

## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH, OR WHY WE HAVE THE CHURCH

by Lester J. Start

Undated

First of all I want to tell you how pleased and honored I am that your pastor and my friend, Otha Gilyard, has asked me to be here tonight on the occasion of your church anniversary celebration. This is a happy event. Imagine 59 years serving this community - but more importantly, - look how you are growing. Soon you will be in your new church and prepared to carry on the work of the church in even bigger and better ways so that Mount Zion Baptist Church will have even more reason to stand proudly as a leading church in the Kalamazoo community.

Now you don't need me to tell you why the church is important. Your presence here indicates you know it is. But it helps sometimes, I think, to stop to consider what kinds of jobs the church does in a community. I don't mean just the preaching and counseling, the marrying and the burying in the busy life of the church. But what are the big jobs, the real of roles, the basic functions the church performs beyond the busy details of church life?

First of all the church has a social role. What I mean by this is that the church doesn't represent only individuals. Church activity is something we do together. Church brings us together as a people and unites us as a people. And this is always the way with religion. Way back in the Bible, Abraham led a people, not some individuals. And Moses spoke for his people and he led his people out of slavery in Egypt across the Red Sea, through the wilderness to the promised land. And through Moses the Lord God made a covenant with his people, promising them he would be their God if they would follow his righteousness. And through the history of the Old Testament, we read about God and his people Israel. And in the New Testament the Gospel of John shows how we are all branches of the one true vine which comes from God, even Jesus Christ. And Paul tells us in the book of Romans, as the Scripture lesson tells us, we are all one body in Christ.

What does this mean? One thing it means is this. There is no such thing as a private religion. Don't let anyone tell you he has a private religion. If your religion doesn't make you associate with other people, relate to others as children of God, it isn't worth very much. Another thing that means is this. Sheer sociability is a value, and it as a religious value. There is a value in the sociability found in a bowling club, a dance club, playing golf with friends, playing cards, or playing games - if there weren't a value people wouldn't be interested. Sharing activities that people enjoy mutually is a basis for sociability. That is why the social activities centered in the church are so important, because sociability at its best is a religious value. And the church is interested in organizing social activities to develop this value and to show that it reaches its highest value when the social activities are organized under the principle of mutual devotion to God and His church. The better the activity, the better the sociability. And it is in Church activity that the good feeling of working together as a people is best developed, for it is aimed at the highest. The church should not scorn social activity, and I am sure your new church will have excellent facilities to foster social activities. Doing things together is a social, a religious value. It is the highest value when done in the church to the glory of God and for the social consciousness

of the church members as a united people, under God. Yes, the church has a job to do in providing the best social experience in the community.

There is another job the church does, that most people would perhaps think of first. That is the church acts to teach us and remind us of God's commandments, God's demand of righteousness as our part of the covenant He has made with us. And this is a terribly important task of the church. Times change, all kinds of pressures grow. The world today looks so different from the world of yesterday, that people question the old rules, the old commandments, and wonder what is right or wrong today. Here is where the church has a role to play, because most are unhappy when they are confused about right and wrong, and there is nothing in the world about us to give us answers to our doubts. And when we look to our religion, our Baptist faith in free inquiry into the Scriptures, when we look into our Bible, we know in our hearts that righteousness is still demanded of us by God. We know that God requires us to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with Him, that as we sow, so shall we reap, and that love, not hate must be the rule for our lives if we are to live as children of God - rather if we are to live at all; if we are to live at peace with our fellows and ourselves. When we are in doubt, the church is here to remind us of the rule of righteousness and more over to remind us of the promise of a life lived according to the will of God. There is the promise in the beatitudes spoken by our Lord, in the Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the merciful, Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. And whosoever shall do and teach these commandments shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. It is the goodness of God which through the love of Christ evokes a sense of goodness and decency in men that makes possible the hope of a better world where old men shall dream dreams and young men shall see visions, and the daughter's prophecy - where swords shall be beaten into ploughshares and men will no longer learn war anymore, or hate; where they shall sit each man under his vine and his fig tree, and none shall make him afraid. This is the hope, the dream of the kingdom of righteousness, and we need the church to keep this dream alive, to make it grow, until its truth embraces all mankind.

There is a third job that the church does, a third function that is more and more important in our day. And that is what I call the intellectual function. There is the call to righteousness in the Bible. But there is also an appeal to wisdom, too, the wisdom that knows that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. There are many aspects of this intellectual function. The church is there to give us answers to the hardest questions we can ask about the meaning of life, the nature and destiny of man. More importantly perhaps, the church is there to interpret for our own age the eternal truths that are revealed in the pages of Scripture. It is hard, sometimes, to see how the ancient histories of the Bible relate to the modern world, what exactly leading the life of a Christian entails today, how we are to understand some of the wondrous stories of miracles, and especially what the cross of Christ means as a challenge, a burden, a promise and a victory. And the church has an important role here from the youngest Sunday school class to the inspired and inspiring sermons of your pastor. It takes intelligent and dedicated people to run the church school properly. It takes a very smart man to be a successful teaching and preaching pastor in the troubled world of today. And you can be grateful you have just such a man in Otha Gilyard. The intellectual function of the church consists not only in interpreting the Scripture, but also in inspiring the people in the church to seek out the highest excellence, the highest education they

can find in order to learn the skills that will make them leaders in the wider community as teachers, preachers, lawyers and doctors, engineers and shopkeepers - computer specialists and good mechanics. It is no accident that the church has founded most of our nation's schools of higher education, and it is no accident that this church with its pastor committed to education is having a growing influence for good in the larger community. You shall know the truth, said Jesus - and the truth shall make you free.

There is a fourth job of the church. And this is fundamental to all the others. It is the deepest religious function - I call it the mystical function. It is that which brings us to God through Christ. It works through public worship and private meditation and prayer to teach us all what it means to have an encounter with God, to experience presence of God in Christ, and through Christ have a sense of a new being, a new life, a new spirit. This is the unifying vision that makes the social value possible, that evokes the earnest desire for righteousness and love, that inspires us to learn more and more the truth about God and His creation. This is the job the church does in worship. That is why it is so important to participate in it. It is by prayer that we come closer to God; it is through worship together that we feel ourselves united as one in the body of Christ, which is the church. When we feel ourselves so united, we see that there is no one without dignity or worth, that we can call no soul cheap for whom Christ died. One part of this great body of Christ cannot say to another, I have no need of you. Nor can one part of the body of Christ scorn another. Just as all the parts of the body work together, depend on each other, and thus all have worth, so it is with the body of Christ. So it is with us, if the Spirit of Christ be in us, if we be the body of Christ - we are all united in God through Christ who came to save us all.

How do we sense this Spirit? How do we learn it? We catch this spirit, we sense it in worship, in prayer. You are about to enter a new era in this life of Mount Zion Baptist Church as you enter a new sanctuary. You will take with you a proud history in this church and an old spirit of dedication and commitment with proven results. Now with the ever renewing spirit of the grace of God, we pray this church will develop into an ever larger expression of the Spirit, the body of Christ.

May God be with you and bless you in the years ahead.