

The Separateness of the Church

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A Sermon Preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary on Sunday, March 8, 1925
Matthew 5:13: "Ye are the salt of the earth; but if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is henceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men."

In these words our Lord established at the very beginning the distinctness and separateness of the Church. If the sharp distinction is ever broken down between the Church and the world, then the power of the Church is gone. The Church then becomes like salt that has lost its savor, and is fit only to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men.

It is a great principle, and there never has been a time in all the centuries of Christian history when it has not had to be taken to heart. The really serious attack upon Christianity has not been the attack carried on by fire and sword, by threat of bonds or death, but has been the more subtle attack that has been masked by friendly words; it has not been the attack from without but the attack from within. The enemy has done his deadliest work when he has come with words of love and compromise and peace. And how persistent the attack has been! Never in the centuries of the Church's life has it been altogether relaxed; always there has been the deadly chemical process, by which, if it had been unchecked, the precious salt would have been merged with the insipidity of the world, and would have been henceforth good for nothing but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men.

The process began at the very beginning, in the days when our Lord still walked the Galilean hills. There were many in those days who heard Him gladly: He enjoyed at first the favor of the people. But in that favor He saw a deadly peril; He would have nothing of a half-discipleship that meant the merging of the company of His disciples with the world. How ruthlessly He checked a sentimental enthusiasm! "Let the dead bury their dead," He told the enthusiast who came eagerly to Him but was not willing at once to forsake all. "One thing thou lackest," He said to the rich young ruler, and the young man went sorrowfully away. Truly Jesus did not make it easy to be a follower of Him. "He that is not with me," He said, "is against me." "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife and children..., he cannot be my disciple." How serious a thing it was in those days to stand for Christ!

And it was a serious thing not only in the sphere of conduct but also in the sphere of thought. There could be no greater mistake than to suppose that a man in those days could think as he liked and still be a follower of Jesus. On the contrary the offence lay just as much in the sphere of doctrine as in the sphere of life. There were "hard sayings", then as now, to be accepted by the disciples of Jesus, as well as hard commands. "I am the bread which came down from heaven," said Jesus. It was indeed a hard saying. No wonder the Jews murmured at Him. "Is not this Jesus," they said "the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven." "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus did not make the thing easy for these murmurers. "Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink of his blood, ye have no life in you." At that many even of His disciples were offended. "This is a hard saying," they said; "who can hear it?" And so they left Him. "From that time many of his disciples went back and walked no more with him." Many of them went back - but not all. "Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." Thus was the precious salt preserved.

Then came the gathering clouds, and finally the Cross. In the hour of His agony they all left Him and fled; apparently the movement that He had initiated was hopelessly dead. But such was not the will of God.

The disciples were sifted, but there was still something left. Peter was forgiven; the disciples saw the risen Lord; the salt was still preserved.

One hundred and twenty persons were gathered in Jerusalem. It was not a large company; but salt, if it truly have its savor, can permeate the whole lump. The Spirit came in accordance with our Lord's promise, and Peter preached the first sermon in the Christian church. It was hardly a concessive sermon. "Him being delivered by the determinate council and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain." How unkind Peter was! But by that merciful unkindness they were pricked in their hearts, and three thousand souls were saved.

So there stood the first Christian Church in the midst of a hostile world. At first sight it have seemed to be a mere Jewish sect; the disciples continued to attend the temple services and to lead the life of Jews. But in reality that little company was as separate as if it had been shut off by desert wastes or the wide reaches of the sea; an invisible barrier, to be crossed only by the wonder of the new birth, separated the disciples of Jesus from the surrounding world. "Of the rest," we are told, "durst no man join himself to them." "And fear came upon every soul." So it will always be. When the disciples of Jesus are really faithful to their Lord, they inspire fear; even when Christians are despised and persecuted and harried, they have sometimes made their persecutors secretly afraid. It is not so, indeed, when there is compromise in the Christian camp; it is not so when those who minister in the name of Christ have - as was said in praise some time ago in my hearing of a group of ministers in our day - it is not so when those who minister in the name of Christ "have their ears to the ground." But it will be so whenever Christians have their ears, not to the ground, but open only to the voice of God, and when they say simply, in the face of opposition or flattery, as Peter said, "We must obey God rather than men."

But after those persecutions, there came in the early church a time of peace - deadly, menacing, deceptive peace, a peace more dangerous by far than the bitterest war. Many of the sect of the Pharisees came into the church - false brethren privily brought in. They were not true Christians, because they trusted in their own works for salvation, and no man can be a Christian who does that. They were not even true adherents of the Old Covenant; for the Old Covenant, despite the Law, was a preparation for the Saviour's coming, and Law was a school-master unto Christ. Yet they were Christians in name, and they tried to dominate the councils of the Church. It was a serious menace; for a moment it looked as though even Peter, true apostle though he was at heart, was being deceived. His principles were right, but by his actions his principles, at Antioch, for one fatal moment, were belied. But it was not God's will that the Church should perish; and the man of the hour was there. There was one man who would not consider the consequences where a great principle was at stake, who put all personal considerations resolutely aside, and refused to become unfaithful to Christ through any fear of "splitting the Church." "When I saw that they walked not uprightly," said Paul, "according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all..." Thus was the precious salt preserved.

But from another side also the Church was menaced by the blandishments of the world; it was menaced not only by a false Judaism, which really meant opposition of man's self-righteousness to the mysterious grace of God, but also by the all-embracing paganism of that day. When the Pauline churches were planted in the cities of the Graeco-Roman world, the battle was not ended but only begun. Would the little spark of new life be kept alive? Certainly it might have seemed to be unlikely in the extreme. The converts were for the most part not men of independent position, but slaves and humble tradesmen; they were bound by a thousand ties to the paganism of the day. How could they possibly avoid being drawn away by the current of the time? The danger certainly was great, and when Paul left an infant church like that at Thessalonica his heart was full of dread.

But God was faithful to His promise, and the first word that came from that infant church was good. The wonder had actually been accomplished; the converts were standing firm; they were in the world but not of the world; their distinctness was kept. In the midst of pagan impurity they were living true Christian lives. But why were they living true Christian lives? That is the really important question. And the answer is plain. They were living Christian lives because they were devoted to Christian truth. "Ye turned to God," says Paul, "from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come." That was the secret of their Christian lives; their Christian lives were founded upon Christian doctrine - upon theism ("the living and true God"), upon Christology ("his Son...whom he raised from the dead"), and upon soteriology ("which delivered us from the wrath to come"). They kept the message intact, and hence they lived the life. So it will always be. Lives apparently and superficially Christian can perhaps sometimes be lived by force of habit, without being based on Christian truth; but that will never do when Christian living, as in pagan Thessalonica, goes against the grain. But in the case of the Thessalonian converts the message was kept intact, and with it the Christian life. Thus again was the precious salt preserved.

The same conflict is observed in more detail in the case of Corinth. What a city Corinth was, to be sure, and how unlikely a place for a Christian church! The address of Paul's First Epistle is, as Bengel says, a mighty paradox. "To the Church of God which as at Corinth" - that was a paradox indeed. And in the First Epistle to the Corinthians we have attested in all its fullness the attempt of paganism, not to combat the Church by a frontal attack, but to conquer it by the far deadlier method of merging it gradually and peacefully with the life of the world. Those Corinthian Christians were connected by many ties with the pagan life of their great city. What should they do about clubs and societies; what should they do about invitations to dinners where meat that has been offered to idols was set before the guests? What should they do about marriage and the like? These were practical questions, but they involved the great principle of the distinctness and exclusiveness of the Church. Certainly the danger was very great, the converts were in great danger, from the human point of view, of sinking back into the corrupt life of the world.

But the conflict was not merely in the sphere of conduct. More fundamentally it was in the sphere of thought. Paganism in Corinth was far too astute to think that Christian life could be attacked when Christian doctrine remained. And so pagan practice was promoted by an appeal to pagan theory; the enemy engaged in an attempt to sublimate or explain away the fundamental things of the Christian faith. Somewhat after the manner of the Auburn "Affirmationists" in our day, paganism in the Corinthian Church sought to substitute the Greek notion of immortality of the soul for the Christian doctrine of the resurrection. But God had His witness; the apostle Paul was not deceived; and in a great passage - the most important words, historically, perhaps, that have ever been penned - he reviewed the sheer factual basis of the Christian faith. "How that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures." There is the foundation of the Christian edifice. Paganism was gnawing away - not yet directly, but by ultimate implication - at that foundation in Corinth, as it has been doing so in one way or another ever since, and particularly in the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America just at the present time. But Paul was there, and many of the five hundred witnesses were still alive. The gospel message was kept distinct, in the Pauline churches, from the wisdom of the world; the precious salt was still preserved.

Then, in the second century, there came another deadly conflict. It was again a conflict, not with an enemy without, but with an enemy within. The Gnostics used the name of Christ; they tried to dominate the Church; they appealed to the Epistles of Paul. But despite their use of Christian language they were pagan through and through. Modern scholarship, on this point, has tended to confirm the judgement of the great orthodox writers of that day; Gnosticism was at bottom no mere variety of Christian belief, no mere heresy, but paganism masquerading in Christian dress. Many were deceived; the danger was very great. But it was not God's will that the Church should perish. Irenaeus was there, and Tertullian with his

vehement defence. The Church was saved - not by those who cried "Peace, peace, when there is no peace," but by zealous contenders for the faith. Again, out of a great danger, the precious salt was preserved.

Time would fail us to speak of Athanasius and of Augustine and the rest, but they too were God's instruments in the preservation of the precious salt. Certainly the attack in those days was subtle enough almost to deceive the very elect. Grant the Semi-Arians their one letter in *homoiousios*, the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet, and Christ would have been degraded to the level of a creature, mythology would have been substituted for the living God, and the victory of paganism would have been complete. From the human point of view the life of the church was hanging by a hair. But God was watching over His own; Athanasius stood against the world; and the precious salt was preserved.

Then came the Middle Ages. How long, and how dark, in some respects, was the time! It is hard to realize that eleven centuries elapsed between Augustine and Luther, yet such was the case. Never in the interval, indeed, was God altogether without His witnesses; the light still shone from the sacred page; but how dim, in that atmosphere, the light seemed to be! The gospel might have seemed to be buried forever. Yet in God's good time it came forth again with new power - the same gospel that Augustine and Paul had proclaimed. What stronger proof could there be that that gospel had come from God? Where in the history of religion is there any parallel for such a revival, after such an interval, and with such a purity of faithfulness to what had formerly been believed? A gospel that survived the Middle Ages will probably, it may well be hoped, never perish from the earth, but will be the word of life unto the end of the world.

Yet in those early years of the sixteenth century how dark was the time! When Luther made his visit to Rome, what did he find - what did he find there in the centre of the Christian world? He found paganism blatant and triumphant and unashamed; he found the glories of ancient Greece come to life in the Italian renaissance, but with those glories the self-sufficiency and the rebellion against the God and the moral degradation of the natural man. Apparently paganism had at last won its age-long battle; apparently it had made a clean sweep over the people of God, apparently the church had at last become quite indistinguishable from the world.

But in the midst of the general wreck one thing at least was preserved. Many things were lost, but one thing was still left - the medieval church had never lost the Word of God. The Bible had indeed become a book with seven seals; it had been buried under a mass of misinterpretation never equalled perhaps until the absurdities indulged in by the Modernism of the present day - a mass of misinterpretation which seemed to hide it from the eyes of men. But at last an Augustinian monk penetrated beneath the mass of error, read the Scriptures with his own eyes; and the Reformation was born. Thus again was the precious salt preserved.

Then came Calvin and the great consistent system which he founded upon the Word of God. How glorious were the by-products of that system of revealed truth! A great stream of liberty spread from Geneva throughout Europe and to America across the sea. But if the by-products were glorious, more glorious by far was the truth itself, and the life that it caused men to live. How sweet and beautiful a thing was the life of the Protestant Christian home, where the Bible was the sole guide and stay! Have we really devised a substitute for that life in these latter days? I think not, my friends. There was liberty there, and love, and peace with God.

But the Church after the Reformation was not to have any permanent rest, as indeed it is probably not to have rest at any time in this evil world. Still the conflict of the ages went on, and the paganism prepared for an assault greater and more insidious perhaps than any that had gone before. At first there was a frontal attack - Voltaire and Rousseau and the Goddess Reason and the terrors of the French Revolution

and all that. As will always be the case, such an attack was bound to fail. But the enemy has now changed his method, and the attack is coming, not from without, but, in far more dangerous fashion, from within. During the past one hundred years the Protestant churches of the world have gradually been becoming permeated by paganism in its most insidious form.

Sometimes paganism is blatant, as, for example, in a recent sermon in the First Presbyterian Church of New York, the burden of which was, "I believe in Man." That was the very quintessence of the pagan spirit - confidence in human resources substituted for the Christian consciousness of sin. (*This paganism is widely distributed by clergymen like Robert Schuller and the "self-esteem" movement.* - Editor) But what was there blatant is found in subtler forms in many places throughout the Church. The Bible, with a complete abandonment of all scientific historical method, and of all common sense, is made to say the exact opposite of what it means; no Gnostic, no medieval monk with his fourfold sense of Scripture, ever produced more absurd Biblical interpretation that can be heard every Sunday in the pulpits of New York. Even prayer in many quarters is made a thinly disguised means of propaganda against the truth of the gospel; men pray that there may be peace, where peace means victory for the enemies of Christ. Thus gradually the church is being permeated by the spirit of the world; it is becoming what the Auburn Affirmationists call an "inclusive" Church; it is becoming salt that has lost its savor and is henceforth good for nothing but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men.

At such a time, what should be done by those who love Christ? I think, my friends, that they should at least face the facts; I do not believe that they should bury their heads like ostriches in the sand; I do not think that they should soothe themselves with the minutes of the General Assembly or the reports of the Boards or the imposing rows of figures which the church figures contain. Last week it was reported that the churches of America increased their membership by 690,000. Are you encouraged by these figures? I for my part am not encouraged a bit. I have indeed my own grounds for encouragement, especially those which are found in the great and precious promises of God. But these figures have no place among them. How many of these 690,000 names do you think are really written in the Lamb's book of life? A small proportion, I fear. Church membership today often means nothing more, as has well been said, than a vague admiration for the moral character of Jesus; the church in countless communities is little more than a Rotary Club. One day, as I was walking through a neighboring city, I saw not an altar with an inscription to an unknown god, but something that filled me with far more sorrow than that could have done. I saw a church with a large sign on it, which read somewhat like this: "Not a member? Come in and help us make this a better community." Truly we have wandered far from the day when entrance into the Church involved confession of faith in Christ as the Savior from sin.

The truth is that in these days the ecclesiastical currency has been sadly debased. Church membership, church office, the ministry, no longer mean what they ought to mean. But what shall we do I think, my friends, that, cost what it may, we ought to at least face the facts. It will be hard; it will seem impious to timid souls; many will be hurt. But in God's name let us get rid of shams and have reality at least. Let us stop soothing ourselves with columns of statistics and face the spiritual facts; let us recall this paper currency and get back to a standard of Gold.

When we do that, and when we come to God in prayer, with the real facts spread before Him, as Hezekiah spread before Him the letter of the enemy, there will be some things to cheer our hearts. God has not left Himself altogether without his witnesses. Humble they may often be, and despised by the wisdom of the world; but they are not perhaps altogether without the favor of God. In China, in Great Britain, and in America there have been some who have raised their voices bravely for their Savior and Lord.

True, the forces of unbelief have not yet been checked, and none can say whether our own American Presbyterian Church, which we love so dearly, will be preserved. It may be that paganism will finally

control, and that Christian men and women may have to withdraw from a church that has lost its distinctness from the world. Once in the course of history, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, that method of withdrawal was God's method of preserving the precious salt. But it may be also that our Church in its corporate capacity, in its historic grandeur, may yet stand for Christ. God grant that it may be so! The future at any rate is in God's hand, and in some way or other - let us learn that much from history - the salt will be preserved.

What are you going to do, my brothers, in this great time of crisis? What a time it is to be sure! What a time of glorious opportunity! Will you stand with the world, will you shrink from controversy, will you witness for Christ only where witnessing costs nothing, will you pass through these stirring days without coming to any real decision? Or will you learn the lesson of Christian history; will you penetrate, by your study and your meditation, beneath the surface; will you recognize in that which prides itself on being modern an enemy that is as old as the hills; will you hope, and pray, not for a mere continuance of what now is, but for a rediscovery of the gospel that can make all things new; will you have recourse to the character of Christian liberty in the Word of God? God grant that some of you may do that! God grant that some of you, even though you be not now decided, may come to say, as you go forth into the world: "It is hard in these days to be a Christian; the adversaries are strong; I am weak; but thy Word is true and thy Spirit will be with me; here am I, Lord, send me."