

# **McCormick Theological Seminary**

## **HISTORICAL CELEBRATION**

**In Recognition of the Eightieth Year of the Origin of the  
Seminary, the Fiftieth Year of its Location in Chicago,  
and the One Hundredth Year of the Birth of**

**CYRUS H. McCCORMICK**

**November first and second,  
Nineteen hundred and nine.**



**Chicago, Illinois  
1910**

## The Ministry and the Individual

BY PRESIDENT WOODROW WILSON, Ph. D., LL. D.

**M**R. CHAIRMAN, ladies and gentlemen: I feel that it is a privilege and a responsibility to bring this interesting program to a close, particularly when I know how simple the message I bring to you will turn out to be.

It seems singular that each generation should ask itself for what purpose the gospel had come into the world, and yet it is necessary, if we would understand our own purposes, that we should ask ourselves in our own generation that fundamental question. No doubt Christianity came into the world to save the world. We are privileged to live in the midst of many manifestations of the great service that Christianity does to society, to the world that now is. All of the finest things that have made history illustrious seem to have proceeded from the spirit of Christ. All those things which distinguish modern civilization are things which it has derived from the spirit of the church, which, when it has remembered Christ, has reminded the world of the ideals according to which it should serve mankind, should serve all the ends for which men live together; and in our own day in particular there are a great many notable movements afoot which are manifestly touched — at their root, at any rate — with the spirit of Christ.

But Christianity did not come into the world merely to save the world, merely to set crooked things straight, merely to purify social motives, merely to elevate the program ac-

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cording to which we live, merely to put new illuminations into the plans we form for the regeneration of the life we are living now. The end and object of Christianity is the individual, and the individual is the vehicle of Christianity. There can be no other vehicle; no organization is in any proper sense Christian; no organization can be said itself to love the person and example of Christ. No organization can hold itself in that personal relationship to the Saviour in which the individual must hold himself if he would be indeed one who lives according to the Christian precepts.

You know what the distinguishing characteristic of modern society is, that it has submerged the individual as much as that is possible. In economic society particularly we see men organized in great societies and corporations and organic groups, in which each individual member feels that his own conscience is pooled and subordinated, and in co-operating with which men, as you know, constantly excuse themselves from the exercise of their own independent judgment in matters of conscience. The great danger of our own day, as it seems to me, is that men will compound their conscientious scruples on the ground that they are not free to move independently; that they are simply parts of a great whole, and that they must move with that whole, whether they wish to or not. For they say, "The penalty will be that we shall be absolutely crushed." The organization must dictate to us, if we be members of a corporation; if we be members of a union, the union; if we be members of a society of whatever kind, the program of the society must dominate us. It was easy in a simpler age to apply morals to individual conduct, because individuals acted separately and

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by a private and individual choice, but we have not adjusted our morals to the present organization of society; and whatever you may say in general terms with regard to the obligation of the individual to exercise his own conscience, you will find yourself very much put to it if a friend comes to you with an individual problem of conduct and asks you how in the circumstances you think he ought to act.

It sometimes seems like a choice between breaking up the program of the organization and subordinating your own conscience. I have had men tell me who were in the profession to which I was originally bred — the profession of the law — that it is extremely difficult to thread their way amidst a thousand complicated difficulties in giving advice to the great bodies of men whom they are called upon to advise, and to discriminate between what is legally safe and what is morally justifiable.

It is in this age that the preacher must preach. The preacher must find the individual and enable the individual to find himself, and in order to do that he must understand and thread the intricacies of modern society.

It was my privilege to speak upon a similar occasion to this, not many months ago, and there to take as my theme the necessity the minister is under to enable the individual to find himself amid the intricacies of modern thought. This is an age of obscured counsel about many fundamental things, and the average individual cannot unassisted know his place in the spiritual order of the universe as it is now interpreted by multitudinous and differing voices. The minister has the very difficult and responsible task of enabling the individual to find himself amidst modern thought. This

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evening I must call your attention to the fact that it is also his business to enable the individual to find himself amid modern action. There are daily choices to be made, and the individual must make them at the risk of the integrity of his own soul. He must understand that he cannot shift the responsibility upon the organization. The minister must address himself to him as his counselor and friend and spiritual companion; they must take counsel together how a man is to live with uplifted head and pure conscience in our own complicated age, not allowing the crowd to run away with or over him.

You know that the law has shirked this duty. Sooner or later the duty must be faced. The law tries nowadays to deal with men in groups and companies, to punish them as corporate wholes. It is an idle undertaking. It never will be successfully accomplished. The only responsibility to which human society has ever responded or ever will respond, is the responsibility of the individual. The law must find the individual in the modern corporation and apply its demands and its punishments to him if we are to check any of the vital abuses which now trouble the world of business. You may pile fines never so high in the public treasury, and corporations will still continue to do things that they ought not to do, unless you check them by taking hold of the individuals who are ultimately responsible for their policy. While the law waits to find this out, the minister cannot wait. He must attempt and must accomplish what the law declines, for men are dying every day. They are going to their long reckoning. They cannot wait for the law to find the way of the gospel. The minister

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must be present with them while they live, and comfort them when they die, and reassure them of the standards of their conduct.

Every great age of the world of which I have ever heard was an age not characterized chiefly by co-operative effort, but characterized chiefly by the initiative of the indomitable individual. You cannot give any age distinction by the things that everybody does. Each age derives its distinction from the things that individuals choose to be singular in doing of their own choice. Every turning point in the history of mankind has been pivoted upon the choice of an individual, when some spirit that would not be dominated stood stiff in its independence and said: "I go this way. Let any man go another way who pleases."

We die separately. We do not die by corporations. We do not die by societies. We do not withdraw into our closets by companies. Every man has to live with himself privately — and it is a most uncomfortable life. He has to remember what he did during the day, the things that he yielded to, the points that he compromised, the things that he shrugged his shoulders at and let go by when he knew that he ought to have uttered a protest and stood stiff in declining to co-operate. And this lonely dying is the confession of our consciousness that we are individually and separately and personally related to the ideals which we pursue, and to the persons to whom we should stand loyal. Corporations do not and cannot love Christ. Some individuals that compose them do, but those individuals do not love him truly who co-operate in doing the things that those associated with them do that are inconsistent with the law of Christ.

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I have heard a great deal of preaching, and I have heard most of it with respect; but I have heard a great deal of it with disappointment, because I felt that it had nothing to do with me. So many preachers whom I hear use the gospel in order to expound some of the difficulties of modern thought, but only now and again does a minister direct upon me personally the raking fire of examination, which consists in taking out of the Scriptures individual, concrete examples of men situated as I suppose myself to be situated, and searching me with the question, "How are you individually measuring up to the standard which in Holy Writ we know to have been exacted of this man and that?"

I am one of those who remember with a great deal of admiration the work of that extraordinary man, Mr. Moody. He was not a learned man, as you know, and the doctrine that he preached was always doctrine which seemed to have inevitably something personal to do with you if you were in the audience. Whenever I came into contact with Mr. Moody I got the impression that he was coming separately into contact with one person at a time. I remember once that I was in a very plebeian place. I was in a barber shop, lying in a chair, and I was presently aware that a personality had entered the room. A man came quietly in upon the same errand that I had come in on, and sat in the chair next to me. Every word that he uttered, though it was not in the least didactic, showed a personal and vital interest in the man who was serving him. Before I got through with what was being done to me I was aware that I had attended an evangelical service, because Mr. Moody was in the next chair. I purposely lingered in the room after he left and

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noted the singular effect his visit had upon the barbers in that shop. They talked in undertones. They did not know his name. They did not know who had been there, but they knew that something had elevated their thought. I left the place as I should have left a place of worship. Mr. Moody always sought and found the individual, and that is the particular thing which the minister must do.

As I see the opportunity of the church, it is to assist in bringing in another great age. Ministers are not going to assist very much in solving the social problems of the time, as such. Their attitude toward the social problems of the time is always supposed to be a professional attitude, and they are not of as much assistance in that matter as the average serious-minded layman is. But the opportunity of the church is to call in tones that cannot be mistaken to every individual to think of his own place in the world and his own responsibility, and to resist the temptations of his particular life in such ways that if he be central to anything the whole world will feel the thrill of the fact that there is one immovable thing in it, a moral principle embodied in a particular man.

This is an age of conformity. It is an age when everybody goes about seeking to say what everybody else is saying. Winds of opinion creep through the country. Formulas are repeated with all sorts of dexterity in their mere variation. Men have caught the gregarious habit of conscience as well as of mind, and you will find that nothing heartens an audience in a modern age more than to hear an individual, whether he has anything new to say or not, get up and say something that he really means, singly and by

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himself, without the least care whether anybody else thinks it and means it or not. A friend of mine who was of such a sort was congratulated for his courage in speaking the things that he really thought. He said: "Why, I am not aware of any courage. It would take courage to do the other thing. If I said the things I did not mean, I would say very contradictory things at different times; I would get all tied up, and I should not know how to get out." The only way to avoid that is by echoing everything else that everybody else says. There was a cynical saying of Dean Swift's, "If you wish to be considered a man of sense, always agree with the person with whom you are conversing." That is a very modern, and also, I dare say, a very ancient way of gaining a reputation of being a man of sense. But it is practiced at the peril of your soul, which is a consideration worth thinking of.

I have often preached in my political utterances the doctrine of expediency, and I am an unabashed disciple of that doctrine. What I mean to say is, you cannot carry the world forward as fast as a few select individuals think. The individuals who have the vigor to lead must content themselves with a slackened pace and go only so fast as they can be followed. They must not be impracticable. They must not be impossible. They must not insist upon getting at once what they know they cannot get. But that is not inconsistent with their telling the world in very plain terms whither it is bound and what the ultimate and complete truth of the matter, as it seems to them, is. You cannot make any progress unless you know whither you are bound. The question is not of pace. That is a matter of expediency, not of direction; that is not a matter of principle. Where

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the individual should be indomitable is in the choice of direction, saying: "I will not bow down to the golden calf of fashion. I will not bow down to the weak habit of pursuing everything that is popular, everything that belongs to the society to which I belong. I will insist on telling that society, if I think it so, that in certain fundamental principles it is wrong; but I won't be fool enough to insist that it adopt my program at once for putting it right." What I do insist upon is, speaking the full truth to it and never letting it forget the truth; speaking the truth again and again and again with every variation of the theme, until men will wake some morning and the theme will sound familiar, and they will say, "Well, after all, is it not so?" That is what I mean by the indomitable individual. Not the defiant individual, not the impracticable individual, but the individual who does try, and cannot be ashamed, and cannot be silenced; who tries to observe the fair manner of just speech but who will not hold his tongue.

That is the duty of the preacher. I have noticed that there is one sort of preaching in simple congregations and sometimes a different sort of preaching in congregations that are not simple. Now there cannot be two gospels. There cannot be two ways in which individuals shall save themselves. And the minister ought to see to it that with infinite gentleness, but with absolute fearlessness, every man is made to conform to the standards which are set up in the gospel, even though it cost him his reputation, even though it cost him his friends, even though it cost him his life. Then will come that moral awakening which we have been so long predicting, and for which we have so long waited;

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that rejuvenation of morals which comes when morals are a fresh and personal and individual thing for every man and woman in every community; when the church will seem, not like an organization for the propagation of doctrine, but like an organization made up of individuals every one of whom is vital in the processes of life.

I remember attending recently a missionary conference in which we were all heartened with the plans that were being formed for bringing all the denominations in the missionary field together in a common effort. After all the speeches had been made and we had dispersed and I was going home in the night, I thought: "This is a very beautiful thing that is about to happen in the mission field. But I hope that after it has happened there the people who are being evangelized will not come here and see us, because I should not like to have them think we could do that thing away from home and could not do it at home. I should not like to have them think that we are divided in our Christianity where we live and maintain the civilization of a Christian nation, and are united only among those upon whom we look with a certain condescension, as if they could not understand our differences of doctrine, and therefore they were not worthy the explanation." It is, I suppose, a high intellectual plane upon which we think that we live, but we do not live upon intellectual planes at all; we live upon emotional planes; we live upon planes of resolution and not upon planes of doctrine, if I may put it so. And the reason that we differ so is that we hold ourselves too far above the practical levels of life and are constantly forgetting that the whole vitality of Christianity consists not in its texts, but in

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their translation; not in the things that we set up as the abstract standard, but in the actions which we originate as the concrete examples.

You will see, therefore, that there is a sense in which the minister is set against modern society. Modern society is collectivist. It says "Unite." The minister must say: "Not so. You can unite for certain temporal purposes, but you cannot merge your souls; and Christianity, come what may, must be fundamentally and forever individualistic." For my part, I do not see any promise of vitality either in the church or in society except upon the true basis of individualism. A nation is strong in proportion to the variety of its originitive strength, and that is in proportion to the vitality of its individuals. It is rich in direct proportion to the independence of the souls of which it is made up. And so every promising scheme that unites us must still be illuminated and checked and offset by those eternal principles of individual responsibility which are repeated not only in the gospel but in human nature, in physical nature.

You have loved some person very dearly. You have tried to merge your individuality with that person, and you have never succeeded. There is no person linked spiritually so closely to you that you can share his individuality or he can share yours. And this inexorable law, physical and spiritual, is the law which must be the guiding fact for the minister of the gospel. He must preach Christianity to men, not to society. He must preach salvation to the individual, for it is only one by one that we can love, and love is the law of life. And the only person living through whom we shall love is our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.