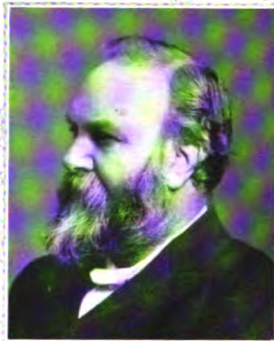




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The Church, The People, and the Age

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Analysis and Summary

BY

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So far as the facts are concerned, it is undoubtedly true that there are thousands of men who show indifference to the claims of the Church. The explanation, however, is, in my judgment, not as simple as it might appear at first sight. There are several causes which conspire to produce this indifference. First of all, the changed idea within Protestantism of the relation of the Church to personal salvation has weakened the sense of obligation to enter into its organized life. As long as it was supposed that outside the Church there was no salvation, men identified themselves with the Church as a matter of course. But since it is generally understood that a man may be a good Christian and not a member of any organized body of Christians, the necessity of joining an organization does not present itself as vividly. In fact a certain sense of independence and freedom in the expression of one's Christian life compensates the man who declines or neglects to affiliate himself with any of the branches of the Church.

THE CHURCH, THE PEOPLE, AND THE AGE

In another way the relation of the individual member to the Church is misunderstood by many. The case you cite, of Abraham Lincoln, illustrates this misunderstanding quite clearly. He professed himself willing to join any church which made its sole qualification for membership the short restatement by Jesus of the substance of both law and gospel. It is quite possible that in his day the denominations defined conditions of church membership more rigidly than they do now. At the present day, I daresay, there are Christian churches of the evangelical type which would accept his willingness to affiliate himself and work with "any body of Christians" on the basis he proposed as a credible evidence of faith in Jesus Christ and would admit him to their membership. Those who withhold their allegiance from the Christian Church of to-day on the same ground are certainly laboring under a misapprehension.

The remedy for the unfortunate loss of such persons to the Church must be mainly the enlightenment of the minds of those who are making the above mistake. Progressiveness in theological definition, the relating of doctrinal statements to the current literary, historical, scientific and philosophical views will greatly help. So would also a simplification of all official creeds by the churches somewhat in line with Dr. Denney's suggestion in the concluding chapter of his *Jesus and the Gospel.** But after all the main effort must be toward getting men to understand what the Church is, what it requires of its members, and what it aims to accomplish.

* See p. 209.