

# CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING  
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

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## Christianity and the Visible Church

THERE is great diversity of opinion concerning the relation between Christianity and the visible Church and *vice versa*. This diversity of opinion will be found in the main, we believe, to be rooted in and to grow out of different conceptions of Christianity itself. Here as elsewhere, if we mistake not, the primary question is the old yet ever new question, What is Christianity? Be that as it may, the problem of the relation between Christianity and the Church is one of great practical importance. It is not merely true that the different solutions offered have divided and sub-divided those who profess and call themselves Christians into different camps; it is also true that the solutions offered have had and continue to have a more or less determining influence in shaping their conception of their duties and obligations as Christians.

That view of the relation between Christianity and the Church which has prevailed most widely (thus far) has received its fullest and most consistent expression in Roman Catholic circles. According to this view the relation between Christianity and the visible Church is so close and vital that they become practically identical. According to the Roman Catholics, all of God's saving activities in the present dispensation are exercised through the instrumentality of the Church. They teach as fully as any that salvation is ultimately from God and so proclaim a supernatural salvation; but they hold that in distributing this supernaturally wrought salvation to individuals God employs

the Church as His exclusive agent. This means that the Church stands between the individual soul and God and that it is to the Church to which men must immediately look for salvation. This is not to say, of course, that the Roman Catholic supposes that the salvation that the Church dispenses has been obtained independently of CHRIST. He holds as explicitly as any that there is no salvation apart from CHRIST. None the less he holds that CHRIST in dispensing to men the benefits of His saving work operates not directly but through the instrumentality of the Church which He has established for that purpose. This matter is so important that for its fuller exposition we avail ourselves of the words of Dr. W. P. PATTERSON of Edinburgh:

"Observe the extraordinarily important place that is occupied in the Roman Catholic

scheme of salvation by the idea of the Church. It is hardly incorrect to say that in the Roman Catholic conception the central feature of the Christian religion is the supernatural institution which represents CHRIST, which carries on His work, and which acts as the virtual mediator of the blessings of salvation. Instead of making the relation of the believer to the Church depend on his relation to CHRIST, it makes his relation to CHRIST depend on his relation to the Church. It may not be anywhere expressly affirmed that the Church is the central provision of Christianity, but it is certain that the doctrine of the Church dominates and colors the whole interpretation of the Christian dispensation. . . . Its vocation or commission is nothing less than the perpetuation of the work of the Redeemer. It does not of course supersede the work of CHRIST. Its presupposition is that CHRIST, the eternal Son of God, laid the foundation of its work in His incarnation and His atoning death; that from Him come ultimately all power, authority and grace; and that as from Him all spiritual blessing proceeds, so that to Him belongs all the glory. But in the present dispensation the Church, in large measure, has taken over the work of CHRIST. It is, in a real sense, a re- incarnation of CHRIST to the end of the continuation and completion of His redemptive mission. Through His Church CHRIST continues to execute the offices of a Prophet, of a Priest, and of a King. His prophetic office it perpetuates by witnessing to the truth once delivered to the saints and by interpreting and determining doctrine with infallible authority. . . . It represents Him so completely in the priestly function of mediation between God and man that there is no covenanted salvation outside the pale of the visible organization of which He is the unseen Head. It further represents Him as sacrificing priest by the perpetual repetition in the Mass of the oblation He once offered upon the cross. . . . And finally it administers the kingly power of CHRIST on earth. It has an absolute claim to the

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obedience of its members in all matters of faith and duty, with the right to punish the disobedient for the breach of its laws, and to coerce the contumacious" (Rule of Faith, pp. 240-242).

It is obvious that while according to the Roman Catholic view both Christianity and the visible Church owe their existence to the once crucified but now reigning CHRIST, and are inconceivable apart from Him, they are related in such a way that the fortunes of the one rises and falls with the fortunes of the other. The Roman Catholic practically identifies the Christianity of any particular period of history with the visible Church of that period inasmuch as he looks upon the extension of the visible Church and the extension of Christianity as virtually the same thing. It is natural, therefore, that his center of interest is in the visible Church and that he should regard its extension as the thing most needed. Surely he is right if the benefits of divine grace are dispensed only through the agency of the visible Church.

The view of the relation between Christianity and the visible Church, which has prevailed most widely in Protestant circles, differs quite radically from the one we have considered. It should not be overlooked, however, that this view (ordinarily called the Evangelical view to distinguish it from the Roman Catholic view on the one hand and the Modernist view on the other) has much in common with the Roman Catholic view. The Evangelical fully agrees with the Roman Catholic that God in His grace has provided a supernatural salvation, that Christianity is through and through a supernatural religion. His opposition to the Roman Catholic view has to do not with the question whether God in His grace has made a great salvation available but with the question of the means by which and the conditions under which the benefits of this great salvation are appropriated by sinful man. To be more specific, the Evangelical denies that CHRIST has established the Church as an intermediary between God and the individual soul and affirms that in His saving operations He deals directly and immediately with each soul. Let it never be forgotten then that the true Evangelical ever

makes the twofold confession (1) that salvation is from God and God alone and (2) that God in saving men deals with them directly and immediately. There is need of emphasizing this because there are many who seem to think they are Evangelicals merely because they confess that there are no intermediaries between the soul and God. He only is an Evangelical who also confesses that salvation is wholly of God. Deep as is the gulf that divides between the Evangelical and the Roman Catholic, it is not as deep as the gulf that divides both from those who teach that men save themselves.

It is obvious that the visible Church occupies a much less important place in the Evangelical scheme of salvation than in that of the Roman Catholic. It distinguishes, as the Roman Catholic does not, between the visible and the invisible Church and regards membership in the latter as the thing of primary importance. Conceivably, according to the Evangelical view, Christianity might not only exist but be influential in the world even if there were no visible Church as here the thing of fundamental importance is the sinner's relation to CHRIST rather than his relation to the Church. This is not to say, however, that the Evangelical attaches small importance to the visible Church. For while he does not hold that CHRIST established the Church as the means by which to communicate His saving grace to men, he does hold that CHRIST Himself established the visible Church and that membership in it is obligatory on all His followers. Moreover he holds that to the visible Church CHRIST "hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints . . . and doth by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto." Hence in harmony with his conviction that the thing of fundamental importance is the sinner's relation to CHRIST he holds that all who bow before Him, live in His Word, and respect His ordinances will attach high value to the visible Church. While he does not hold that the visible Church is essential to the very existence of Christianity as a factor in the life of humanity, he does

hold that according to the divine plan its well-being is dependent on the visible Church. Only as the visible Church bears witness to the gospel of the grace of God in its purity and integrity through the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments and the exercise of discipline have we any right to hope that the fortunes of Christianity in this world will go on from strength to strength.

A few words (all that our space permits) as to the relation between the visible Church and the kingdom of God in the present dispensation will perhaps serve to make the matter clearer. The Roman Catholic view virtually identifies the visible Church with the kingdom of God. The Evangelical view, broadly speaking, virtually identifies the kingdom of God not with the visible but with the invisible Church. According to the Evangelical view, therefore, the kingdom of God is much more inclusive than the visible Church. The kingdom of God exists in proportion as God's absolute supremacy is recognized in word and deed. This means that members of the kingdom of God seek in every sphere of life, such as business, politics, science, education, etc., to have the will of God done on earth even as it is done in heaven. It will be seen, therefore, that not only is a true member of the visible Church a member of the kingdom of God but that as a member of the latter he has wider and more inclusive duties than as a member of the former. The late Dr. JAMES ORR has written so wisely relative to the relation between the kingdom of God and the Church that we avail ourselves of his words:

"The kingdom of God is a wider conception than that of the Church. On the other hand, these ideas do not stand so far apart as they are sometimes represented. The Church is, as a society, the visible expression of this kingdom in this world; is indeed the only society which does formally profess (very imperfectly often) to represent it. Yet the Church is not the outward embodiment of this kingdom in all its aspects, but only in its directly religious and ethical, *i. e.* in its purely spiritual aspect. It is not the direct business of the Church, for example, to take to do with art, science, politics, general literature, etc., but to bear witness for God and His truth to men, to

preach and spread the gospel of the kingdom, to maintain God's worship, to administer the sacraments, to provide for the self-education and religious fellowship of believers. Yet the Church has a side turned toward all these other matters, especially to all efforts for the social good and bettering of mankind, and cannot but interest herself in these efforts, and lend what aid to them she can. She has her protest to utter against social injustice and immorality; her witness to bear to the principles of conduct which ought to guide individuals and nations in the various departments of their existence; her help to bring to the solution of the questions which spring up in connection with capital and labor, rich and poor, rulers and subjects; her influence to throw into the scale on behalf of 'whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report.' A wholesome tone in literature, a Christian spirit in art and science, a healthy temper in amusements, wise and beneficent legislation on Christian principles in the councils of the nations, the spirit of long-suffering, peace, forbearance, and generosity, brought into the relations of men with one another in society, Christian ideals in the relations of nations to one another, self-sacrificing labors for the amelioration and elevation of the condition of the masses of the people,—these are matters in which the Church can never but be interested. Else she forgoes her calling and may speedily expect to be removed out of her place" (*The Christian View of God and the World*, p. 358).

We have dwelt at such length on the Roman Catholic and Evangelical views (held by the vast majority of those who profess and call themselves Christians) that we must content ourselves with a mere reference to the "Modernist" view of the relation between Christianity and the Church—a view which while it has received little or no confessional statement is more or less widely held in all the churches. Here as elsewhere the language of "Modernism" is prone to be vague and indefinite; hence it is impossible to state the Modernist view with anything like the clearness and distinctness with which it is possible to state the Roman Catholic and Evangelical views. What is more, here also, the Modernist employs language that can also be properly used by both Roman Catholics and Evangelicals. The Modernist commonly speaks of the "Living Church" but as he rejects the thought of a faith once for all delivered the words have a dif-

ferent meaning when used by him than when used by either Roman Catholics or Evangelicals. Like the Roman Catholic he regards the Church as the seat of authority though in a different sense from the Roman Catholic since he knows nothing of an authoritative Scripture, or an authoritative tradition, to be infallibly interpreted by the Church. Back of the Modernist conception of the Church is the Modernist conception of Christianity itself, according to which the Christianity of today is related to the Christianity of CHRIST somewhat as the oak is related to the acorn from which it sprung. When, then, the real Modernist speaks of the right and duty of the living Church to restate its faith to bring it in harmony with its growing knowledge he has in mind not so much a restatement that will bring it into accord with the full teachings of the Bible as a restatement that will indicate how far the modern Church has gotten beyond the teachings of the Bible. Hence

we need to be on our guard against those who commonly employ the term, "the living Church." They may not be Modernists but the probability is that they are—in some measure at least. We may well approve both when the Modernist rejects the Roman Catholic view of the Church as the distributor of the benefits of divine grace and when he rejects its view of the Church as the infallible interpreter of the Bible: but that does not mean that we may approve when he denies that there are any supernaturally-given benefits of divine grace to be distributed or when he denies that the Bible is the Word of God and as such the infallible rule of faith and practice. To do that would be to throw out the baby with the bath. We do not hesitate to say that in as far as men do the latter they are not Christians at all. An organization composed of such men might call itself a "living Church" but certainly it would not be a Christian Church.

## Editorial Notes and Comments

### The "Reformation Fellowship"

ABOUT a year ago the REV. JOHN CLOVER MONSMA made a plea for a "Reformation Fellowship," composed of Presbyterian and Reformed laymen (*CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, March, 1931), having as its objective the elimination from our church life of those Modernistic and secularistic activities so prevalent today. We are advised that the response to that plea has been so encouraging that for some months he has been actively engaged in the task of establishing such a fellowship with such a measure of success that an organization meeting is planned in Philadelphia in the month of April.

The advocates of the plan have two leading thoughts in mind. The first is that the laymen of the Church should be roused to activity, and that a general summons to arms should issue to all the faithful men and women in the pews, throughout the land. It is believed that a form of clericalism has developed in the Church that is contrary to Scripture and the Standards. Our fathers stressed the "priesthood of all believers." Believers are "kings and priests unto God." Only in the awakening and banding together of the "laymen" do the proponents of the Fellowship see a chance to throw off the present yoke.

The other leading thought is that the orthodox ministers and members form the real Presbyterian Church, while the modernists are intruders and outlaws. For that reason there should be a reformation, rather than a separation. The Church is historically and juridically theirs. They should pray and labor and fight to deliver their heritage from its destroyers, seeking to restore it by a constructive process of reformation to the true service of CHRIST, their SAVIOUR-KING. And in all this the *general membership* must take an active part.

The immediate goals of the Fellowship will be:

(a) The ascertaining of the numerical strength of the orthodox believers all through the Church, to help raise their morale;

(b) The holding of congresses in various parts of the land where able, orthodox leaders can plead the Reformation cause;

(c) The promotion of the Reformation cause by meetings, addresses, correspondence, and the issuing of bulletins to the members on the progress made;

(d) The placing of orthodox ministers in orthodox charges, and the helping of large numbers of orthodox ministers who are now

(Concluded on page 24)