**THE WAY EVERLASTING: SERMONS BY JAMES DENNEY**

**09. THE IDEAL CHURCH by JAMES DENNEY**

*"And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' teaching and in the fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and the prayers."*

*Acts 2:42*

There are two ways in which the New Testament exhibits to us the ideal of the Church. One is doctrinal, and is illustrated in the epistle to the Ephesians. There the Church is set forth as the end of all the ways of God - the body of Christ which is filled with his fullness - the new humanity in which all the enmities and divisions of the old are transcended - the glorious bride of Christ, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. The other is historical, and is illustrated in this passage of Acts. Here we see the Church, as Luke saw it in his mind's eye, in the days of its splendid prime, when the memory of Jesus was vivid and the gift of the Spirit new. Beginnings may not always be perfect, but there is always something inspiring about them, and something authoritative as well. To a Romanist, the doctrine of the Church is in a very real sense the only doctrine of Christianity; if he is right about this, he cannot be wrong about anything else. Protestants give the Church a very different place both in their thoughts and their faith; but as we all, in point of fact, have some relation to the Church, it is well that we should realize its significance in the New Testament.

This passage presents us with four notes of the true Church as they impressed an early disciple, and I shall say a few words in explanation and enforcement of each.

**1.** They continued steadfastly in the teaching of the Apostles - rather, they waited assiduously upon their teaching. Some connexion with the Apostles is necessary if the Church is to be true to its ideal, for the Church is Christ's Church, and the Apostles are the ultimate witnesses to Christ. A society which repudiated the teaching of the Apostles would not be the Christian Church nor entitled to the Christian name. Sometimes the connexion with the Apostles, apart from which a Church cannot be Christian, is supposed to be secured by what is called the apostolic succession of the ministry. The Apostles, it is asserted, ordained men to continue their office in the Church, and they in turn ordained others in an unbroken line reaching to our own time. It is this official continuation of the ministry on which the apostolic and therefore the Christian character of the Church depends. About this there are two things to be said. The first is, that there is not a Christian minister in the world, from the Bishop of Rome up or down, who can prove that he himself stands in any such unbroken succession. And the second is, that even if it could be proved, it would be quite irrelevant as a mark of the true Church. Such an external, legal, formal continuity, even if it existed, could guarantee nothing spiritual, and it is on spiritual consanguinity with the Apostles and their testimony to Jesus that everything depends. A historical succession, could it be really traced, would have something imposing for the imagination; it would not be without interest for the intelligence; but to conscience it could never mean anything at all. The connexion with the Apostles which marks the Church as Christian is not to be sought in any external continuity of church officers, but in fidelity to apostolic teaching. Wherever such fidelity is found we have the primary note of the apostolic Christian Church.

What then, we naturally ask, did the Apostles teach? A little further on in this book their enemies describe them as unlearned and ignorant men; but they took knowledge of them, we are told, that they had been with Jesus. This gives us the answer to our question. They had been with Jesus; they knew Jesus better than anybody else did; they never wearied telling about Him, and the Church never wearied hearing. That is what is meant by, "They continued steadfastly in the teaching of the Apostles"; it means they could never hear enough about Jesus. Our authorized version renders the words, "They continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine"; but that is both too narrow in itself, and to the ordinary reader suggests something false. No doubt the Apostles had doctrine even in the current sense: they had facts and interpretations of facts which constituted their Gospel, and apart from which they could not have borne their testimony to Jesus at all. St. Paul tells us what these were at the very beginning - the primary truths of the Gospel in which He and the Twelve had always been at one. "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures - He was buried - the third day He rose from the dead according to the Scriptures." But though this was no doubt accepted by all the disciples, something wider is meant here. The teaching of the Apostles would include their whole testimony to Jesus, and we have every reason to believe that it is truly represented in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This is the primitive deposit of the apostolic testimony. We must remember in particular that it contained not only doctrines in the narrower sense of the word, but the revelation of a new life to which Christians were called. "Go and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." Everything that is covered by the name of Jesus, the whole appeal made to men by His words and life and death, is included in the teaching of the Apostles to which the early Church was devoted. And it is the mark of the true Church always that it remains devoted to this teaching, and can never hear too much of the life and death, of the love and will, of its Lord.

There are plenty of people, of course, outside the Church who have a sincere contempt lor sermons- There are plenty of people inside who would like, as they put it, to enlarge the field of interest, and to hear the minister of the Church on all sorts of literary, economical, or political questions. There are even people who disparage preaching on the plea of devotion: we do not go to church to hear sermons, they say, but to worship God. The mouths of all these people would be shut in a church waiting assiduously on the teaching of the Apostles, always eager to hear more about Jesus. Preaching is much more likely to fail, even in interest, from want of concentration than from want of range. There are plenty of people to talk politics and literature, and not too many to bear witness to Jesus who will yet extend His sceptre over every field. If the sermon in church is what it ought to be - if it is not an exhibition of the preacher but of Jesus - there should be nothing in it even conceivably in contrast with worship, but the very reverse. What can be more truly described as worship than hearing the word of God as it ought to be heard, hearing it with penitence, with contrition, with faith, with self-consecration, with vows of new obedience? If this is not worship in spirit and in truth, what is? We may sorrowfully confess that in all our churches there is too little worship, that adoration is rare, that while singing is enjoyed the sacrifice of praise is hardly conceived, and the ardour and concentration of prayer strangely un familiar, but we will not mend these deficiencies by thrusting into the background the testimony to Jesus. Such a testimony is the only inspiration to worship in the Christian sense of the term, and it is the primary mark of the true Church that it gathers round this testimony and is unreservedly loyal to it.

**2.** The second mark of the Church in its early beauty was that they continued steadfastly in the fellowship. Fellowship is a word that has now been practically appropriated to religious uses, which means, unhappily, that it has lost any distinct significance for the ordinary reader. But its meaning here is tolerably plain. Strictly it signifies joint. participation, or mutual giving and receiving, and it refers to the peculiar conditions of life in that early society as they are described in the opening chapters of Acts. "They were together"; "they had all things common"; "no one said that any of the things he possessed was his own"; "there was no one in want among them"; "distribution was made to every one according as he had need." The Church was a family in which the new law of love was actually kept - so the historian puts it - even in regard to the outward necessities of life. This, and not something intangible or merely spiritual is in his mind when he says, "They continued steadfastly in the fellowship". And this, we must not forget, is a note of the ideal Church.

We need not be astonished that it has been criticized. Students of the New Testament have sometimes thought that Luke both exaggerated the teaching of Jesus about riches and poverty - being a lover of voluntary poverty himself - and that he exaggerates in these passages the extent to which community of goods existed or was approved in the early Church. So far as it was produced, too, in a moment of enthusiasm, they find it comparatively easy to disparage it. It meant no great sacrifice, they suggest, in a community in which practically everyone was poor - with a climate in which the body could be satisfied with one garment, and with one meal a day - in a civilization which was not dependent like ours on accumulation of wealth - and above all, in a world which might at any moment come to an end. Further, it was a failure. Even the presence of Jesus could not secure "the fellowship" of the Twelve from the inevitable risks: Judas the treasurer was a thief and pilfered the paltry funds of the society. The fellowship of the primitive Church was responsible for Ananias and Sapphira. It was responsible for the poverty of the Jerusalem Christians which made them a burden on the Gentile Churches in Galatia and Asia, in Macedonia and Achaia. The saints sank under it into paupers, and as Paul discovered at last, into ungrateful paupers. What they ought to have been taught was that independence is as much a part of the Christian ideal as charity, and that it is short-sighted policy which forgets this.

In speaking of "the fellowship" of these early believers as a mark of the ideal Church, I am not careful to answer the advocatus diaboli who urges such arguments against it. The problem of poverty is not so simple - certainly it is not so simple with us - nor is the solution of it so easy, as the early Christians supposed. But the instinct which impelled them in dealing with it was genuinely Christian, and apart from that instinct we shall never be able to deal with it at all. We must not disparage on any ground whatever the first bona fide attempt to make human brotherhood real. There is no true Church where the effort to do this has ceased. "Let brotherly love continue." "Love the brotherhood." "Be kindly affectioned one to another in brotherly love." "Remember the poor." The more things we have in common, material as well as spiritual, the more we realize the ideal of a Christian Church. Within the Church, there ought not to be such a thing as neglected and unsuccoured poverty, and so far as I can judge there is not much. The Church does not neglect its poor members, and perhaps those who complain that it neglects the poor in general - that is, neglects to help them in their poverty - forget how difficult it is to help those who refuse to have any relation with others except that of holding out their hand. The people who are here said to have continued steadfastly in the fellowship were all alike members in a society where personal relations of every kind were intimate, and it was this which made "the fellowship," such as it was, possible. It was one feature in a society where, thanks to the influence of Jesus, many were willing to say, All that is mine is yours; but it cannot be reproduced, even with its drawbacks, in a society where the only cry is, All that is yours is mine. Do not let us forget that with all its drawbacks it was an inspiration of love, and that though love needs wisdom to guide it, without love - active, sacrificing, positive love - there is no Church at all.

**3.** The next note of the Church is of another kind, yet closely connected with this. "They continued steadfastly in the breaking of the bread." To break bread means in the Bible to eat, or to take food; but it came to be appropriated very early to the sacred meal in which Christians declared the Lord's death. It is synonymous, for all practical purposes, with the Lord's Supper; and it is another mark of the ideal Church, as Luke apprehended it, that the Lord's Supper has a central place in its worship.

The history of the Supper, or perhaps it should be said of the sacraments in general, is the most heart breaking and discreditable chapter in the whole story of Christianity. Those who call themselves Catholic Christians no doubt give the sacraments a great place in their religion. But the doctrine of the sacraments, in its so-called Catholic form, is a mere defiance to the mind of man - a mixture of religious materialism, of superstition, of magic, of impossible metaphysics, with no indubitable result but that of the enslavement of the Church to the priesthood. It is not wonderful that in repelling, as they are bound to repel, a system of ideas and practices which is not only thoroughly unchristian but thoroughly irrational, Protestants should sometimes have been tempted to lose patience with the whole subject round which it has been con structed. Some have dispensed with sacraments; some have proposed to suspend them for a generation or two till the superstition which has grown about them has died down; and many, to say the least, are embarrassed. Baptism is supported by sentimental as much as by Christian convictions. In "Catholic" churches the number of communicants as compared with the whole number of church people is very small, and among Protestants there are many to whom the Communion Sunday is rather a day of misgiving than of peculiar joy. The popular apprehension of the sacraments has shrunk, in fact, in many cases, to something purely negative. The ordinary church member does not believe that baptism regenerates, and he does not believe in a real presence of Christ in the bread and wine. It would be renouncing the very faculties God has given him to believe such things; it would be renouncing all that he means by faith in God Himself. And however he may be embarrassed by the sacraments, he finds it quite impossible to depart from this position.

But surely mere negation cannot comprehend the whole truth. Surely Christ did not institute ordinances of any kind only that those who believe in Him might confess themselves baffled by them. If we negate one thing, it must be to affirm another. With the negations just referred to - that is, with the unqualified rejection of what claims to be the Catholic doctrine of the sacraments - I find myself in entire agreement. I do not and cannot believe either that Christ is in the water of baptism, or that He is in the bread and wine of the Supper. But I am quite sure that the New Testament suggests a real presence and working of Christ in the celebration of the sacraments, when they are celebrated as they originally were, and were always intended to be, in penitence and faith. It is not a presence in the elements, but a presence in the sense of the elements, and to the intent signified by them. It is not a presence which is explained by transubstantiation or by consubstantiation; both these theories are meaningless answers to meaningless questions. It is not a presence before which we must simply stand with minds paralysed, as if mental paralysis were identical with adoration, or even with the sense of the mysterious. What the New Testament suggests, and what experience confirms, is that when baptism is celebrated in penitence and faith Christ is present, not in the water, but in the sense signified by it - that is, in the power of His spirit to wash our sinful nature and to renew it to life in God; and that when the Supper is celebrated He is again present, really present, not indeed in the sacramental elements, but in the sense of them; that is, He is present as the Lord whose body was broken and His blood shed for men, present in the power of His atonement, present to be the meat and drink of the soul. If anyone says that this reduces the elements to mere symbols, I entirely agree; they can never be anything else. But they are Christ's pledge of His real presence in the sense of the symbols, and it is this which gives the sacraments their place of honour in the Church. They are not explanations, or theories, but facts; they remind us that faith rests not on any doctrine or wisdom of men, but on the. presence and the action of a redeeming God. When the Communion Sabbath comes, then, let us celebrate the Supper not with superstition which would fain be reverent, and not with embarrassment which would fain be rid of something so perplexing in a spiritual faith, but with solemn, joyous, grateful appropriation of the Lord who is present with us, and who still gives Himself to us in the virtue of that sacrifice in which He once gave Himself for us. There is no true Church in which the soul is not nourished on a present Christ, and that Christ the very one whose body was broken and whose blood was shed for us. This is what the Sacrament declares.

**4.** Finally, the ideal Church of early days had this mark: they continued steadfastly in the prayers. The expression implies public and stated prayers: they had such in the temple, and the custom was born again in the Church. Prayer became a new thing when it became prayer in the name of Jesus, prayer prompted by the contemplation of Jesus and by faith in Him. On the one hand, Jesus was an inspiration to prayer: men could ask God for all they saw in Him - for part in His purity, His obedience, His faith, His patience, His victory. On the other hand, Jesus was a limit to prayer: men could not ask, as children of God, exemption from experiences which He was not spared; they could not ask to have no poverty, no misunderstanding, no weariness, no cross. They could only present in Jesus' name prayers which He would present in their name; they could ask everything to which He would say, Amen, but nothing else. It is a mark of the true Church to continue steadfastly in such prayers, to know that its life must be fed from heavenly springs, and to cherish its communications with God. Dr. Chalmers says that the reason why ministers fail in their work, when they do fail, is not that they do not preach, or visit, or study, but that they do not pray. They go to do by themselves alone what no man can do unless God is with him. Every minister who knows anything knows that this witness is true. But it is true of congregations and of individual Christians exactly as it is of ministers. The life to which the Church is called in Christ is a life which it cannot live alone. It can only address itself to it as it is uplifted and strengthened by contact with God. Yet who could tell whether our inability to pray, or our unwillingness, is greater, an inability and unwillingness all the more astonishing when we consider how much we need and how much God in Christ has to give. How many of us hold on so earnestly to the sense of the prayers in church that we can even add a sympathetic Amen? Is there any note of the ideal Church in which more of our Churches would be found wanting than this - they continued steadfastly in the prayers?

Luke tells us some of the consequences which at tended the possession of these striking notes, and it is worthwhile to mention them in closing. One was fear: fear fell upon every soul. This is Luke's token of the presence of the supernatural. A church in which men are not awed by the unquestionable presence of God will never be a power in the world. Another was joy: they did eat their meat with gladness. There are family meals spoiled by low spirits, bad temper, sullenness; and nothing will drive these miseries away but a part in Christ and in the new life of His Church. This will brighten the very meals we eat, and there are unhappy homes that will never be made happy by anything else. The last is increase: the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved. Only the Lord can do it; and in a Church de voted to the testimony of the Apostles, to brotherly love, to adoring worship in which it appropriates the present Redeemer, and to fervent prayer, we have the conditions in which His power works. Let us pray for these things, and that God may make us, more than we have ever been, representative of that early Church, His sanctuary and His witnesses in a world which needs the Gospel as much as ever.