

The Functions of the Church

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Introduction: What Is The Church?

This is the subject of the essay which the praesidium of your District asked me to present. In our day and age when we hear the Church mentioned, we are apt to think of an organization which takes its place beside many other organizations. Typical of this type of thinking was a report which appeared some time ago that the Roman Catholic Church compares in efficiency of operation with General Motors Corporation. Or there is the remark which one hears on occasion that the church has become big business. So too when we speak either of our home church or of our Synod, what is first apt to come to mind is membership statistics, the state of the treasury, the physical plant, the progress which we are making in those areas, the planning which we are doing, or the efficiency of our organization.

But when we get down to the bedrock of the Lord's language in His Word, we find that very little stress is laid upon matters such as were mentioned before. We are made to realize that when Judgment Day comes most of them will have had their day. But not so the Church. For the Church is people. Consider a few quotations from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which the sainted Professor J. P. Koehler liked to call the hymn of the Church. In chapter 2, verse 7 we read: "That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of His grace, in His kindness toward us, through Christ Jesus." In the glory to come when people like you and me are seen there, happy and blessed forevermore although we with our sinfulness and sinning had deserved an eternity of woe, it will be evident how great the grace of God is: that He could want to find a way to get us to heaven, did find a way, and took it although it meant sending His Son down from heaven to death on the cross. Much the same thought is picked up in chapter 3, verse 10: "To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known *by the church* the manifold wisdom of God." Those in whom the angels will see the highest demonstration of what God in His wisdom is able to do are called the Church. Yes, the Church is people.

Which people? Those to whom it can be said: "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). These are the people, all of them and only they, who are the Church. That is Bible language, and we shall think in these terms when we speak of the functions of the Church.

I. The Receptive Function

A. Its Nature

Now I should like to submit that the first function of the Church is receptive. This is not a duty, it is a fact. The Church is not to receive, she does receive. The first time that the Lord Jesus mentions the Church is when He says to Peter: "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church: and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). "I will build my church." She receives being built. What does that mean? The picture behind the Greek word for church is that of a group of people who have been called out of their homes to gather together. So Christ's Church is His called out ones. What could that mean? Peter as spokesman for the disciples had just made a beautiful confession: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). "And Jesus answered and said unto him, 'Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven'" (17). Peter had been called out of the ranks of those who know only what their own flesh and blood, their own thinking and reason,

have to say and had been made to take hold of a revelation which was given to him by his heavenly Father. Now Jesus tells him that he was not to be unique, but that the Father would do for many others through Jesus what He had done for Peter. He indicates that they would be a unit, for He says that they would be built, and that implies, built together, for they would rest upon one cornerstone, be other building blocks laid upon it just as Peter was one. So this is what Jesus would do as He built His Church: acting as His Father's agent He would bring souls to faith in Himself. Jesus makes the Church, it is receptive, passive. There are other passages which teach the same truth without using the term church. There is John 10:16: "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd." Or there are those two which follow in quick succession in Acts 2: "Then they that gladly received His word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (41). "And the Lord added. to the church daily such as should be saved" (47).

A fuller description of the receptive function of the Church is given in Ephesians 5:25-27: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." What Peter confessed when he called Jesus the Christ, the promised Savior, is here spelled out. He gave himself for it. He became the substitute for sinful men. God made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, for the world's sin was imputed to Him, charged against Him. He took the place of sinful men when the punishment which the law said must be inflicted upon sin was inflicted. He was made a curse for us. Therefore remission of sins and with it escape from damnation can be preached.

What Jesus meant when He said, "I will build my church" is here also spelled out. For after He gave himself for the Church He sanctified and cleansed it with the washing of water by the word. Whether baptism first works faith as the washing of regeneration or whether it confirms the faith which has already been created by the Word, it does bring to the individual this blessing that he is sanctified, made holy, and cleansed from sin. The power lies not in the water, but in the Word which instituted baptism and has the promise that baptism will sanctify and cleanse. And the result is that the Church is Christ's own, presented by Him to himself, and glorious, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but holy and without blemish. But in all of this the Church's function is receptive, it receives from Christ, is created by Christ.

B. The Importance of the Fact

We want to emphasize this fact that the first function of the Church is receptive. We are so apt to think that the important matter in the life of the Church is doing, that there has to be a lot of flash and hurrah. But we need to remember the lesson which Martha had to learn. She was all taken up with doing something for Jesus, careful and troubled about many things. And it galled her that her sister Mary was not as active as she was, but quietly sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to what He had to say. In her impatience with Mary she even grumbled about Jesus: "Lord, doest thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me" (Lk. 10:40). But Jesus set her straight in a hurry: "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful; and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (41, 42). Sometimes when our members see the crowded calendar of events of other churches, they are apt to complain, "There's nothing going on at our church." Then we do well to pause and to ask, "Are we on the receiving end in our church? Is Jesus there, bestowing forgiveness and comfort and hope through His Word and sacrament?" If so, something is going on in our church. It is performing its first and foremost function of being receptive. In this connection it might be well to remember that when we go to church or receive the Lord's Supper, it is not we who are doing the Lord a favor, but rather it is the Lord who is doing us a favor. To be receiving this favor is the first and foremost function of the Church.

I can think of no more fitting words to summarize what we have been saying about the receptive function of the Church than to quote those in which St. John summarized what happened during the days when

the first company of the called-out ones was together with Jesus: “Of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace” (Jn. 1:16).

II. The Active Function

A. Building by Adding

But while the first function of the Church is receptive, its function is also to be active. For when Jesus says, “I will build my church,” we know that down through the centuries He has been doing that through the Church. This cooperation between Jesus and His Church is thus described in Mark 16:20, where the activity of the apostles after the ascension is described: “They went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.” St. Paul says: “We are laborers together with God” (1 Cor. 3:9). And again: “Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God. – We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain” (2 Cor. 5:20; 6:1). Thinking of His Church as His called-out ones we are reminded of what Peter said in his first epistle in a connection in which he speaks of the building of the Church: “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him what hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9).

We notice that this is the function of the Church because it is the function of each individual believer. Showing forth the praises of the Lord is not something that a believer does because he is forced to do so, but because it is one of the ways in which the new life which has been created in him when he became a believer shows itself. So it was from the very beginnings of the New Testament Church. As soon as Andrew had come to faith, “he first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, ‘We have found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ’” (Jn. 1:41). Do you see how the Father worked through a human agent when He revealed to Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God? This same Peter indicated that to speak about the Lord is part of the life which begins when faith begins when he said: “We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

We cannot be earnest enough in pleading with one another as Christians to be true to our very nature by speaking to others about Jesus. We dare never get the idea that this function has been in any wise curtailed because we have our organized mission program. In our Synod we now have a committee for evangelism. To the extent that the work of such a committee on the synodical or District level helps to show the individual believer how he can best perform the function of witnessing it will be valuable. But it dare never be allowed to lead to this that the individual members of our congregations get the idea that telling others in their community about the Savior is now the function of a committee and that if they are not on the committee they are excused from doing their part in building the Church by speaking to others.

Group activity in doing mission work, whether it be by a congregation or by our Synod, is not original, but subsequent. We shall have a strong concern for group mission work only if individual Christians are restlessly striving to win men for Christ. As they become painfully aware of how many there are who do not know the Savior, and how few of them they can reach at best, they will want the Church to pool its efforts and its means, first to train and then to set aside men for the work who can devote their entire time to reaching out, and who can go into areas which the individual in spite of his best intentions cannot reach. But it is still the case that the voice of the missionary is by virtue of his call the voice of individual believers speaking for them. So I am not disparaging our Synod’s worker training or mission program. Far be that from me. But I am trying to show that it is not something that is foisted upon us by others, but rather something which grows out of our own life and needs as we are aware of our part in the Church’s function of building itself by adding souls.

B. Building by Edifying

1. The Need for It

“I will build my church.” This function of the Church which Jesus performs through the Church involves not only the laying of additional living blocks upon those which have already been laid, but also bringing those which have already been laid to rest ever more solidly upon the foundation, Christ. The word “edify” appears quite often in the New Testament. The word in the original is the same word which is also translated “build.” We dare not divorce the one from the other. I recall a remark by William Taylor in a sermon about the text: “Feed my lambs, feed my sheep.” It was to the effect that too often in the life of congregations and church bodies so much emphasis is laid upon doing mission work that the shepherding of those who have already been won is neglected. Here too it is a case of: “These ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone” (Matt. 23:23).

As little as a man is born full-grown, so little are men born again full-grown. They start out as babes in Christ and need to be built up, edified. The food is the Word, starting with what the Bible calls “milk” and going on to what it calls “meat” (1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12). In our concern for thus edifying the body of Christ we lay much emphasis upon Christian education in a Christian day school, the Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, confirmation class, and rightly so. Often a pastor is in a dilemma when he prepares a sermon. He grants to offer meat to those who ought to be brought along to growth in knowledge, but also milk to those who still need it. To strike the proper balance and to avoid the extremes of preaching a sermon which is too deep for those who still need milk and too simple for those who are ready to leave “the principles of the doctrine of Christ” and “go on unto perfection” (Heb. 6:1) is not easy.

The craving for novelty was not peculiar to the Greeks of old. Innovations are constantly being proposed in the activity of the Church. In many areas of American Lutheranism there is a Romanizing trend ranging, all the way from such comparatively harmless matters as clerical garb and vestments and the use of acolytes down to such outcroppings of error as the elevation of the host, prayers for the dead, and the addressing of clergy as “father.” There are other innovations aplenty which are either copied or products of someone who gets bright ideas. Results of some kind or other are being sought by the introduction of such innovations. But the Church is not there to get any kind of results, but rather to build the Church. Therefore the acid test to which we must put any proposal for an innovation is thus stated by great St. Paul: “All things are lawful for me, but all things edify not” (1 Cor. 10:23). Do they edify?

2. Growth in Knowledge of the Truth

a. Called For

The two areas in which the Church is to build itself internally may be covered by our well-known terms: doctrine and practice. This is evident from the general pattern of the epistles, especially of St. Paul. Usually there is a doctrinal section, followed by what we call a practical section. Anyone, be he a child or an adult, who knows and believes what Jesus teaches in John 3:16: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” – anyone, I say, who knows and believes what Jesus here teaches, knows enough doctrine to be saved. But it is not the Lord’s desire that we settle for a minimum. He wants us to reach a point where we have been weaned and can go to solid food. Witness the rebuke in 1 Corinthians 3: “I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat; for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal” (1-3). Or the other in Hebrews 5: “Ye are dull of hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to

them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (11-14).

b. Not to be Avoided

As Jesus builds His Church, He wants to lead each believer along from growth to growth and thus to plant him ever more firmly upon the foundation. That He wants no minimum, but rather a maximum penetration into what He has taught, is evident from His command concerning those who would be called out by baptism and teaching: “Teaching them to observe *all things* whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). It always irks me when someone brushes aside the presentation of some facet of the truth by saying, “That’s too deep for me.” When we consider our advantages of a Christian background which in some cases started with home training, went on to Christian day school and perhaps even a Christian high school and college; when we consider the thorough indoctrination which preceded confirmation and the countless sermons which were dinned into the ears of our people; when we compare that background with the background of congregations which were young and to a greater or lesser degree were made up of people who but recently had come from heathenism; and when we then consider what St. Paul wrote to these young churches and expected them to understand, we have reason to be irked when some of our members brush aside the content of some of these very epistles as being too deep for them. The Lord wants growth, edification, in knowledge. We indeed need to be careful when presenting these truths that we do not treat them as something dry and dull, but rather with the enthusiasm which is born of knowing that the Savior is the hub of the wheel about which all truth radiates, and that all truth somehow manifests the grace of God.

c. The Threat from Error

This phase of building the church is in constant danger of being hindered or frustrated by error. Error surely always stunts growth, and it may break the living stone loose from the building which is Christ’s altogether. For Jesus calls false prophets ravening wolves. I suppose that we agree that pastors and teachers, whom the Lord has set as watchmen upon the walls of Zion, have the calling to expose error and warn against it. But they are not a privileged class. In fact, they have no functions other than those which all believers have, the only distinction being that they by common consent perform some functions publicly or exclusively for the sake of decency and order. But guarding the doctrine is never their exclusive function. The removal of a single comma which is not warranted by the original makes Ephesians 4:11,12 read thus: “He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” So while pastors are to train, the ministry, the service, by which the Church, the body of Christ, is to be edified, is to be performed by the saints, the believers. And what is this service which they are to perform for one another? “Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things which is the head, even Christ” (13-15). The saints are to make one another proof against error and build up one another with the truth. It hardly looks then as though exposing error and contending against those who would introduce error is a preachers’ quarrel and that if it were left to the laymen there wouldn’t be these distressing differences between churches.

3. Growth in Sanctification

a. Knowing What to Do

The other area in which the church is to build itself internally is in the area of practice, of life, of Christian living. The faith by which the Father makes us stones which are a part of the Church is living. This life expresses itself not only in confessing, as we have indicated before, but also by holiness of living. Here again it is Peter, for whom the picture of the Church as a building must have had a special meaning since that memorable day on which he heard Jesus use it with reference to himself – here again Peter is our authority. Speaking of Jesus as God’s chosen cornerstone, he says: “To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ye also, as lively stones are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (2:4,5). In the same vein the Apostle Paul says that the fitting expression of gratitude for the mercies which our Lord has shown to us is that we present our bodies to Him as a living sacrifice by being guided in our conduct entirely by His will (Ro. 12:1,2).

In this area the Church is to build itself up in two directions. For one thing it is to seek growth in wisdom. The Lord tells us: “Be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is” (Eph. 5:17). The Lord does not only reveal His will by specific commands for specific situations, but also gives us general principles which He trusts us as grown men in Christ to know how to apply to specific situations as they arise. Think, for example, of the Golden Rule. Or of axioms like these: “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (1 Cor. 5:6); “The disciple is not above his master” (Matt. 10:25). In this kind of wisdom there is always room for improvement, for growth, for being built up. Witness, for example, the Apostle’s prayer that “ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (Col. 1:10). Since our Old Adam is lazy and does not like to put forth the effort which it takes to discover which principles of God’s commands apply in a given situation, he would like to have everything cut and dried. Hence the Jews have their Talmud, Rome has its canon law. We find people too who would like to have some superbody legislate for us and lay down rules and laws for every imaginable situation. But the Lord directs us to the harder way of searching for wisdom, and growing in wisdom, or growing in conviction and a sense of duty under the influence of His Word. No one can become convinced for us, we must grow in conviction by ourselves under the guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit. And only what is done out of conviction is fruit coming from within and thus pleasing to God.

b. Doing it

1) Quantity

But merely knowing what the Lord wills is not enough, doing must follow. Remember what Jesus said: “If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (Jn. 13:17). Here too there will be constant room for growth, for being built up. The Apostle says: “As ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more” (1 Th. 4:1). There are many similar passages which encourage us to fill the cup of performance more and more until it runs over. Here there will be endless variety in progress, as much as there are individuals (Matt. 13:23). To try to hammer everyone over the same last and to demand equal performance of everyone is to ignore the fact that we are dealing with living beings and not with dead metal. The Lord has made us individuals with different abilities, temperaments, and opportunities. Blessed are we if He can say of us what He said of Mary: “She hath done what she could” (Mk. 14:8).

2) Quality

This inner edification of the Church is not only a matter of quantity, but also of quality. “Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the Heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). The quality which makes the performance of believers unique is love, love toward God and love toward man. So Jesus says: “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (Jn. 14:15). We know what St. Paul says in his great hymn of Christian love in 1 Corinthians 13, in which the translators of the King James’ Version unfortunately used the word “charity:” “Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, I am nothing” (3). Therefore we hear the Apostle praying: “This I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more” (Ph. 1:9). And again: “The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men” (1 Th. 3:12). We need to make sure that our motives are pure, that we cultivate that “singleness of heart” (Acts 2:46) which is praised in the early Christians. To perform what has been recognized as a duty because we have to, not because we want to; to do what appears to be good in order to show off and thus to cater to our vanity; to bring in a spirit of competition to produce results – all of this and similar wrong motivation could render our works worthless before God. Therefore we need to watch ourselves that more and more we heed the injunction: “Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men” (Col. 3:23). And we need to encourage our fellow believers to do likewise. So too the Church edifies itself.

There will be some fields of doing good in which believers will pool their efforts in order to do corporately what they could not do singly. We do welfare work as a Synod through our Board of Support, our Committee for General Relief, and in the East Fork Nursery, for example. There are other charitable institutions and welfare agencies in various areas of our Synod too. Even the mother church at Jerusalem practiced organized charity.

4. Discipline

When we think of the Church as building itself internally in doctrine and life, we do not want to overlook the fact that it has the obligation to practice discipline in both of these areas as part of that function. This is not first of all a group function, but rather a function of the individual believer performed to win an erring brother. In the only other passage in which Jesus himself speaks of the Church beside the one to which we have referred repeatedly, He speaks of the efforts which a believer will put forth to win a sinner from the error of his ways. If he will not listen to the individual, nor to two or three, then, Jesus says: “tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican” (Matt. 18:17). For the disciples that meant calling together as many as possible of those who had been called out by being brought to faith in Jesus in order that they with united voice might testify to the sinner of the seriousness of his sin. For us getting the united testimony of the Church would involve the same course, calling together those whom on the basis of their confession we accept as fellow believers, laying our charge against the sinner before them, and asking them to second both our accusation and our plea. Ordinarily we would function as a congregation, but here too the words of Jesus are too general to restrict us to one rigid pattern only.

“Let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican.” But the individual believer is not to be the only one who comes to a sad conclusion concerning the sinner with whom he has gone all the way in trying to bring him to repentance. The Church which has been drawn in is to share in the judgment of the individual believer and is to let the impenitent sinner know where he stands. This is indicated by the very next words of Jesus after His reference to the Church: “Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18). When Jesus spoke similar words to Peter as an individual believer He was explaining what He meant when He told him: “I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 16:19). Hence our term “ministry of the keys.” The joint use of the keys in excluding the impenitent sinner not only from our fellowships but also from the kingdom of heaven, is made a definite duty in 1 Corinthians 5:13: “Put away from among yourselves that

wicked person.” So too is the joint use of the keys in opening the kingdom when excommunication has had the desired effect and led the sinner to repentance: “Ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him” (2 Cor. 2:7).

In the matter of doctrinal discipline, in which the final step may not be excommunication but separation or termination of fellowship, it is interesting to note that the passages which have been used to support the separation between church bodies who do not agree in doctrine and practice, are addressed to individual believers and not to bodies of believers, with the possible exception of what is said in Revelation 2 and 3 in the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor. Believers as a body have the duty because believers as individuals have the duty. But for that very reason it dare not be contended that individual believers have a wider latitude in the matter of fellowship than congregations and church bodies.

C. Misconceptions

1. Mere Character Building

We have been at it for some time discussing the active function of the Church. What we have said will hardly agree with popular opinion. I have had discussions with lodge members in which they put the question to me, “Why should you have anything against the lodge? We have the same purpose as the church. We both want to help people to become better than they are.” Nor are cases unknown where even Lutheran churches have tried to put the bite on business men in their community with the plea that churches ought to be helped because of their wholesome influence upon the morals of a community. The advocates of the social gospel have the idea that it is the business of the Church to make the world a better place in which to live. Now we can indeed point to a passage which tells us that Jesus died for us to make us good: “Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (Tit. 2:14). Or to one that tells us that God brought us to faith to make us good: “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). But while good works will come about because Jesus died and God brought us to faith, that is not the chief purpose of either the death of Jesus or of our conversion. In John 3:16, the Lord Jesus tells us that God gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. That’s the chief purpose both in the death of Jesus and in the working of faith: salvation, forgiveness, everlasting life. The command to preach the gospel is accompanied by the promise that he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. To let the main matter out of consideration and then, since when the Church performs its functions improved behavior will result, to conclude that the Church has the same purpose as any character building organization is not true to fact. Our business is to save sinners first of all, the rest will follow. That’s what makes the Church unique.

2. Conscience of the State

Another idea that is quite widespread is that it is a function of the Church to be the conscience of the state. That’s why you’ll find that church conventions will often burst into print with resolutions condemning nuclear testing or encouraging integration, condemning slums or urging recognition of Communist China. Now individual Christians do have a conscience and are to let it be guided by God’s Word also in evaluating current issues, or when they let their voice be heard as Christian citizens. But the Church, in which the Christian comes into consideration only as a believer, has no responsibility over against the state. Her area is “the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21).

D. The Means to be Used

1. Means of Grace

The means with which the Church is to perform its active function of being the Savior's instrument in building itself externally by adding believers to its ranks, and internally by promoting growth in faith and fruits are the means which He has placed into her hands: "Preach the gospel." "Disciple all nations, baptizing them." "This do in remembrance of me." It's the Gospel in Word and sacraments, the means of grace. Once we have learned to say with the Apostle: "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" (Ro. 1:16), we shall be confident that that which is the power of God will surely be sufficient for carrying out the functions of the Church.

2. The Place of Social Activities

But in our churches we do have social activities. Do they lie within the scope of the functions of the Church? Not specifically. In many cases these activities are combined with a greater or lesser degree of indoctrination or exhortation based upon the Word of God, and to that extent lie within the scope of the prime function of the Church. That does not mean that I take a dim view of social activities in the church, provided that they are treated as incidental. In 2 Timothy 5:1,2 we read: "Rebuke not an elder, but entreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren; the elder women as mother; the younger as sisters, with all purity." This passage the sainted Professor August Pieper called the outstanding passage in Scripture in favor of societies in the church. Here the Lord does recognize the fact that there are natural groupings among the members of a congregation. Even the early church seems to have sensed the need for a measure of social life in the church, for it had its Agape, love feast. We learn indeed from 1 Corinthians 11 that these social activities, comparable to our potluck dinners, degenerated and defeated their very purpose. That's warning enough for us to keep a watchful eye upon social activities in the church lest they get out of hand. It is certainly a matter of over-emphasizing a minor matter if a congregation evaluates the usefulness of a pastor on the basis of his being a good mixer or being able to put life into the social activities of a congregation. The Lord looks for higher qualifications.

But there are many passages in Scripture which indicate that in the building of the Church there is to be much concern on the part of the individual believer for the individual believer. When a congregation is small, it is comparatively easy for the members to know the spiritual state, and the material state, of fellow believers and then to heed the Lord's admonition: "Warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men" (1 Thess. 5:14); "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep" (Ro. 12:15). But as a congregation grows in size and its people hurry into church and out of church, how can they learn to know one another and render to one another the service which they owe one to another unless some opportunity is provided for them to become acquainted with one another? Here the informal atmosphere of social activities provides an answer.

Conclusion

The matter which we have been discussing concerns us personally and individually. For we profess to be believers and thus members of Christ's Church. Nothing more wonderful has ever happened to us than this, that the Lord added us to His Church, for thus we were made partakers of the salvation which He bought with His blood, we became members of His body and objects of His loving care. Recalling that the first function of the Church is that it is passive, receptive, we shall rejoice that the Lord has not only once given to us, but is still continually bestowing upon us blessings from His rich store. Grateful for His boundless grace and asking what we can do for Him, we learn that the Church is also active, used by Him to build itself by adding to its ranks and by promoting growth in the knowledge of the truth and in God-directed living. These functions will continue

until the end of the world. And then the Church will no more be divided into the Church below and the Church above, for all will be raised to live together with the Lord in glory. No more will the Church then be grieved by outward divisions among its members though inwardly she is one, for the sinfulness and imperfection which lie at the root of divisions will not be part of the glorified bodies of believers. The Church then will have no more to receive, for her Lord will have given her all that can be given: perfection and eternity. But she will still be giving as with one heart and one voice she sings forever: "Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (Rev. 1:5,6).