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THE BUSINESS OF THE CHURCH.

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In responding to the invitation to write upon the subject of "The Business of the Church," it is worth while to avail one's self of the limitations of the subject. We assume that we may omit any consideration of the technical definitions of the church; the outstanding characteristics, or "marks" of the church; its spiritual equipment; its past history, and its great mission through the years to come.

The whole question narrows down to the interesting, important, and extremely practical question—"What does Jesus Christ want us who are in His church to do today?"

What is the present task of the church in our country? This inquiry must contemplate the church in the general sense in which that term is used, including all the Protestant Evangelical bodies in our land.

The present task of the church calls upon us to consider how it is related to the people of God themselves. The work of the church in this regard is to gather them out of the world, to nourish and strengthen them, and to inspire them to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world."

As the work of the church relates to what is known as the "world," that is, the unregenerate mass about us, its duty is to evangelize and save as many as possible, and to season and

enlighten all of life in every sphere, even where it may not result in the regeneration and salvation of men. In other words, it is the work of the church through proper channels of influence to counteract materialism, intemperance and all unwholesome and hurtful influence in public and private life.

The work of the church in our country has one other important relation which must be kept in view: it is that which it bears to the kingdom of God throughout the world, in the widest and fullest sense. In this respect it is the duty of the church to make this land the strategic point, and the most effective factor in the evangelization of the world. It is interesting to note that this particular phase of the relation of the church to the Kingdom of God throughout the world, is true of the church in this country in a sense which is not true of the church in any other land; for the opportunity to occupy this honorable position in the spread of the gospel through the whole world appears to have passed away from the older countries, such as England and Germany; and if America fails to avail itself of this great providential opportunity, in all probability the opportunity will soon pass away; and it is probable that China will be the next nation to which will be intrusted the high honor of being the leading evangelizing factor in the conquest of the world for Christ.

As we reflect upon the present task of the church in our country, two significant facts present themselves. One is the idea, which is gaining wide acceptance, that the church is proving inadequate, and indeed is perishing with dry rot. The other important fact is, the tremendous call which is being presented to the church to meet the sore moral needs of the life of today in all classes and conditions.

If the church is really breaking down, there is an unspeakably tragic element in it—that it is failing upon the very threshold of the greatest door of opportunity which has ever been open to it in this western world. Public life is sick, and all classes of men are perplexed, and it would be an immeasurable calamity, if the only agency which has divine healing and heavenly wisdom should fail in the crisis.

How can the church accomplish its task? How can we do

today what Christ would have us do? No more important question can be asked. It will not suffice to answer by saying there must be more consecrated and holy living. Such suggestions appear to rest upon the idea that there is a kind of spiritual radiation from holy living which, like leaven in the meal, will in due time leaven the whole lump. The radiation theory has much truth in it. It is illustrated in the helpful and saving influence which a godly member of a household often exerts upon other members of the family. It is a blessed truth in the experience of every community where godly people live. It may not be amiss for us to remember, that although radio-activity is a very recent discovery in physical science, it has been operative in many beneficent ways through all ages. However, these mysterious forces in nature with which we have so recently become familiar become mighty only when intelligently and definitely *directed* toward the desired ends. The church must in the same manner not only generate a vaster spiritual power, but it must succeed in *concentrating* that power for definite results.

In order that the church may have this increased power, and may be able to make it effective upon the world about, certain minimum requirements must be met by individual Christians and by the organized church.

In order that the individual believer may become the power of God, there must be—First, an acceptance of the Saviour's standard, that every believer is to be a "witness" for Him. We must recognize that this was one of the chief characteristics of Apostolic Christianity, when it was said of its messengers "these that have turned the world upside down have come hither also." We must get back and up to the high position occupied by the Apostolic Christians, who missed no opportunity to declare that Jesus Christ was a risen and living Lord "whereof we are witnesses"; which was unhesitatingly exemplified when they rejoiced even "that they were counted worthy to suffer for his name."

Second, we must accept the New Testament standard of stewardship in life and possessions. This does not mean that we are to seek the earliest opportunity to lose our lives, or to

divest them of those natural and innocent comforts and joys which we naturally desire; nor does this standard impose upon us the duty of immediately selling all that we have and giving to the poor, or to any other cause; but it does demand a clear, definite, loyal, enthusiastic dedication of life and possessions to the service of God, as His providence may indicate. These two features of the Christian church when it was in its pristine power were not mere accidental features, but were essential elements in that marvelous life and power which gave promise of the speedy evangelization of the world. They must be brought back into Christian life, if we are ever to hear the bugles of God sounding the final charge against the forces of sin. Thus it will be seen that it is not child's play which is before the church of Christ, if it seriously contemplates meeting the great challenge and opportunity which is before it today. It may be feared that many will say again "this is a hard saying, who can bear it?" On the other hand we are tempted to believe that a vast multitude of God's people will rejoice to recognize that they have been brought into the Kingdom of God in this wonderful time in which we are living for just such a worthy task as this.

On the part of the organized church certain requirements stand out with imperative significance. Foremost amongst these necessary elements stands the demand for efficiency. Efficiency is one of the newest of the professions. Secular life is waking to the realization that it is suffering a tremendous loss of power through all kinds of inefficiency in organization and operation. It has been demonstrated by one of the leading economists in our country that the railroads in the United States are wasting in this way a million dollars a day. Inefficiency and insufficiency in the financial system of our nation have been recognized with ever deepening concern for many years, and our national congress has had no more important task before it than to try to provide against this weakness.

Much of the recent discussions along practical religious lines has led to the conclusion that the church of Christ in America is inadequate and inefficient. Such conclusions are usually extravagant in the length to which they go; but it may be well for us to accept to a large extent this humiliating estimate.

It imparts great force and justice to the demand that the church shall insist upon efficiency in all life and work.

So far as the Presbyterian Church is concerned, every Presbytery should see to it that every minister on its roll who is capable of effective work, but who is bringing forth no adequate results, should have the demand for efficiency pressed heavily upon his conscience. Sunday School superintendents and teachers, and all leaders in Christian work, high and low, should have the most vigorous and wholesome application of the principle that "by their fruits ye shall know them." Presbyterial and other conferences throughout our Assembly during the past two years, upon the subjects of Evangelism and Stewardship, have been looking in the right direction, and in many places have made marked headway towards a new life and vigor and fruitfulness. Such efforts should be encouraged, and other means devised, with a view to bringing the army of Christ as it is represented in the Presbyterian Church up to the highest possible point of efficiency.

We must realize that the great task before the Church of Christ in America today is nothing short of a re-conquest of the country, not along lines of material and physical subjugation, which followed the frontier of other days as it moved westward, but the spiritual and moral conquest of the vast multitudes whose lives and problems open a new frontier, which challenges all the nerve and faith and courage which the church can bring to the glorious enterprise. It is obvious that all of the branches of the church of Christ must be united as closely and efficiently as possible in their great endeavor. God has been moving in a wonderful way among the churches of Christ in America, bringing the heart of one denomination to beat with wondrous sympathy with the aspirations and plans of others. This is particularly true in regard to the great Presbyterian and Reformed family of churches in this land. Presbyterianism has always had a genius for separation and reunion. When properly understood this may be an ecclesiastical analogue of the biological principle by which physical life is claimed to be a process of separation and reassociation of vital cells. We have had a long period of separation and now

appear to be in an atmosphere, if not of re-assimilation, at least of closer and more cordial and effective co-operation. Whatever may be the Master's plan for accomplishing it, we can at least be certain, that when once the Presbyterian and Reformed forces in America are properly and harmoniously related to one another, and the maximum of their power is realized, it will not only be the most potent spiritual influence in America, but will well-nigh take the world for Christ.

In addition to the requirements of efficiency, and of reasonable and scriptural co-operation, it is perfectly clear that the church, in order to live vigorously and triumph gloriously through the great day which God is giving us, must accept the challenge for *Social Service* which is becoming more insistent with every passing day. *Social Service* is a new name for an old Christian duty—the duty of Christian people being “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.” Some people are disposed to shy at it as something new, and consequently something questionable, if not dangerous. It is a repetition, only on a smaller scale, of the experience which the church had a generation ago in reference to Evolution, and a little later to Higher Criticism. Multitudes trembled for the Ark. Indeed one was under suspicion in some quarters if he did not share in the panic. We have seen these terrible scare-crows stripped of their false pretences and dogmatism, and have found them actually bringing tribute to the Word of God.

Let us lose no time in silly panic over *Social Service*. Christian *Social Service* with which the church is to be concerned, is the effort to bring the spirit of the Gospel of Christ into the natural relationship of man with his fellow man, and to lead him thus to recognize God as his Father and Friend. We have long and solemnly declared that the gospel is the solution of all the social ills and economic injustice which have so sorely afflicted public life. The “world,” the secular life about us, is at last beginning to take us at our word, and unlike the African congregation of which Dan Crawford tells us, that “they swallow my sermons, but spit out the salvation.” they are turning to the church, and are asking for that remedy which has been so long advertised from our pulpits and press. It would

be an immeasurable tragedy if the church should turn in panic and flee from an opportunity like this.

How shall the church render this service? What is the power by which it can be accomplished? Shall the church and the preachers take an active hand officially in business and politics and other secular activities about them? By no means. The power is to come through the Spirit of Christ as manifested in the holy living of his people in every situation of life, as it is wisely directed to bring its heavenly light and power to the solution of life's sore problems. The church will not be going bodily into business and politics, but it will be sending an ever increasing multitude of people into business, society and politics, who have been instructed and inspired by her teaching and ordinances, and who will trade, and talk, and vote, and act as before God, and to His glory.

When these conditions have been measurably realized, we will be back to the life, joy and power and fruitfulness which marked Apostolic Christianity. When one congregation shall live this reasonable Christian life for one year, it will invite a spiritual revolution in America.

There may be no call for the church to sing fewer hymns, nor demand for less praying, nor propriety for abatement of any other spiritual exercises, but it does behoove the people of God in America today to listen to the words, and catch the spirit, of the Lad who long ago sat in the midst of the wondering doctors of the law, and said "*Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?*"