

The Church, The People, and the Age

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Analysis and Summary

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FUNK & WAGNALLS COMPANY

NEW YORK AND LONDON

1914

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Published March, 1914



[PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA]

... and religion! (not theology)

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× HENRY SLOANE COFFIN, D.D., ×

NEW YORK, N. Y.

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You begin with the query, "Why is it that there are so many persons who are indifferent to the claims of the Church?" and then quote from Mr. Lincoln a statement not of indifference, but of incomplete intellectual agreement with the Church. There are doubtless a good many persons who hold aloof from the Church because they disagree with some of its beliefs or supposed beliefs; but this is certainly not the sole or chief cause of indifference, or churches, like the Unitarian, which have a minimal creed, would not be as seriously affected as others. In fact they are as much affected, and perhaps more. Mr. Lincoln might, on his own terms, have entered the communion of almost any Protestant church. In his statement he speaks of Jesus Christ as Saviour and expresses his willingness to share his devotion to God and man. He could certainly have been a Presbyterian, for our communion has never asked more than this of would-be members, and I imagine that he would have been welcomed on his own basis by most Protestant churches. Were the main point of your letter to answer

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its first question, I might allege many more potent reasons for the indifference on the part of numbers of persons to the claims of the Church:—an unawakened religious sense, an undeveloped conscience, the unadmirable characters of church-members, dissatisfaction with the church's timidity or ignorance in dealing with social injustice, the Church's class-consciousness, the dulness of many preachers and church services, intense individualism allowing a man to feel satisfied with his personal religion while he keeps apart from its collective embodiment in an organization, etc., etc.

You next ask, speaking of Mr. Lincoln's statement: "Is it true that this experience is typical of thousands of others?" It probably is; but, as I have pointed out, this is far more often due to ignorance of what the qualifications for church membership actually are, than to too elaborate doctrinal requirements.

Again, you ask: "Do you think it wise to ask the great majority of people to subscribe to statements that deal with debated and controversial questions?" Certainly I do not; nor do many others. A sincere acceptance of Jesus as Lord is all that any church has a right to ask of those seeking to enter its communion; and, as a matter of practise, any man willing to make this statement, or Mr. Lincoln's statement, will find little difficulty in becoming a member of most Protestant churches. I should personally think it unfortunate to phrase the declaration of purpose as you do (and as Mr. Lincoln did not), as "a common purpose of love and service to God and man," without mentioning Jesus. Love and service require more specific definition as Jesus' love and service, as Mr. Lincoln connects them with him. A Christian church, as distin-

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guished for example from a synagogue of Reformed Jews, is a body which accepts the lordship of Jesus; and a personal loyalty to him is an indispensable qualification of fellowship. This Mr. Lincoln implies plainly in his statement. He takes Jesus' summary of the law and the gospel, and incidentally speaks of Jesus as "the Saviour."

This brings me to your questions concerning a fundamental theology. You ask: "Can a theology be unassailable and final that does not accord with the assured results of science?" I reply, No theology can be unassailable or final. Any theology is a man's best attempt to express his religious convictions; it will be necessarily imperfect and so assailable, and it will certainly not be final, for theology is as living, and therefore as growing, as any other science.

Again you ask, "In what way is it to be related to the literary, scientific and philosophical certainties of our time?" It must certainly take account of all truth, and avail itself of all accessible knowledge in uttering its convictions. Theology is simply the attempt to express men's religious experience in adequate language, and to relate it to all his other experience. No man can shut up his creed in one compartment of his brain and keep the rest of his brain open to welcome literary, and scientific, and philosophical discoveries. It is because new truths are being discovered in these and other realms, as well as in the realm of religious experience, that no man can hope to arrive at a final theology.

This brings me to your last request, for an expression of what I think constitutes a theology for our time. I am not a competent theologian, but simply a preacher.

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I do not think it possible or desirable that any man, or any body of men, should put forth a creed that should be binding upon their fellow-Christians. That, to me, is the fundamental error of Roman Catholicism. It is a good thing that the Church should attempt to phrase its convictions, not with a view to forcing them on its adherents, certainly not to exclude those who cannot give them their intellectual assent, but in order to teach the world what Christians believe, and to lead the Church into larger truth. It is also a good thing for the individual member to try to make out his own creed, and very necessary for the preacher to state his, and to keep restating it from year to year as he grows in religious experience. I hesitate to accede to your request, for I feel that no theology of mine can be of value to any one else; but with the distinct understanding that I give it merely as the working creed of a pastor, I subjoin the following:

I believe in Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures: in the authority of his religious experience as Son of God; in the supremacy of his character as revealing what God is and what man may become; in his victory for himself and for us over the world, and sin, and death.

I believe in God, the Father of Jesus Christ, whom he trusted, loved and served: that he is my Father and the Father of all men; that he is love as Christ was love; that he is Lord of heaven and earth, of whom and through whom and unto whom are all things; and that he is ever present in his Holy Spirit, striving to draw all men unto himself and to conform them to the likeness of his Son.

I believe in man as a child of God: that he is capable of attaining the divine sonship realized by Christ, which is eternal life; that all men are brethren one of

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another, and that to live as a son of God is to serve one's brethren as Christ served them.

I believe in the gospel of salvation: that God was in Christ reconciling his sinning children unto himself, and that whosoever repents, and trustfully commits himself to him, is freely forgiven and enabled more and more to live as a son of God.

I believe in the kingdom of God—the social order in which love is supreme; in the Church of Jesus Christ—the fellowship of all his followers for the establishment of the kingdom; and in the ultimate triumph of the kingdom in glory everlasting.

This is by no means a complete theology. It gives no answer to scores of questions which a thoughtful mind must raise. It purposefully leaves many things indefinite. I do not think a creed ought to aim at exhaustive completeness; it must be agnostic on hosts of subjects if it is to be honest. This brief statement expresses the fundamental convictions which I attempt to proclaim to men and women who share the literary and scientific and philosophical knowledge of our day.