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The Church and Democracy

WHAT IS THE CHURCH DOING TO REALIZE DEMOCRACY?

FRED L. BROWNLEE.*

This question comes as a challenge. The church is under fire. Men like Odell and Fosdick and McAfee are but representative of many who are cross-questioning the church sharply. Other sacred institutions are also under fire. Democracy has withstood one of the most colossal barrages of the ages and now that it is safe—for a while at least—we are turning our attention to the fundamental question of making democracy safe for the world. Hence the query, What is the Church Doing to Realize Democracy?

We need to define our terms. What do we mean by "the Church"? And, what do we mean by "democracy"? Some ecclesiastics are given to speaking of "the Church and the denominations." But no one would be willing to think of democracy and episcopacy and papacy in the same sentence unless it be to show what democracy is not. For convenience, therefore, suppose we define "the church" as any church organized on a democratic basis of government for the promotion and extension of what Professor Coe calls "the democracy of God."

And, what about "democracy"? Democracy is a very unstable term. It has been used to describe the despotism of Mexico and the Bolshevism of Russia. Most people seem to think of democracy almost entirely in terms of government, but democracy must mean much more than government. It is a form of social living as well as government. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, we will define democracy as a form of social living in which every normal individual is recognized as a social asset, who in turn recognizes his own social interdependence, and finds his chief joy in human fellowship or friendship.

Now then, what is the church as thus defined doing to realize democracy thus defined? I shall attempt to answer this question by calling attention, (1) to the message of the church; (2) to the church as a training-school in democracy, and (3) to the program of the church school. In conclusion I shall mention a few hindrances, even in the democratic church, to rapid progress along these lines.

THE MESSAGE OF THE CHURCH.

Democracy like other institutions is the embodiment of an idea or a set of ideas. It has also, if it be progressive, the machinery for realizing an ideal. In origin, the Christian Church was the embodiment of a very simple and communistic idea of democracy. It was also the mouth-piece of a universal ideal of democracy or human brotherhood. The churches that have done the most to realize democracy have been the ones that have not departed very far from these simple beginnings. The

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complexities of social living on a large scale have made communism impracticable, but they have not minimized the necessity of declaring the ideal of human brotherhood a workable and feasible world-ideal. It is with the declaring of this ideal to the world that we are concerned right now.

Sometimes we are prone to underestimate the value of the pulpit message in the democratic church. How often preachers become discouraged and say to themselves, "What's the use of this everlasting preaching of the ideals of Jesus, when the important thing is to go into practical social work, or politics or industrial welfare work?" That is precisely one of our great mistakes. We have worn the word "practical" threadbare by busying ourselves with this thing, that thing and another thing, when the most practical thing we could do would be to get a clearer vision of the fundamental ideas and ideals that lie back of what needs to be done. Right now the Religious Education Committee of the church with which I am connected is studying, in seminar fashion, the psychology of religion. When we get through we are planning to tackle the subject of the theory and practice of religious education. With a Sunday school that needs attention and reform at many points you may think this committee very impractical. But we think that we are not worthy to be entrusted with the responsibility of a church school until we know what we are about and why we ought to do certain things. Is not the foundation of a building as important, if not more important, than the interior decorating and the light fixtures?

For thirty years Dr. Washington Gladden preached from a single pulpit the social ideals of Jesus. Much of this time his voice was as one crying in the wilderness. He had his hours of discouragement. He died in the midst of a great war that in some respects seemed to him the very repudiation of those ideals. But he never wavered. Last week his church went over the top in a one-hundred-thousand dollar memorial fund to be used in putting into practice in the city of Columbus, Ohio, the very ideals that its first preacher so faithfully declared to them.

For this kind of service we have no standards of measurement. You can never tell with measures and weights just where a church is getting with ideal preaching. But wherever a preacher stands forth and honestly and fervently declares to his people the social and democratic ideals of Jesus he is delivering a message that sooner or later will undermine the autocratic and dogmatic machinery of an otherwise antiquated institution. But the church must do more than preach.

THE CHURCH AS A TRAINING SCHOOL IN DEMOCRACY.

The church we have defined is one that chooses its own pastor and decides what his salary shall be. This is no small matter, speaking in terms of democracy. It is generally agreed today that the question of leadership and its compensation is one of the very vital, if not the

most vital question of democracy. We must have leaders and they are worthy of their hire. Who shall select them and who shall determine their salaries? The danger in leadership is that it wants to determine its own salary, as well as the ethics and religion of the persons who are to be led. When you get together a group of folks who are stockholders and workers, choosing their own leader and setting the bounds of his salary, you are getting together an institution that is doing not a little in training in real democracy. Such an institution is the church that we are talking about.

When we speak of stockholders we instantly think of dividends. What about the dividends that the stockholders of the church receive? They are banded together for profits in character and better social living only. The reason we have so little real democracy up to the present is because of material wealth and the power that such wealth controlled. An institution that gets people to invest their money in a cause that pays dividends in terms of character and social living is one that is doing much to realize democracy. One of the very finest things our country did during the war was to issue Liberty Bonds and saving stamps in such small denominations that the poorest of the poor could make a real investment in the national government. But the government had to attach its $4\frac{1}{4}\%$ to these bonds and stamps. If we agree that what the government did on an interest-bearing basis was an excellent way to train citizens in democracy, how much more must we concede that an institution which gets its members to invest their money on a non-interest-bearing basis is realizing the very finest kind of democracy.

But the church is doing more than this. It permits its members, and in some case, its non-members, to suggest new ways of doing things and improved ways of doing old things. I know of a well-equipped and well-organized democratic church in one of our large cities that has a committee on Community Welfare. Its business is to keep the church informed on community needs and to suggest ways to meet them. This church is in a foreign section of the city. On this particular committee there is a German who runs a grocery store in the neighborhood, a man with a social vision but not a member of the church. Another member is a Polish real estate man who also is not a member of the church. A third member is a visiting nurse who goes in and out of the homes of the community; she also is not a member of the church. This church is not only training its own members and non-members in real democracy but is also democratically influencing the entire community.

It is a great thing to give people the right to choose their leader and fix his salary. It is a great thing to get people to invest their money on a non-interest-bearing basis for the sake of better social living. It is a great thing to let people criticize an institution and initiate new ways of doing things. But it is a still greater thing to get people to happily doing good things together. This the church is doing. The church to

which I have just referred has a resident membership of almost one thousand. Almost five hundred of these members have distinct jobs in the church. One of the very best and most useful workers is an Italian who drifted into the church ten years ago as a vagabond. He was allowed at the time to wheel some coal into the church and to sleep in its engine-room. Today he has a good room in the church dormitory and is trusted with taking the church money to the bank every Monday morning.

In defining democracy we said that it has to do with a type of social living that not only recognizes the value of every normal individual and the social interdependence of individuals, but also looks upon human fellowship or friendship as the greatest thing in the world. It is the church that most effectively realizes this latter condition. The church, just referred to, takes great delight and pride in the fact that during the sixty years of its existence it has had not a single internal quarrel, and this church has not been neutral in matters that divide even good people, such as the liquor traffic for example. Because of this fine fellowship it is easy to get faithful workers to do the things that this church finds to do.

The church is a veritable training school in democracy, through its missionary work, principally in the foreign work. One result of the great war is the proposed league of nations; the church with its missionary vision and work has done much to make the organization of such a league possible. I know of no live church that does not participate actively in this world-wide work. Even autocratically organized and controlled churches are getting in on the game. Of all the church activities which are destined to drive away selfishness, narrow-mindedness and autocracy the most compelling is that which comes from the kindling of a love so unselfish and far-reaching that it takes into its embrace the whole world and calls every man its brother.

When you add to all these things the many sub-organizations in a church, most of which came into existence on a democratic basis and which are democratically controlled you have an institution that stands second to none in what it is doing to realize democracy. But in all this we have had in mind largely the adults of the church. There is one other department of the church that is doing great things for democracy. I refer to the Church School.

THE CHURCH SCHOOL AND DEMOCRACY

Each generation must be trained in democracy and social living if these things are to be a part of the generation's life. The future of any institution rests on the new generation. The family that leaves no offspring pronounces the death sentence on its family name. The church that has not a live Church school is sure to die. We admit these things readily from a physical standpoint, but are we willing to admit them from the standpoint of religion and education? Over fifty years ago Germany applied the same standards to religion and education

and bound her people to the support of Prussianism through a controlled religion and education. The Roman Catholic Church has perpetuated its religion with all its dogmatism and superstition through its parochial schools. The Church school must have a program of religious education that will train growing children in Christian democracy. This the Church school of today has.

Most Protestant churches no longer have abandoned the old narrow conception of the Sunday school. It is surprising how the use of the new name, Church school, indicative of the new religious education program—has spread. The Church school now considers its task really to be that of training children in social living and Christian character. Following Horace Bushnell, the Church school today holds that a child should grow up conscious of the great problems of social living, trained to take a firm stand against social evils, and fired with a love for and a joy in democratic, social living. The programs of religious education advocated by the Religious Education Association and some of the educational departments of the leading denominations have this ideal as their goal. And, as rapidly and as tactfully as possible the details of these programs are being put to work in the church schools that accept them. In the midst of all this there has come from Dr. Coe's book, "A Social Theory of Religious Education." The churches that put into practice the theory of education contained in that book—and there are some church schools already at it—are taking one of the very finest and surest ways to realize democracy that I know anything about.

So much for what the church, as we defined it, is doing for the kind of democracy that we have been talking about. Now for a few words as to three obstacles that stand in the way of these things being done more obviously and more rapidly. Obvious things are always in the hands of those who draw the crowds. The churches that have the largest followings are the Catholic and the orthodox Protestant Churches. We cannot expect anything avowedly autocratic and orthodox to do much for democracy. It wouldn't be orthodox. We must remember this distinction always lest we be inclined to pessimism when dealing with such vital theme as the one of this paper. The heralds of democracy have always been lonely people. Amos stood alone. Jesus stood practically alone. Martin Luther stood alone. The churches that are doing things for democracy are few and scattered, but there are many more of them today than twenty years ago. And this war has exiled and ruined more autocrats than anything else in history.

The other obstacles are within the very democratic churches. The average church that has been running for a number of years takes to the newer programs of religion and education slowly. Dogmatism has more than one life. It dies hard. The church program that is passing was arranged for a system of dogmatism. It was a logical affair totally devoid of any child-, adolescent- and adult-psychology.

It started with a theory of God that demanded definite things from man. The church had formulated these demands into prescriptions and rolled them into pills. The function of the church was to administer the pills. This is orthodoxy, and that is why I link it with autocracy.

The preacher who suggests a revision in the church creed bumps against dogmatism. The preacher who declares from his pulpit a social gospel bumps against dogmatism. Likewise the ones who suggest a change in the order of worship or new methods in the Sunday school bump against dogmatism. But since it is of the nature of dogmatism to die hard, we must be patient. Nevertheless, we must be firm, and finally kill it.

The last obstacle is unwillingness to place more faith in new and younger laymen. Church business and church management inevitably tend to get into the hands of a few who think that they and they alone can do things. I know one pastor who would have been a candidate for a resignation had he not worked by proxy to make it possible for some new laymen to get on his board of trustees. Another church finds it impossible to get women and laboring men on its church boards. In the name of humanity and democracy these things should not be.

We need to trust the laymen as they come along if we are to keep up with the times and get accomplished the things that need to be done. This may mean some radical and practical changes now and then, but what if it does? Democracy is never stagnant. Whenever it stagnates it either becomes autocracy or dies. In one community just the other day the members of its one church and some non-members proposed that the church cut loose from all denominational interests in order that other denominations be discountenanced in coming into this community. This was a democratic proposal. It was also very radical and unorthodox. But it carried. The church is now in name and in deed a Community Church, and sixty fine, intelligent people, representing many denominations, joined on this basis. The State Superintendent of the denomination advised against it, as did older ecclesiastics. But it went through by the will of the people. And the young people of the community are represented on the new board of trustees. The obstacles can be removed; the church is progressing and great days are ahead of it in realizing democracy.