

The Ministry of Mercy for Today

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“All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their head, by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man. Saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*).

Chapter One: Do We Need the Ministry of Mercy Today?

As it nears the end of the 20th century the modern world finds itself facing stupendous problems which baffle the minds and hearts of men. Life has become so complex and closely interrelated that no question can be faced in isolation. Rather, because of the organic character of human existence and history, each new problem must be viewed in the light of its fellows, sometimes strikingly similar but more often on the surface at least widely different.

The most immediately pressing concerns of mankind seem to be the political issues involved in the titanic struggle between the Western democracies and Russian totalitarianism under a pseudo-communistic regime. However, as must be apparent to all who have seriously considered the issues, the political difficulties are intertwined with a welter of other questions and problems which must be faced before they can be satisfactorily resolved.

In discussing the particular issues which face the leaders who seek a way out of the present impasse, Toynbee in his *Civilization on Trial* demonstrates the interrelation of the several problems admirably in his brief summary. “What shall we do to be saved? In politics, establish a constitutional cooperative system of world government. In economics, find a working compromise (varying according to the practical requirements of different places and times) between free enterprise and socialism. In the life of the spirit, put the secular superstructure back onto religious foundations. Efforts are being made in our Western world today to find our way towards each of these goals. Of the three tasks, the religious one is, of course, in the long run by far the most important...”^[1]

In the present world the church of the Lord Jesus is still an influential and powerful organization. No other organization has such a long, continuous and honorable history. Thus Toynbee, though holding that the economic and political issues are the most pressing, readily admits that the religious problem is the most basic.

The true church has within herself the gift of divine grace which alone is able to lead men out of the morass into which they have wandered because of their sins, and to lift both individuals and nations by the Holy Spirit which she has received to that conscious spiritual communion with the God of the Scriptures which gives hope and happiness. The true solution to the ills of mankind is found in God's grace revealed in the Bible. Although the Scriptures offer no detailed blueprint of the effective program which alone can answer the problems of men, they do announce in no uncertain voice the principles which must control our thoughts and lives.

The calling of the church, therefore, is first of all to confront individuals with the gospel of God's grace in Christ. In their deliverance from the power of sin lies the sole hope for the amelioration of the social, cultural and political conditions of the present age. These redeemed

individuals, embraced in the fellowship of the church by baptism and profession, constitute the new humanity. And that new humanity is the proving-ground for the effectiveness of the social program of the gospel. To them the church gives leadership for all of life.

The church therefore has much to say also on economic issues. Because she firmly believes the basic principles of Scripture, she affirms that no adequate answer to the economic ills of society can be given without a humble recognition of the sovereign Lordship of Christ and the need of His redeeming grace. Thus her members interest themselves both in developing a more realistic, effective and spiritual approach to basic economic problems, and in ameliorating the conditions of those who suffer because of the inequalities and injustices of life. Contrary to the criticism of many of her opponents, she is very much concerned with the physical life of man. Believing that God in Christ has redeemed the bodies as well as the souls of men, she stresses the need of working toward the improvement of those distressful conditions which make men suffer.

In the church which strives to do her work faithfully and obediently, no new organization is necessary to witness to the redeeming power of the gospel for the whole life of man.

(1) The church is commissioned first of all to proclaim the glad tidings that in Christ is a full salvation for body and soul, for time and eternity. For this work she has received from her Glorified Head the apostles and *preachers to whom has been committed the ministry of reconciliation*.

(2) Furthermore, her life must be regulated in all its details according to the teachings of His Word. To assist her in this there has been instituted *the ministry of government represented by the elders* who are to be appointed in every congregation.

(3) And finally, to make more effective already in this life the law of perfect love in word and deed by ameliorating such rampant results of sin as poverty, sickness and distress, she has received *the ministry of mercy which comes to expression in the loving service of the deacons* without whose presence no congregation is completely organized according to the Scriptural pattern.

With the nature, task and effective execution of that ministry of mercy in the churches we are now to concern ourselves.

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The actuality of the subject of diaconal service in the churches in these mid-century years cannot be easily overestimated by those who are intimately acquainted with the life of Christ's church today.

Four trends which impinge on the life of the church ought to be reviewed briefly. In them the diaconate should recognize a rising challenge to their place and effectiveness in the life of the churches as "the salt of the earth and the light of the world."

(1) *One of the undeniable characteristics of the church today is her growing concern with herself*. Since the leaders of men have placed her largely on the defensive in our modern culture, she has learned the art of introspection by which she has somewhat better been able to evaluate her worth and work.

Someone has aptly remarked that "the great unsolved problem of Protestant theology is the problem of the Church."^[2] Insofar as this is true, the church can only blame herself. Too long has she either wandered around in a confused welter of conflicting theories or else withdrawn with the weary dignity of an enfeebled grandam to the sidelines of the conflict which is raging today. We ought to be deeply grateful that out of the Oxford conference of 1937 there has come for many a new evaluation of her place and duty summed up in the statement, "Let the Church be the Church." Since that day no end of writers have tuned their instruments to this

pitch. On the Continent, in Great Britain and even on this side of the sea leading theologians have tried to implement this position with a clear-cut presentation of what the church may and may not do. Quite generally they have agreed that the church has failed in her calling because she brought the word of man instead of the Word of God. By allowing herself to become the sounding-board of the latest man-made theories she has stifled the gospel of sovereign grace. Her only hope together with the last best hope of the world, so many of the outstanding leaders claim, lies in a renewed consciousness of her prophetic calling. If the church is to be truly the church, she must return to her job of preaching.

Although this emphasis on her “prophetic role” was a good corrective for the vague “social gospel” which has been in vogue for some decades, the new position on the church’s calling is too limited in its scope. It is true that the church is called upon to give “birth to an adequate theology as the fruit of her insistence on a complete reorientation of the mind and will towards God.” However, too great a restriction is placed on the calling of the church when it is affirmed, “But the chief concern of the Church now as ever is not to transform the conditions in which men live, for that must largely be done by secular organizations inspired by the Christian spirit, but the regeneration of men themselves.”[\[3\]](#)

Much as we appreciate this return to a more clear-cut appreciation of the uniqueness of the church’s contribution in our present-day cultural crisis, we maintain that much more ought to be expected of the church than preaching—foundational and fundamental as this truly is. The Holy Spirit does not “create the creators of a new civilization” in a vacuum. They are born into the family of God, the redeemed humanity that knows and loves and seeks to do the will of the Father in all things. This new humanity, which is the spiritual body of which Jesus Christ is Head, must be disciplined by the Word, so that not only the Christian individual but also the collective life of the Christian community reflects the will of God. And to give expression to that life of God-centered and God-glorifying service she is to be guided by the ministers of mercy, the deacons, who according to the Scripture are among her permanent officers.

Of great significance to a proper understanding of the nature and importance of the diaconate has been the study of this phase of the church’s early life undertaken by many scholars during the past seventy or eighty years. The first contribution of note was Dr. Lightfoot’s *Essay on the Christian Ministry*, written in 1868, which appeared in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*. His estimate of the offices in the early churches was widely accepted by competent scholars in England and Germany, until Dr. Hatch published his celebrated Bampton Lectures in 1881.[\[4\]](#)

His opposition to the theories of Lightfoot and others gave rise to a very fruitful series of discussions. In England Sir. William Ramsay furnished new insights based on his archaeological discoveries in several erudite works.[\[5\]](#) Thomas M. Lindsay presented his conclusions in *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries*, in which the controversy about office-bearers in the primitive churches was carefully sketched and evaluated.[\[6\]](#) Since then the discussions have been carried forward with but few intermissions.

This material is particularly useful for our investigation. For surely if the diaconate is to receive a worthy place in the life of the church today, it ought to be demonstrated that this ministry is properly part of the well-organized congregation. Only when thoroughly convinced that the "priestly" function is as much a part of the church's divine calling today as the "prophetic" will we be able both to defend the legitimacy of the diaconate and to outline in a measure the spiritual contribution which it should make.

(2) *Particularly necessary does a careful study of the ministry of mercy in the churches appear, when we take note of the appalling secularization of the present world-order.*[\[7\]](#)

For many centuries the church was the dominant institution in the Western world. During the Middle Ages this was effected largely through the closely-knit organization of the Roman

Catholic Church. With the Protestant Reformation this external unity was shattered. However, the spiritual power of the gospel became markedly manifest in the lives of hundreds of thousands who because of their allegiance to the supreme Head of the church refused allegiance to the pope. Protestants of various types were more thoroughly convinced of the necessity of a God-centered and Biblically-grounded philosophy and practice of life than the Roman Catholics of the medieval period ever were. Especially was this strong in the lives of those who followed the Calvinistic pattern. The story of the Reformed people in France, the Netherlands, Hungary, Great Britain and not the least of the Puritans in America reflects a way of life which is diametrically opposed to the materialistic and earth-bound secularism which sways the world today. Therefore, those who defend the thesis that secularism is the legitimate offspring of Protestantism betray the grossest ignorance of the spiritual dynamic which inspired her people as well as her leaders.

The tap roots of this spiritually devastating movement must be sought in other soil than that in which Protestantism flourished. Already before the Reformation in those nations which were at least outwardly to remain loyal to the Roman Catholic Church the influence of the Renaissance with its glorification of classical Greek and Roman culture blinded the eyes of many to the things of the Spirit of God. As this new ferment gradually spread from one country to another, the lives of multitudes were divorced from the gospel of Christ. It both produced and was kept alive by a revolutionary spirit which completely transformed the life of Europe. It has now appeared in all lands as a “new gospel,” competently aided and abetted by such movements as the industrial revolution, “neutral” public education, and power politics on the national and international levels.

Today there is no greater foe of the Christian gospel than this materialistic secularism. It has registered its most signal triumphs in the Russian communistic order which has openly attacked the church, ridiculed the gospel of Christ and set in opposition to it the “gospel” according to Karl Marx.

The secularization of a world largely committed in the past to the Christian pattern of thought and action required centuries to achieve its present position of prominence. But now that its gains have been consolidated, the battle-lines are being sharply drawn. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants ceaselessly warn against its all-pervading influence. Even the leaders of the non-Christian religions are aware of its threat to their positions. The life of the race today manifests a disintegrating quality which bodes ill for the future, since it cannot satisfy the heart and mind of man. “For years secular thinking around the world has not been governed by any single, luminous idea that gives meaning and purpose to life...Even before the last world war, Albert Schweitzer had become aware of the lack of an integrating conception in our culture.... What is at stake is a clear, coherent conception of life.”^[8] In summarizing this situation with its crucial effects for our nation the same author affirms, “I pause at this point to say that the effect of all this upon the United States and upon the American public opinion generally is devastating. This is particularly so in the world of youth. We live like people in a strange world.... We are conscious of no all-embracing purpose. Broken-mindedness benumbs the heart; it dries the fountains of philanthropy; it makes heroic action impossible; it creates cynicism and distrust. It is a condition much harder to cure than that of the broken heart.”^[9]

By now this secularization has fully saturated our culture. Everything is separated from God and His Word. Government, education, economics, recreation and culture have come to be regarded as ends in themselves. Such a way of life can rise no higher than its source. Thus all of its products are as earth-bound as its theories.

That this secularization has sapped the strength of philanthropy is evident on every hand. That grace had for centuries been the hallmark of the church and believers. In distinction from those who sought only themselves, the people of God were deeply convinced of their obligation to help all who were in need. At first this was done in and through the church. Later private charities imbued with the Christian spirit developed next to the instituted church. Finally this work was removed from the inspiration and leadership of the church and

handed over to the state in many countries. But by making charity a function of the government we have robbed it of its spiritual rootage and character, of its intimate relation to the will of the God of the Scriptures, and of its original consideration for the dignity and welfare of man. No purely humanitarian philanthropy can ever answer to the demands of the law of love. This can be done only where that law is understood, appreciated and applied in obedience to the divine mandate. And since it is the God-given function of the ministry of mercy to demonstrate the power of this law concretely and to furnish definite guidance to all who recognize its authority, no time is more favorable for the restoration of the diaconate than this secular age which, though it knows so little of the things of the spirit, still complains of the vacuum in the lives of men which must be filled.

(3) A third argument for considering the ministry of mercy today may be gleaned from the growing complexity of the problems which have arisen in our modern culture.

This exceedingly complex phenomenon is quite in contrast with the simplicity of life as it was originally lived in various parts of the world. With the new means of communication and transportation our world has been shrinking. The problems of Brazil and China and Hungary, for example, are today in a very real sense the problems of the average American. Economic upheavals and wars and droughts in one part of the world directly affect the lives of people everywhere. In politics we are no longer largely limited to the local magistrates; we think in terms of world government. In industry are we no longer controlled by the employer who hired us; a thousand complications ranging all the way from United States government regulations to the price of tin in Indonesia determine how long we shall work and how much we shall be paid. When anything goes wrong, it seems to go wrong on a worldwide scale. Both the economic recession of the thirties and the international conflict of the forties have demonstrated this conclusively.

Today we find evidences of poverty on every hand caused by the rising living standards which prevail throughout the world. Whereas in times past the actual income of most people was far smaller than it is today, the hardships encountered today were largely unknown or at least unrecognized. Much difficulty is encountered because of the complexity of world economy. Thus today there is a crying need for security, not only political but especially economic, throughout the world. We are beginning to understand the ties which bind us indissolubly to the whole race better than before. The cataclysmic wars of this century have forced on our attention the basic unity of the race also in its suffering. New fields are opened for the ministry of mercy, and in this the members of Christ's church must somehow be made to share. Also in the fulfillment of the law of love it is our duty to outgrow the former limited and provincial outlook which sees need only at the back-door and closes its eyes to the sorrows of the world community.

(4) And finally there is no escaping the question of the place of the ministry of mercy in the churches today because of the growing preoccupation of man with his physical needs.[\[10\]](#)

Much of this has been fostered by the spread of socialistic and communistic theories which are grounded in historical materialism and hold forth the hope of heaven on earth to the downtrodden masses. Quite naturally when such glittering promises of decent dwellings and full dinner-pails are sketched to the poverty-stricken peoples of earth, especially to those who have felt the blighting breath of secularism, it need not surprise us that multitudes eagerly swear allegiance to a new way of life. Little do they realize and less do they care that they are bartering freedom for security. In so many instances they have never known liberty. These same economic philosophies have also forced the democracies to pay more attention to cleaning up their own houses. Many types of social legislation have been passed and enforced because of the growing clamor for economic security. Man is much more conscious of his body than of his soul.

This concern has been further fostered by the tremendous advances of medical science. No longer is sickness regarded with fear as in times past. So many ailments once considered

incurable can now be conquered. But here too the care of the body has been too much divorced from the care of the soul. The constitutional unity of man is attacked by a practical denial of the needs of the spirit.

In this field the church in times past has made tremendous contributions. And because the ministers of mercy were charged with the problems of poverty and sickness in those days it is well to ask whether also today they may have something to offer which has been too long obscured or denied.[\[11\]](#)

In consideration of the above we should gratefully take note of the plain teaching of Scripture that Christ has provided His church on earth with the necessary auxiliaries to meet the challenge of every age. As He Himself came not to be ministered unto but to minister and to give His life a ransom for many, so He lays the law of sacrificial love upon the hearts of His people. They must follow in His footsteps. To make their loving service effective He has instituted the ministry of mercy.

It is one of the outstanding tragedies that the church has too long minimized and misunderstood this office. Its true significance is in almost total eclipse. And until the church in all seriousness returns to the Word, there is little hope that this eclipse will pass.

It is true that the churches still recognize deacons. There are even arch-deacons and sub-deacons. But little do these offices reflect the original institution of the Savior through His apostles. As a result the church has lamentably neglected the duties of Christian charity.

Though in many places philanthropies are flourishing, they owe much of their inspiration to the tender mercies of a few individuals and are usually regulated by some secular committee. In some places small groups of believers have constituted themselves as relief organizations. In others believers either directly or indirectly seek to influence the passing of social legislation in the hope that poverty will be curbed and large benefits extended to needy individuals and families. But all these attempts fail to show the power of the church as the great spiritual agency for mercy in a world shot through with distress and despair. The healing touch of the sympathetic Savior is seldom felt through the loving service of His disciples. We, too, are in a measure to blame for the secularization of the works of charity. In our superficial concern with the body we failed to realize that many who are suffering physically faint for lack of the refreshing waters of Christian love and fellowship.

In our modern world it is essential that we realize that the church of Christ has a well-defined priestly as well as prophetic function.

We may not leave it to a few individuals to discharge this function in the name of Christ. The calling comes to all who are members of His spiritual body. And to make it effective, we must use the agency which He Himself has provided in the office of the deacons.

In this way of faith and obedience the well-being of the whole church will be promoted. Only by personally participating in the works of mercy through the legitimate representatives of the Savior with unbroken regularity will we be led to a deeper appreciation of the love of God in Christ towards us. We need a renewed conviction that the gospel of grace has a message for the body as well as for the soul, for this life as well as for the life to come. The eloquent message of the hymn of a previous century demands our attention.

Thine arm, O Lord, in days of old,
Was strong to heal and save;
It triumphed o'er disease and death,
O'er darkness and the grave.

To Thee they went the blind, the dumb,
The palsied and the lame,
The leper with his tainted life,
The sick with fevered frame.

And lo, Thy touch brought life and
health,
Gave speech and strength and sight;
Lo, youth renewed and frenzy calmed
Owned Thee, the Lord of Light.

Until the church recognizes anew her calling of preaching that full, rich Savior of mankind, she is tragically remiss in her duty toward a world fallen upon evil times. In the name of that ever-living and ever-loving Redeemer she must pray and practice,

And now, O Lord, be near to bless,
Almighty as of yore,
In crowded streets, by restless couch,
As by Gennesareth's shore.

Be Thou our great Deliverer still
Thou Lord of life and death;
Restore and quicken, soothe and bless
With Thine almighty breath.

To hands that work and eyes that see
Give wisdom's heavenly lore
That whole and sick, and weak and
strong
May praise Thee evermore.

The church has this blessed work to do in Christ's name until He comes. Such a deepened understanding of the priestly work of the church will be a challenging testimony to the world that Christians love one another, and are moved with compassion for the afflictions of the race even though they may never have seen their fellows face to face. Such love is the fulfillment of the law of Christ in a loveless world.

[1] Arnold Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*, pp. 39, 40.

[2] Mackay, *A Preface to Christian Theology*, p. 170.

[3] Mackay, op. cit., p. 178.

[4] Edwin Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches*, third edition, London 1888.

[5] William Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire before A.D. 170, Letters to the Seven Churches, The Cities of St. Paul; Pauline and Other Studies*, etc.

[6] Thomas M. Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries*, pp. 365-377.

[7] E. R. Hopper, *The Crisis of Faith*, p. 28f. For a survey of secularization in politics cf. A. Hyma, *Christianity and Politics*, p. 263f.

[8] Mackay: op. cit., p. 6.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[10] Cf. Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*, pp. 311-315, for an analysis of our present-day sensate culture with its degradation of values.

[11] Much has been written in recent years about the church's ministry to the sick. This, however, is customarily limited to the spiritual comfort given by the pastor. Cf. Cabot and Dicks, *The Art of Ministering to the Sick*; also John S. Bonnell, *Pastoral Psychiatry*, esp. p. 75f.