



## HOLY TRINITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

First Principles, Week #7

What Does the Church Exist to Do?

*Bio and introduction to be distributed at a later date.*

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### **The Mission of the Church**

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*[An Address delivered under the title, "Safeguarding the Church," before the Presbyterian Ministers' Association in Philadelphia, **March 1st, 1926**, and (under the title, "What the Church Stands For") previously in the Washington and Compton Avenue Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, 12 February 1926. Excerpted from *The Presbyterian*, vol. 96, no.14 (8 April 1926): 8-11.]*

1. Before we can consider the mission of the Church, we must determine what the Church is. What are its limits? What forms a part of it and what does not? Where is the true Christian Church to be found?
2. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church, the invisible Church is to be distinguished from the visible Church. The invisible Church consists of the whole number of those who are saved; the visible Church consists of those who profess the true religion, together with their children. There is absolutely no warrant in Scripture for supposing that any particular branch of the visible Church will necessarily be preserved. Always, it is true, there will be a visible Church upon the earth, but any particular Church organization may become so corrupt as to be not a true Church of Christ, but (as the Confession of Faith puts it), "a synagogue of Satan."
3. Now the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America has certainly not become a synagogue of Satan. The hostile forces in it are indeed very powerful, and in some sections of it they are dominant, but the majority is still Christian. But the point is that we have absolutely no warrant in Scripture for holding that the Christian character of this particular Church or of any other particular Church will necessarily be preserved. The question whether this Church will remain Christian or will become non-Christian (as so many other ecclesiastical bodies throughout the world have done) will probably be determined in the next five or ten years. If the indifferentist party continues (working with the Modernists) to dominate the Church, as it did (so far as administrative matters are concerned) by a slight majority at our last General Assembly, and as it does so generally in the Boards and Agencies, if the great issue continues to be concealed, then the Church will soon become non-Christian; but if, on the other hand, the issue is plainly raised and is decided aright, then the Church will continue to be a Church of Jesus Christ.
4. But what needs to be carefully observed is that the Church universal is not bound to any one organization. Our Lord established that fact in a great passage in the Gospels, which is often misused. A man was casting out demons in the name of Christ. The disciples bade Jesus

rebuke him because he followed not with them. But Jesus said: "Forbid him not, . . . he that is not against us is on our part." That utterance is sometimes held to support doctrinal indifferentism—to support the absurd view that a man can be a real disciple of Jesus no matter what opinions he holds about Jesus. But such a use of the passage is quite preposterous. That man in the Gospel held no low view of Jesus, such as is held by the Modernists of to-day. On the contrary, he held a high view of Jesus, since he believed that Satan was subject to Jesus' name. He certainly had a very lofty creed. There is not the slightest reason to suppose that he differed in doctrine from the rest of the disciples. His fault from the point of view of the disciples was not that he was heretical, but that he was entirely too zealous; his only fault was that he followed not with them, that he did not obey their behests, that he was not—to put the thing in modern language—subservient to their committees. But Jesus accepted him as a disciple, and in so doing he spoke the mightiest word against organizational Church union that has ever been spoken. There are those to-day who cherish the notion of one universal Church organization, mapping out the work for the whole world through some central committee, assigning a place to every man and allowing no place whatever for the Spirit of God, trying to bring all Christendom under its sway. I am bound to say frankly that for my part I regard it as a depressing and hateful dream. It is the greatest obstacle in the world, I think, to the realization of our Lord's high-priestly prayer that "they all may be one." God grant that the dream may not come true! God grant that the Christian Church upon this earth may not be brought under one organization! God grant that liberty may be preserved, and that when we contemplate groups of Christians large or small who prefer to do things in their own way, we may remember the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, how he said, "Forbid him not, . . . he that is not against us is on our part."

5. But where shall a criterion be found to determine which of these many ecclesiastical bodies are truly Christian? The criterion is provided by this same incident in the Gospel of Mark, of which we have just been speaking. That man in the Gospel was casting out demons, and he was casting them out in the name of Christ. There is found the two-fold test. First, the doctrine or the message was right; the work was done in the name of Christ. The "name" means, of course, not merely a word of so many letters, but the stupendous Person whom the name represents. In the second place, demons were being cast out; a mighty and beneficent work was being done. That two-fold test can be applied to-day. Many churches (in their corporate capacity) are not Christian because they do not meet the former part of the test. They are not really using the Name. They use indeed the word "Jesus," but the word designates for them a poor, weak enthusiast who has little to do with the real Jesus presented in the Word of God. In the second place, to be recognized as a true Church of Christ, a Church must bring forth works that correspond to the casting out of demons which was possible when miraculous gifts were still in the possession of the Church. No organization and no party in any organization can be recognized as Christian when the works that it brings forth are the specious double use of traditional terminology and all manner of chicanery and deceit. By that test again many parties of to-day are condemned. "By their fruits shall ye know them," said our Lord. A party cannot be recognized as Christian merely because, in a purely external and physical way, it bears the name of Christ; it cannot be recognized as Christian if, in its corporate capacity—we are not speaking about the relation of individuals to Christ—it brings forth Satan's works.

6. But if the two-fold test is met; if, in the first place, the doctrine or the message is right, and if, in the second place, the result is not deceitfulness, but truth, then many a despised company of believers, many a hopeless minority, is to be recognized as a true Church of Christ. It is to be so recognized by us, and above all, it is actually so recognized by our Lord. And what warmth of fellowship we enjoy, in these days of stress and strain, with many Christians of many names who are our true brothers in Christ! How hollow is the external unity of committees and boards, and how deep the true unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace!
7. If, then, the true Church is to be found in many places and under many names, for what does the true Church stand, and why do we Presbyterians think that it is found in greatest purity in the Reformed or Calvinistic faith?
8. The Church of Christ entered upon the present period in its history in a certain upper room in Jerusalem in the first century of our era. The Church had indeed existed before; it had existed under the old dispensation; it had existed in the time of Abraham; it had existed ever since the Promise had been given after the fall of man. But, under the old dispensation its life had been derived from a promise of good things to come, and now the fulfillment had arrived. The redemption promised of old had actually been wrought; the Saviour had made atonement for the sins of his people, and had completed his redeeming work by his resurrection from the dead.
9. The little company of his disciples in the upper room were waiting for power from on high, and when the power came they went forth to the conquest of the world.
10. That first Christian church in Jerusalem had a creed; indeed, upon a creed all its power was based. One part of its creed, of course, is plain; it was, "Christ is risen from the dead." A stupendous creed that was in truth; it is just that creed which is really denied by the vast modernist forces in our Presbyterian Church in America to-day and in the other great Churches of the world. But the words, "Christ is risen," were not all of the creed of the first Christian church. We have a little extract from the central things of that Jerusalem creed preserved for us in the First Epistle to the Corinthians; Paul there tells us what he had "received" from the primitive Jerusalem Church. And what was it that he had received? "How that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose the third day according to the Scriptures." A wonderful creed in truth! "Christ died for our sins"—there we have the center of Christianity, the blessed doctrine of the atonement. "He has been raised from the dead"—there we have the completion of the redeeming work in the glorious miracle of the resurrection. That was the good news, the "gospel," the doctrine, upon which the Church's life was based; that was the message with which it went forth to the conquest of the world.
11. At first the work was among the chosen people; but soon the leading of the Spirit became plain. The Gentile Cornelius was baptized; and the great apostle to the Gentiles was converted by the Lord himself. The distinctive work of Paul was not the mere geographical extension of the frontiers of the kingdom, but it was the setting forth of the principles of the gospel upon which the world-wide work was based. Those principles indeed were not unknown before; the doctrine of the Cross, as we have seen, was at the basis of the life of the Jerusalem Church; but to Paul was revealed with special clearness the epoch-making

significance of the redeeming work of Christ. Because of that work, certain commands which under the old dispensation had been required of God's people were no longer in force. A new era had begun. Paul recognized that fact; and because he did so, he is sometimes regarded as a "Liberal"—as the precursor of those who in our times reject the authority of the Bible and take the commands of God with a grain of salt. But persons who talk in that way simply show that they have no inkling of what scientific history is. No, the thing is perfectly plain to every historian; Paul was no "Liberal"—not in that low sense of the noble word. He always held with all his heart and mind to the full truthfulness of the Bible, as Jesus of Nazareth had done before; he never separated the "letter" from the "spirit" in the misleading modern way; and he believed that even the ceremonial requirements of the Old Testament law were commands of God. But he held that those ceremonial requirements are represented by God, in the Old Testament itself, as temporary; so that a man was actually disobeying the Old Testament law if he carried them over in full into the new dispensation. A new era had begun; the time of the Promise was over, and the time of the fulfillment had come.

12. So the Church could go forth with a good conscience and with the full favor of God to the conquest of the Gentile world.
13. That was a great moment in the Antioch Church when the missionaries were sent to Cyprus across the narrow seas and then to the conquest of the world. Those missionaries would no doubt have been coldly received by many modern mission boards. Did they not refuse to work with opponents of the Cross, both within and without the Church? Did not one of them later say: "Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed"? The idea of sending out a missionary who determined to know nothing save Jesus Christ and him crucified! The thing would be regarded to-day as quite preposterous. Such men as Paul and Barnabas, I fear, would hardly have been appointed with much enthusiasm by some modern mission boards. But the choosing of missionaries was different in those days. The prophets and teachers were gathered in the Church at Antioch, and "the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them." They received their appointment indeed! And forth they went across the blue waters of the Mediterranean—humble and despised as the world looks upon such things, but with one possession that made them the mightiest of the children of men, with a gospel without which none, high or low, wise or unwise, could be brought into communion with the holy God.
14. In the years that followed, that gospel had to face attack. What mighty doctrinal conflicts there were in the apostolic age! I sometimes think that those who decry controversy have never read history at all, and certainly have never read the Word of God. The New Testament (Gospels as well as Epistles) is a controversial book almost from beginning to end; truth in it is always set forth in contrast to error. So it was in the apostolic Church; truth was struck forth as a fire from the clash of conflict; the great evangelical epistles, Galatians and Romans, were written in the glorious form in which they actually appear only because of the conflict with the Judaizers, who, like the Modernists of to-day, though in a much less obviously destructive manner, denied the all-sufficiency of the substitutionary atonement of our Lord. So it will always be, even in uninspired books. Men who decry controversy never

in the whole course of the history of the Church have produced anything really great; great Christian utterances come only when men's souls are stirred.

15. God brought the Church through those early conflicts. But certainly he did not do so by the instrumentality of theological pacifists, but by the instrumentality of that glorious fighter, the Apostle Paul. The Judaistic doctrine of human merit was kept out, at least from the center of the Church's life, and also the pagan sublimation of the resurrection into a mere doctrine of immortality—which sublimation is so strikingly like the contention of the thirteen hundred Auburn Affirmationists in our Presbyterian Church to-day.
16. At last the apostolic age drew to its close. Those who had received the lofty special apostolic commission from Christ were taken away. But two things remained—in the first place, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and in the second place, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments that the Holy Spirit used.
17. In the second century there was another great conflict, and again it was a conflict not without, but within the Church. The Gnostics used Christian terminology, like the Modernists of to-day; but like the Modernists of to-day they were opposed to Christianity at its root. Despite the insidiousness of the danger, the Church was saved. But it was saved only because the leaders were no theological pacifists, but mighty contenders for the faith. Irenaeus wrote his great work against heresies, and Tertullian contended against Marcion, and so the gospel was preserved. Those men were not afraid of controversy. God be endlessly praised for that! If they had been opposed to controversy, there would be no Christianity in the world to-day.
18. So it has been in all the other great ages through which the Church has passed. So it was in the conflicts by which the great ecumenical creeds were produced; so it was in the days when Augustine contended against the Pelagian view of sin; so it was in the heroic days of the Reformation. Always there have been pacifists who have endeavored to conceal the issue and to bring about the false peace of compromise. But always there have been some true men who have resolutely refused.
19. So it was also when our great Reformed system of doctrine was set forth on the basis of the Scriptures alone. The Reformation had burst the bands of Roman slavery, and had returned to the Magna Charta of liberty in the Word of God. But, after the first heroism was over, there had come the days of vacillation and compromise; the Reformation had completed its negative work, but its positive work was yet undone. It had broken with the Roman system, but it had no thorough system of its own. Then came the man of the hour, the man whom God had chosen. In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, John Calvin set forth not scattered bits of evangelical truth, but a great system, and a system that was derived from the Bible alone. There is some justification for the dictum which I saw somewhere in that late lamented paper, The Freeman, of New York, which differed from most radical papers in that, instead of making radicalism stupid, it made radicalism bright—there is some justification for the dictum of The Freeman to the effect that only in the Reformed System has Protestantism overcome the “inferior complex” which elsewhere besets it over against the imposing system of Rome. We need, I think, to learn the lesson. The strongest Christianity, I think, is consistent Christianity; and consistent Christianity is found in the Reformed Faith. Strange indeed it is that men should desert that glorious heritage, as in the

United Church of Canada, for the hasty creedal formulations to be expected in our intellectually decadent age. I believe in progress in theology. That is the reason why I do not regard theology as a kaleidoscope, but rather prefer to build for the future, in theology as in other branches of science, upon the solid achievements of the past.

20. At the time of the Reformation, and no doubt at the time of Calvin, there were many voices that counseled compromise. But, thank God, there were also true men who would not listen to the Tempter's voice.
21. So it is also in our own day. For one hundred and fifty years the Church has been in the midst of a conflict greater than all the conflicts that have gone before. Many great branches of the Church are completely dominated by the non-Christian forces; our own Presbyterian Church in America is in the gravest danger of going on the same path. In 1920, a great attack was made upon the very vitals of our Constitution by the Plan of Organic Union, which received a large vote, and which if it had been successful, would have caused the Church to cease to be Christian in its corporate capacity at all. In the later years, thirteen hundred ministers of the Church have signed the so-called Auburn Affirmation, which attacks the whole factual basis of our religion; and the great Synod of New York is on record officially as approving the licensing of a minister who actually refused to affirm even the Virgin Birth of our Lord. The Boards and Agencies have almost no presentation from the evangelical party in the Church, and, to say the least, are failing to sound any ringing evangelical note.
22. In this time of crisis, when the question is being determined whether our Church is to remain Christian or not, there are those who deplore controversy and say that all is well. Among them there are no doubt many who are not really Christian in their preaching at all. These men are not, indeed, conscious of denying the Bible and denying Christ; but the Cross really fails to hold the central place in their hearts. But among the ecumenical pacifists there are also no doubt many truly Christian men. They belittle controversy because they do not yet see how serious is the danger, or what the controversy is really about. Can they be made to see in time? That is the question of all questions. Upon that question the existence of our Church depends. Oh, brethren, you who belittle controversy, you who think that all is well, if you could only be made to see, if the Holy Spirit would only open your eyes! When I contemplate the issue, I feel as though it were a crime for us ever to rise from our knees, except to speak the word that God has given us to speak. God grant, brethren, that the mists may be dispelled from your eyes, and that you may yet witness in this time of crisis, before it is too late, for the Lord Jesus Christ. If you do, then our Presbyterian Church will be saved as a true Church of Christ, and will go forth again with new power for the salvation of the souls of men.

[excerpted from *The Presbyterian*, vol. 96, no. 14 (8 April 1926): 8-11.]