. There never was a day when there was greater need that the church should tell the truth about religion. The church has not been telling the truth. It has been suppressing the truth. It has thought the truth unsafe. There are exceptions, of course. No sweeping statements can be made. There are pulpits which have been frank and brave, a good many of them, all told, but I heard Dr. Hall say yesterday morning that the great majority of the churches are still adhering to a theology which does not represent the knowledge of today, and I am sure that he is right.

To be specific, let me say that one essential part of the dominant function of the church in the life of today is to tell the truth about the Bible. There are comparatively few churches in which the truth about the Bible has been told. There are comparatively few ministers who tell their congregations the truth about the Bible which they themselves have learned in the theological seminaries. There is no use, of course, in puzzling the people with all the theories of the critics, for many of them are sufficiently fanciful; but certain palpable facts lie upon the very surface of the Biblical literature,—facts which the Bible frankly tells us about itself, which all men who use the Bible need to know, and which are not known by the vast majority of church members. The knowledge of these facts would make impossible the mechanical and mischievous theories of inspiration which furnish the soil for certain dangerous fanaticisms now widely propagated. The Bible is not the kind of book that it is thought to be by a great majority of our church members. It is a much better book than they think it to be; a far more interesting book; a more human book; a

wiser book; a diviner book. The truth about it leaves us free to believe in a good God, and shows us how wisely and patiently and graciously he has been leading the world out of ignorance and savagery up to the light of the new day. The theory of verbal infallibility to which the vast majority of our church members are still clinging clouds and confuses this wonderful record, stultifies the intelligence of those who try to justify it, and repels from the book and from religion tens of thousands who might, if they were told the truth about it, find in it the bread of life.

To tell the truth about the Bible, is no small part of the obligation resting on the church of today. To say or think that it isn't safe to tell the truth about it is the depth of fatuity. Nothing else is safe. Who dares to say anything about it that is not true? Who dares to leave any essential truth about it unspoken?

More central and more imperative is the obligation resting on the church to incarnate and reveal the principles on which God is organizing the Kingdom in the world. The old Hebrew prophets had a glorious vision of it, it was their hope of which Jesus knew himself to be the fulfilment. To grasp with the strength of a great conviction the truth as it is in Jesus, and make it blaze before the thought of this generation, is the one thing that the church of today is called to do. She is not to speculate about the contents of his personality, she is to take the truth which he taught and live by it, and enforce it upon the world as the law of all life. Her first duty is not to believe what men have said about him, it is to believe what he said, and make the world see that it is truth to live by: that the one thing needful for this world so full of toil and trouble and strife and hate and blind contention is to find the way of Jesus and follow it. The time has come when the world has got to find that way, and what is the church of Jesus Christ in the world for if not to lead the world into that way? She isn't here to teach sociology—any other sociology than the application of the ethics of Jesus to the lives of men. She is not here to substitute social service for religion; she is here to set the hearts of men on fire with the religion of Jesus which can find no expression but social service. She is here to Christianize society, which means to saturate the minds of men with the principles of social justice as they are unfolded in the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount. By some hand the world

has got to be led into this wisdom; and it would be to the church a calamity indeed if by other leadership than hers the world should find the way of life. The church has never had but one mission, but one message; it is to speak with authority the first word of its Founder: The Kingdom is here. Change your minds. Get the new idea. You have long persisted in thinking that the world is won by striving, crowding, trampling one another. No. It is not so. It is won by serving, sharing, helping one another. And the old world itself, weary of war and want and hate is beginning to believe it. Look, look! The dawn is breaking. The new day is coming. O church of God, groping in your path, fumbling with your task, lift up your eyes and see, lift up your voice and cry: "Blessed! blessed! blessed are the poor in spirit! blessed are the meek! blessed are the peacemakers! blessed are they that hunger and thirst after the righteousness which is good will. Theirs is the Kingdom, and the King is at the gates. Lift up your heads oh ye gates, even lift them up ye everlasting doors and the King of glory shall come in!"

WHAT IS THE DOMINANT FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH IN THE LIFE OF TODAY?

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The answer to this question does not seem to be far away or difficult. The chief business of the church is to bring to men in every form possible the consciousness of the living God. You might imagine a wistful whisper arising out of millions of hearts, and at last all gathered up into one great cry, like the voice of an angel: Wanted for America, a hundred thousand churches which really believe in God. Wanted, a hundred thousand ministers who believe with all their hearts in the good God. Wanted, at least ten men and women in every church and Sunday school, who behave as if God lived. Is not faith in God the atmosphere in which everything good grows? Surround human souls then with this faith. Let children breathe the thought of God from their infancy, assure men everywhere that God is, and all the things that constitute