

The Church, The People, and the Age

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Analysis and Summary

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I. I do not think it wise to ask candidates for admission to church membership to subscribe to long complicated statements of Christian doctrine that deal with debated and controversial questions, for the reason that such a practise is (1) contrary to the example of Christ and the apostolic Church; (2) it tends to keep honest doubters from joining the Church—people who may be ready and willing to accept the fundamentals of Christianity, but who may not be prepared to assent to inferences drawn from admitted facts, or to a line of philosophical reasoning underlying a certain creed; (3) it is liable to repulse conscientious, self-respecting, and cultured people, who may have had neither the time, nor the opportunity, nor the inclination to delve into all the hair-

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splitting theological disquisitions which many of our old creeds contain; (4) it breeds insincerity and flippancy because it encourages the acceptance of sacred pledges on the part of people who are ignorant of the grave import of them, though they may be very willing to give their assent; (5) the Church, moreover, has no moral right to lay the yoke of a complicated creed upon the neck of the brethren who are ethically qualified to join the Church, because only a small proportion of the 170,000 American pastors continues the time honored, biblical and rational custom of conducting catechetical classes in which the creed might be interpreted, doubts dispelled, pledges explained, difficulties removed, and confidence inspired by long-continued intercourse between the pastor and the candidate.

The first of the reasons stated above should be decisive with all who accept the Bible as the rule of faith and practise. The gate of entrance into the Church of the living God should not be made narrower than Christ and his apostles made it. When Peter professed his faith in Jesus as "the Christ" (Mark), or as "the Christ of God" (Luke), or as "the Christ, the Son of God" (Matthew)—all three phrases being equivalent to "Saviour" and stressing the Lord's office rather than his nature—Jesus, with evident joy in his heart, answered, "On this rock I will build my Church," that is, "loyal hearts and true" I will recognize as stones which are to be added one upon another in the erection of my spiritual temple. Peter was in no sense constituted the corner-stone of the Church—Christ himself occupies this distinctive place; he was merely declared to be the first real Christian, because of his simple profession of personal loyalty to Jesus as the Christ. When, on the day

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of Pentecost, thousands asked of Peter, "What shall we do?" the man of rock, remembering the Master's declaration in his own case, answered, "Repent ye, and be baptized" (Acts 2: 38), i.e., undergo a religious and ethical change in heart and mind by accepting Jesus as the Christ, as explained in my sermon, and then profess your loyalty before men by submitting to the symbol of spiritual and moral cleansing. When the jailer at Philippi asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus" (Acts 16: 30). Repent and believe are synonymous terms, sometimes used together, and at other times separately, their ground meaning being the expression of loyal adherence to Jesus and of an ethical change in correspondence with the spirit of Christ. An unprejudiced study of the conditions for following Christ, as demanded in the New Testament, will conclusively show that all he asked was "to learn of him" to be a disciple, i.e., a pupil. Under the Lord's tutoring they would, of course, make progress, and their growth in grace and in the knowledge of the true nature of Jesus can easily be traced in the New Testament. The same was demanded by the apostles and the first missionaries. They were strenuously active in season and out of season, by preaching, conversation, and letters, that the new converts "might know the certainty concerning the things wherein they were instructed" (Luke 1: 4). But the entrance conditions were brief in bulk, practical in nature, and unphilosophical in their reasoning.

As the New Testament is the admitted standard of the Church, she also should principally test the sincerity and docility of the person asking for admission. The schoolmaster should be the Church's example. All

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he asks is that the pupil come to school, submit to his guidance and be willing to work. This is enough as a beginning. The rest follows naturally in the course of time. Line upon line, precept upon precept, promotion from the lower to the higher grade, from the grammar school to the high school, then to college, and finally to the university. Now he can read his diploma in Latin, he knows the history of the world, and is prepared to discuss the problems of science and philosophy. What would have become of the little fellow, if the primary teacher had required the attainments of the mature student as a condition for entrance into the A B C class?

In the preceding discussion we have assumed that the Church of to-day does require "the giving of assent to long complicated statements of Christian doctrine" as a condition for church membership. But are we not begging the question? Some churches, indeed, have gone far beyond Christ and his apostles in their requirements for church fellowship. They require the acceptance of the Apostles' Creed in detail and a few still retain in their formulæ of admission those semi-pagan remnants from the medieval liturgies about renouncing the devil, and other unbiblical and worn-out phrases. Others demand subscription to entire catechisms and even to ascetic rules with reference to things ethically indifferent, concerning which "Christ alone is Lord of the conscience," a procedure which Jesus and Paul denounced with great vehemence (Mark 7: 1-23; Col. 3: 16-23). A few denominations forbid voting and office-holding, others denounce officially secret societies, and some communions regulate the outward apparel, the style of hair-cutting, and the wearing of beards. But the overwhelm-

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ing majority of American congregations—the Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, and others—adhere at present, and have for a long time adhered very closely, to the requirements laid down in the New Testament. In the exercise of the liberty enjoyed by pastors and official boards in most of the American denominations, many congregations use even a more simplified and purified form of admission than may be contained in their official liturgies. For instance, “The Book of Common Worship, prepared by the Committee of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A.,” for voluntary use, asks the candidate for admission to the Church: (1) “Do you receive and profess the Christian faith? (2) Do you confess your sins, and turn from them with godly sorrow, and put all your trust in the mercy of God, which is in Christ Jesus; and do you promise in his strength to lead a sober, righteous, and godly life? (3) Do you promise to make diligent use of the means of grace, submitting yourself to the lawful authority and guidance of the Church, and continuing in the peace and fellowship of the people of God?” No one who is at all prepared to join a Christian Church, and not merely a society for ethical culture, should object to these requirements. The ethical note might be a little more emphasized in all our creeds, though it is contained in the very demands “to repent” and “to believe,” if only the pastors would conduct catechetical classes in which these pregnant terms might be analyzed. Yet we concede that a little more stress, in this age of revival of the “ethical and social consciousness,” on the plain question as to the candidate’s acceptance of the royal law (Matt. 22: 37), and the golden rule (Matt. 7: 12) would appeal to many.

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I would, however, advocate the liberalizing of the entrance conditions to church membership solely in order to bring them into harmony with the New Testament and not because I think that by doing so a large number of people standing aloof would then flock into the Church. There are more potent reasons which keep people outside. There is the evil heart of man; ignorance of the Bible, for which the pastors are greatly to blame because they have given up the personal catechization of the young, handing it over entirely to less qualified Sunday-school teachers; the bad example of evil rich men in the Church; atheistic socialism; open lawlessness at the two extremes of society, by the very rich and by the residents in the slums; bad city government failing to enforce the laws protecting the weekly day of rest. In spite of these up-hill conditions the Church is not only holding her own but is making steady progress, both extensively and as to real influence. In Germany the liberal ministers demand freedom to preach "modernism" in order to draw the educated classes; but their churches are empty, while the services of those who hold to the more evangelical and New Testament views are well attended.

With special reference to President Lincoln's case I may be permitted to remark: (1) that he seems to be too exacting in his strictures on the Church. He applied a double standard in his relations to society. He strongly dissented, e.g., from the Dred Scott decision, from a number of compromise laws on slavery, and from minor details of the United States Constitution itself, and yet he did not hesitate on several occasions to accept these documents and to take oaths of allegiance, simply because he knew himself to be a loyal American and found

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himself in sincere sympathy with the constitution and laws in general. If he was a member of a secret society he no doubt found many details of their rules not to his liking, yet he joined the lodge, because he sympathized with the general trend and spirit of the order. Almost everybody believes that President Lincoln was a true Christian at heart, for he highly appreciated the tremendous influence of the Church for good; he loved her ministers, attended her services, prayed to her God, and read the Bible. Might he not have applied his entirely correct practise toward the United States government to the Christian Church, even if she in his time required assent "to long complicated statements of Christian doctrine," a supposition which I doubt very much. President Lincoln's example has done great injury to the Church and to America, during his lifetime and up to this very day; for his conspicuous example has been quoted by thousands as a reason, or as an excuse, for not affiliating with the Church. Distinguished men who love America should carefully consider their influence for evil if they, for reasons which would not weigh with them in other relations of life, fail to throw their influence on the side of that institution which by the common consent of all the good is the strongest power for personal and civil morality, and if they neglect openly to acknowledge the Bible which the United States Supreme Court in the famous Girard will case declared to contain a system of the highest morality known to men.

(2) I doubt whether President Lincoln realized how comprehensive a pledge it is which he declared himself willing to accept "with all my heart and all my soul." In it he declares himself willing to be guided by the great commandment, and as this is contained in the Old

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and the New Testament, he thereby accepts the authority of the Bible in his religion. He calls Jesus "the Saviour," by which he pregnantly professes man's sinfulness, his inability to save himself, and the paramount mission of Jesus. He is willing to follow his teaching, and this implies recognition of Christ's lordship. He considers love the supreme thing in the world, and thereby accepts the quintessence of the New Testament ethics. I verily believe that few evangelical churches in his own time, and still fewer in our time, would have refused President Lincoln admission on such a pledge with its evident implications. If, however, Lincoln wanted his words understood in their bare ethical import, he betrays a superficiality of reasoning not at all usual with him. For he should have known that ethics must rest on religion, and that if Christ and his apostles had had nothing more to offer to the world than what Mr. Lincoln deemed sufficient, there would be no Church to-day, and possibly there would never have been an American republic, nor a character of Mr. Lincoln's excellence.

II. The basis of a sound and workable theology is the truth. Truth may be defined as the perfect agreement between reality and opinion. All truth is one. Consequently, whatever in literature, science and philosophy has really been ascertained as true, must therefore be cheerfully, not grudgingly, accepted by theology and the Church, and their former statements and conclusions must be revised and adjusted according to the new light.

From these observations, which are really of the nature of axioms, a twofold criticism results: one direct-

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ed toward science and the other toward the Church and theology. (1) Science, in its various subdivisions, has always shown the very natural weakness of asserting "assured results," when there was as yet only a hypothesis, a "research guess," to offer. It is a perfectly legitimate method in any scientific induction to start with a hypothesis, and, after having verified it, to present it as a theory. Very often, however, our scientists become impatient at other scientists and especially at the Church for not accepting their hypotheses as proven theories. (2) Theology is the science of religion and the bearing of religion on personal, social, commercial and political life is fraught with the most important consequences, here and hereafter. Hence, while theology must enjoy full liberty of investigation and discussion, the Church cannot permit her to apply her experiments too freely to the issues of practical life on which so much depends, before they have reached a tolerably advanced stage of scientific verification. The place for hypotheses is the laboratory. Even advanced theologians, like Dr. Harnack of Berlin, insist on this distinction. Medical science, e.g., does not permit its research professors to experiment with their supposed finds on men before their hypothesis has been reasonably elevated to a theory. (3) The scientist must remember that truth is possessed of an undying vitality. "Truth crushed to earth will rise again, the eternal years of God are hers." If an opinion is true, i.e., if it corresponds to reality, it will eventually be accepted.

The Church in her organized capacity, on the other hand, is perhaps the most conservative institution in the world. (1) While almost all true progress in the world may, directly or indirectly, be traced back to individuals

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in the Church, the Church in her organized capacity has never been entirely successful in overcoming her besetting weakness of passively holding aloof or actually opposing new departures in science, literature, and philosophy until these movements became so strong that one group after another of her leading men became convinced of the truth; finally the organization as a whole capitulated, but not until she had sustained great losses in prestige and members. Andrew D. White, in his *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*, has, in a spirit entirely friendly to the Church and religion, conclusively shown this. (2) The Church must remember that the Lord promised to her the gift of a fuller understanding of the old, and the acquisition of new truths (John 16: 12-14). (3) The Church should, therefore, remember that every ascertained result in any science whatsoever is in the nature of a divine revelation, and should be claimed by theology as material for her system; for God is the giver of all good gifts. Only the truth shall make men free. (4) Theology and the Church must insist with much greater emphasis than hitherto that the Bible is a record of revelation and of precious religious experiences which have the value of a standard, rather than a text-book of geology, astronomy, physiology and history. This will lift a burden from her shoulders which she was never able to carry with ease and grace. Theologians and the better elements in the Church have learned by this time that changing old view-points and accepting new interpretations is by no means equivalent to giving up the Bible, but only involves a profounder understanding of the word of truth. (5) The Church thrives best when allowing to theology a large measure of liberty in research, investigation and

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reconstruction, while at the same time insisting on spirituality and practical piety in life; for where the heart is right the head will not go very far astray. *Cor est quod facit theologium* ("It is the heart that makes the theologian").

Summing up then, permit me to register my general agreement with the observation in your letter, viz.: that "It is true that a message to be effective must stand for and teach those things that constitute the sum total of the values of human life, whatever their sources may be."