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Declaring God's Glory Through Welfare Work
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Declaring God's Glory Through Welfare Work*

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DECLARE God's Glory," a great church body insisted as it met in convention, and no one could fault it for having chosen anything less than the highest as the standard for measuring its past and the purpose of all its doing in the present and the objective of all its planning for the future. After all, it is called of God out of the darkness of self-governed and self-motivated action into the glorious light of being God-governed and God-motivated so that it might show forth His praises and not the destructive wonders of which man is capable. It has nothing to say unless in the humble obedience of faith it first prays, "Speak, Lord, Thy servant heareth." It has no task unless it cries up from the dust of its brokenness, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" It has no purpose unless it is constantly renewed by the pressing urgency of its Lord's "Follow Me." And it has no future unless it constantly forgets those things which are behind and looks forth unto those things which are before so that it presses toward the mark for the prize of its high calling of God in Christ Jesus. The very fact of its existence does not say much about itself but everything about Him who is willing to be its God. For the church even to be is a declaring of the glory of God, for the church is the tangible expression of what is the meaning of grace, the open-armed invitation to all to

come in order that the Lord might have mercy upon all, for He is all Mercy.

GOD'S GLORY DETERMINED BY GOD HIMSELF

It shouldn't be too strange then that a church body should insist that all its doing be a declaring of the glory of God. But by much the same token it shouldn't be considered so exceptional that the avowed intent stands as a very evident rebuke to all who are not met with her. Is there any group which writes God somewhere into its constitution that does not claim the same for itself? Isn't it right here that the great divisions occur and are justified because all maintain that in even diametrically opposed ways they are seeking the same glory of the same God? The bulk of the instances that we find in the Scriptures are not so much deliberate defection from God as attempts to show forth God's glory according to some standard other than that which was determined by God Himself. In other words, it was what man thought was God's glory instead of being a declaration of what God Himself had first declared to be His glory. When the Children of Israel worshiped the golden calf, even this was an attempt to declare the glory of God. Surely the people did not maintain that this figure, which had been created before their eyes, was the God that had brought them out of the bondage of Egypt. Why, they could still see traces here and there of what they themselves had

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put into the making of this god. Their trouble was that there appeared to be no longer any evidence from God as there had been evidence through Moses, and so they determined to make some evidence for themselves. Much the same can be said for the false prophets that are so severely rebuked for misleading the people of God. They cried out "Peace, peace," when there was no peace. But the fact of the matter is that there was peace, visible, tangible, present peace, and the only one who insisted that there wasn't was Jeremiah, who interpreted what he saw in the light of what God said and not in the light of what was evident. But the false prophets were drawing the only conclusion that so manifestly stared them in the face; they were interpreting the doings of God by their own knowledge and not by His revelation.

Now this should cause us to be at least a little wary with regard to ourselves. "Declare the glory of God!" "Declare the glory of God!" Not only does everyone insist upon this so that our declaration of it is far from unique, but practically every wrong move within the church has been made with that as its stated purpose, and practically every sectarian effort has that as its avowed objective. It's something like the Scriptures and our very facile suggestion that everyone return to the Scriptures. Not a single heresy has ever arisen that did not pretend to have its basis in Scriptures. What does this mean for us? It means that even the choosing of a theme like "Declare God's Glory" is in itself no guarantee that we will do precisely what our theme suggests but might be evidence of personal arrogance and therefore the attempt to declare our own glory under the

guise of showing forth God's, and it might even be the pronouncement of our own judgment. This is not only possible, but it is the inevitable result unless the glory is the glory of the living God and the declaring is on His terms.

Often our real difficulty is that in the use of words which are so familiar to us by constant use and even overuse, we identify the fact of our using them with actually knowing what they mean and the equivalent of doing what they declare. What is the glory of God? It is that by which He Himself demonstrates that He is God. It is not so much what He is in Himself as how He shows Himself to us, how we are permitted to know Him and hear Him and speak about Him. This is not the Light unapproachable, otherwise in the very terms themselves we would be barred. This is not the ineffable Majesty, otherwise who would not be consumed in reaching toward it? This is not the unspeakable Holiness which is the very nature of God, otherwise who would not be utterly repelled by the knowledge that we are all sinners? The glory of God is what God is for us: the Light which approaches us in order to make us light in Himself; the Majesty which stoops so low that it can lift us up; the Holiness by which God Himself makes us holy. Thus it is that we see the fullness of the glory of God, not in some stretching beyond ourselves, not in some standing on the tiptoes of our highest imagination, not in building a ladder with our reason step by step and by our personal morality elevating step above step until we are far beyond what man can ordinarily reach; the fullness of the glory of God is to be seen in the face of Jesus Christ. He is Immanuel, God with

us, and he that has seen Him has seen the Father, and there is no coming to the Father but by Him. If you would know the Way of God you must know Jesus. If you would know the Truth of God you must believe in Jesus. If you would be in the life of God you must be in Jesus. There is no other God, and there is no other glory of God. Surely, no professing Christian would seriously want to cavil at this.

HOW GOD'S GLORY MUST BE DECLARED

What, then, is meant by "declaring" the glory of God? What else can it mean except that in word and in deed, in organization and in organizational action, we give expression to Jesus Christ, not merely that we pontifically pronounce the name and give it prominence in all of our proceedings, but that Christ Jesus be born again in us, so that in us and through us He is able to express Himself today even as He did through the body which was born of the Virgin Mary. God has given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Why? — to the glory of God the Father. Whatever we think about and plan must be the result of letting the mind be in us which was also in Christ Jesus, such a mind that He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross. Whatever we do can by no stretch of the imagination be self-devised and therefore self-doing, otherwise we hold to equality with God as something to be snatched and held at all costs and thereby give evidence that the mind of Christ is not in us and we are not declaring the glory of God. Whatever we suffer dare never be because we insist on

having our own way or withdraw into an aloofness of godlike being right and are intent upon the search for godlike serenity. It can never be anything else but bearing in our bodies the marks of our Lord Jesus Christ and filling up the measure of His suffering, because we know the power of His resurrection and are made conformable to His death. Anything other than that is still the attempt to show forth our own glory, because we are still on our own and are out after our own.

Here, then, is the place of decision, Jesus Christ; and only in Him can we evaluate whether we speak arrogantly when we say, "Declare God's glory," and whether we speak our own judgment, or whether this that God is and would be to all men is actually shown forth by us. If our being as church is of our own making so that we are neatly structured for carrying out the plans that we make and properly organized for putting into operation what we think should be done, then it is very possible that we have created a golden calf for ourselves, not in opposition to God, mind you, but to give expression to what we maintain is the glory of God. If we examine ourselves only in the light of statistics and let our projections be determined merely by what has evidently been the growth of the church, then it may well be that we have become false prophets, not in that we change the message of God but in that we read what has been done and what shall yet be in terms of what we can see and determine for ourselves. This is our "Peace, peace," while some lonely Jeremiah is eating his heart out because he must declare differently and the message of the Lord is a fire in his bones that consumes him into disgrace instead of build-

ing him up into popular recognition among the professed people of God. It has been stated somewhat facetiously that Luther would have trouble getting into the church which is called by his name today; but in somewhat the same vein it should be asked most solemnly just where Jesus Christ would fit into our councils, what hearing He would receive, and what way He would walk. We do not read our Scriptures or ourselves aright if we think that any of it would be anything but a repetition of what is already on record. In fact, failure to see that, is precisely the thing that would cause us to repeat the record because we would be the scribes and Pharisees of our day and we would not lack for elders among the people either. Our gatherings, God help us, would still be efforts at getting this Jesus out of the way of our own plans and own programs. His way among us would lead to the cross, and all His disciples would still forsake Him and flee unless some had already joined Judas or were standing at the fires of the world warming themselves to see what the end would be. He would not be elevated to some podium but would again be raised upon a cross as long as we are the people who maintain that we would never do that to our God but are rather the people who really show forth His glory. This too must be involved in declaring God's glory, otherwise we have set ourselves apart into a class by ourselves, and we fail even to see what the glory of God is for us. This is why church life in order to declare God's glory is ongoing repentance, moment by moment living on the grace of God in Christ Jesus, day by day following after because we have not yet arrived, always showing forth the glory of God in terms

of being what God regards us in Christ and not in terms of being what we are in ourselves, not even as church members, not even as professing Christians. The only thing that we can ever offer God that He will not despise is a broken and contrite heart, and the only good pleasure that God has is in His Son Jesus Christ, so that only in Him is God well pleased with us, only in Him are we the beloved of God.

So it is that the church is always the place of judgment, and we cannot under any circumstances show forth the glory of God if we refuse to let ourselves be judged. If at any time, even now as a church organization, we say that we have no sin, we are merely deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. Significantly, Jesus taught His church to pray the Lord's Prayer; it was not the world, not the manifestly and openly wicked that He urged to pray for forgiveness, but us, the very ones who seek to hallow His name that His kingdom might come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. This is our true humility because it is a humbling which God Himself has wrought, a humbling by which we recognize that at our very best we still do not produce and achieve for God but must always pray that it be done by Him to us as well as through us and then, on top of that, must still ask for forgiveness because, in spite of His very best efforts, we are still so imperfectly accessible to Him that we still are not what He would have us be. This is the black background against which the glory of God must always be held if it is truly to be declared. This is the deep bass which must be present if the great melody of God is to be heard as His glory.

But how is the church to go about this whole matter of actively declaring the glory of God, in other words, by its activity let the glory of God be seen and heard? The simplest would be to retire from all activity and planning and programming, because in a measure it is all doomed to failure anyway; it is all going to end up with our necessary praying God to forgive us. Thus it would be far better if we would simply concern ourselves with our own personal apprehension of God's glory and declare it by the evidence which we give of personal Christlikeness. This is the temptation to which monasticism succumbed, but it is a temptation to which we are also subject. The church is always tempted to limit its declaration of the glory of God both in terms of the declaring and in terms of the glory. Just take for a moment this matter of Christlikeness. What do we think of usually? Some type of devotion to God that is better devotion than what we are demonstrating now, even some kind of faith that is stronger than the faith which we have at present. Now there can be no doubt that this is Christlikeness, because the theme of His life was that He was come to do the will of God and finish His work, and the strength of His life was that faith which held to God even when God manifestly forsook Him on the cross. And so we work for this kind of dedication to God in the church, and we use the instruments of Word and Sacrament so that God might create faith. Nor should we be deceived here. This is what the church is for, because only so can man be saved, only so can man be restored to that oneness with God which is everlasting life. This is a very real insight into what is the genuine need of man, for

what shall it profit him if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul, or what shall we have given if we have given him all without offering him Christ!

THE BODY, TOO, THE OBJECT OF THE CHURCH'S CONCERN

But we can still be deceived here by perverting the insight through overemphasis, which becomes misemphasis. It is true that the church has often succumbed to idealism, and has not kept the skirts of its theology as clean as they might be. So the church has often made the fatal division between soul and body in man in such a way that one could become more the object of its concern than the other and certain areas of man's life could cheerfully be turned over to outside agencies because they did not properly fall into the sphere of church activity. But I would submit that its failure has not been primarily due to accepting a division of man which is entirely of man's own devising. It has been failure in the only area where the church can fail as church, in the area of its very being, that is, in the area of faith; it has been failure in carrying out what is its intrinsic purpose, its reason for being, the showing forth of the glory of Him who has called it out of darkness into His marvelous light. If the glory of God is God in His dealings with man, God stepping out of His being in Himself in order that He might be God to man, even God to man the sinner, then this is God the Creator as well as God the Redeemer and Sanctifier; then it is God as He has made me as well as God as He has saved me; then it is the God who gives me all I need for the support and wants of the body as well as the God who so loved me

that He gave His Son into death for me; then it is the God who defends me against all danger, guards, and protects me from all evil, as well as the God who would have me live in His Son's kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. God the living God, God the holy Triune God, God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, is not three gods, nor is there hierarchy in His Being. He only is God, and He is the Triune God in all of His revelation to me, in all of His activity over against me, so that He, the Triune, is God, my Savior. This is why Jesus could urge total trust in God, because He is the God who clothes the fields and feeds the fowl of the air and so is bound to clothe and feed us, even when we are of little faith. This is why Jesus could guarantee that as we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, all these things without which we cannot live would be added unto us. This is why Jesus would not deny God for the sake of bread, tempt God for the sake of proving what He trusted, or worship other than the true God for the sake of obtaining what belongs to God alone. This is why the Apostle can remind us that whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we do all to the glory of God.

Now far from putting any special value upon certain parts of man, this takes man seriously for what man is, in all his needs, in all his parts, in the sum total of all that goes to make him man. The amazing thing is that the church as instrument of God in His dealings with men for showing forth His glory, as the body of Christ for being today to men what Christ was in His day and still would be in our day through us, should have done some choosing here, as

though its activity can be its own choice if it declares the glory of God. The church has been willing to be the mouth of God in proclaiming what is His Word, but it has not been as willing to be the hand of God for the distribution of His blessings as Creator. The church has not been arrogant in maintaining that none other than God Himself was doing the beseeching when it pleaded with men, "Be ye reconciled to God," but it has seemed to shy away from representing the God who causes His sun to shine and His rain to fall upon the just and upon the unjust. It might even be that in this virtual denial of God the Creator the church has been instrumental in bringing into being and fostering the doctrine of evolution as a denial of God the Creator and helps the state toward becoming the god that it would always be by turning over to it what are the church's functions and therefore God's glory. One thing is certain, and that is that the church must repent of being less than it might have been and so helping people to be selfish even in their helping of others instead of being merciful even as their Father in heaven is merciful. The work is done, and the needs are met, because God is always the Creator and the Preserver, but the church is not declaring this His glory, and so men misinterpret it and make it the glory of man, the goodness of man, the elevation of man into being god. And man never needs any help in this direction, least of all from the church.

CHRIST TOOK CARE OF ALL THE NEEDS OF MEN

We can turn to Christlikeness and find that here, too, we are a long way from attaining that similarity which is implied in

the word. We would never in any way set Jesus up as an Example at the expense of His being Savior, make Him our Teacher without owning Him as our Redeemer, urge Him as Model without offering Him as Substitute. But just what did He do, He whose life was a doing of the will of Him that sent Him and a finishing of His work? He went about doing good, and His preaching was the interpretation of the good He was doing. He entered into every sort and condition of man in order that man under all circumstances and conditions might know that God is Love. He Himself bare our infirmities in His own body, and by His stripes we are healed. In fact, He took a body precisely that He might be the Word made flesh, so that He could dwell among us and we might behold the glory of God, full of grace and truth. He took it precisely that He might be in all things like as we are, yet without sin, so that His body might be both the instrument of God's approach to us and the instrument of God's salvation for us. In what similar sense are we the body of Christ? We say that we are members one of another for the edifying of the body, but edifying for what? Only in order that we might be edified, something like edification for edification's sake, building up the church for the sake of building up the church? Never! Otherwise we end up with that satisfied Christianity which is as smug as it is wealthy, as sterile as it is constantly concerned with nothing more than its own spiritual temperature and its own possibility of getting into heaven. The church is edified so that all the members working together, receiving help and nourishment and service from one another, are able to declare the glory of God, are

in their being a declaration of the glory of God, as was the Christ who dwelt among us that we might behold God's glory. God is the God who reaches out to men's needs whatever they are, and Christ is the Christ who entered into all the needs of men as an act of self-sacrifice, and we are the church that would remain aloof from the needs of men, unsoiled by their dirt, unbloodied by their blows as we seek to help them, honored and respected and not despised any more, because we do not consort with publicans and sinners, because we can play the part of the priest and the Levite so well that we no longer cause others to blush as they follow us and pass by on the other side? Christlikeness, we say, and we have a place, a pleasant place where to lay our heads while there still are many who do not have. Christlikeness, we say, and the leper never knows our touch, the hungry never eats our little which is greatly multiplied under the blessing of God, the outcast never knows what it means for us to sit down at a well and talk with him for hours. Christlikeness, we say, and we have never gone cold so that others might be warm, we have never gone thirsty that others might have to drink, we have never given so much away that we literally had to live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. Christlikeness, we say, and the Son of man came not to be ministered unto but to minister and to give His life a ransom for many. Christlikeness, we say, and Jesus having loved His own, He loved them unto the end, and Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands and that He was come from God and went to God, He riseth from supper, and laid aside His garments, and took a towel, and

girded Himself. After that He poureth water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He girded Himself. We still do not know what He there did to us, much less do we know why. And we still wonder why the intelligent world will not even listen to us when it sees the openly godless more godlike than we are, when it has nothing that it can see from us that will compel it to glorify God, whose glory is evidenced by our good works. It puts on its own drives to help because we will not help. Maybe we still want to be called Master and Lord without even touching another's foot. Maybe we want to be the body of Christ as it is ascended far above all heavens, without following in His steps of suffering, His being Christ in total self-giving.

As church we need to hear this again and again for our repentance and for our becoming that to which we are called by God. We need also to realize that we are worse than wrong if we merely correct with a gesture, so that now we *also* do some welfare work. This underemphasis is still misemphasis because it is a misunderstanding of man, of the being of the church, and the function of the church as it is commissioned to show forth the glory of God. But surely if ever coals were carried to Newcastle this would be it because this is precisely the kind of objection that you have been raising. Only be sure that you do not attempt to take the conclusion without accepting the premises, and perhaps in this sense we would play the part of Amos. You will recall how he gave sermon after sermon to the people of Israel and lambasted everyone all around. Daily the crowds grew larger, and daily

the people grew more vociferous in their approval of his message. They could scarcely be constrained any longer, when he took his hardest crack at Judah, because then the people felt that this was the final vindication of themselves. But last and not least came Israel herself with the full force of God's judgment resting upon it, and suddenly Amos lost his popularity. Israel could not hear her own judgment in that which was spoken upon the other nations. This is also a failing of our own. The church still needs to be called to repentance, but remember it is the church of which we claim to be part and parcel and therefore stand in equal need of repentance. The church's theology of man dare not be grounded in what ancient Plato or modern men have determined, dare not express man's need in terms of welfare only and not the glory of God.

WELFARE WORK MUST REFLECT GOD'S LOVE

We still are not declaring the glory of God though we take over the whole welfare program of the state if it is not God, the gracious, merciful, loving God, making His approach through us and doing His works of love by us. It isn't just any kind of love that we show, like love to self by which we help others in order to help ourselves, contribute to community chest funds in order to cut down on what we would pay in taxes. It is the love of God, and His love is in Christ, and His love is for sinners, so that if our welfare has nothing of this in its picture, it is truly something that can be administered just as well out of Washington as out of 210 North Broadway. We are the church, and ours can never be a general kind of phi-

lanthropy but always and only the love of God. This is really what First Corinthians 13 is all about, so that if we could get every one of our members to give everything that they have to feed the poor but this would not be God's love active in them and through them, it would profit them nothing. We often like to cite what our Lord gives us as something of a preview of the final Judgment, and well we might. If you don't visit the sick, you don't visit Christ; if you don't go to the imprisoned, you don't go to Christ; if you don't feed the hungry, you don't feed Christ; if you don't clothe the naked, you don't clothe Christ. For inasmuch as we do it not unto the least of Christ's brethren, we don't do it unto Him. But what does this mean? Does it mean that we toss these things around as one might toss around some water in the market place and call all on whom it fell the baptized? Again, if that were the case, then the state has supplanted the church, and social agencies will be received of Christ because they did what they did. But this is to be a doing unto the least of Christ's brethren, which can mean nothing else than that our doing to men is doing to Christ's brethren, deliberately and consciously recognizing them as such and therefore owning the claim that they have on us. This does not mean, as we often insisted, that we help only professing Christians, although we are worse than the heathen if we do not care for those of our own household, the household of faith. It means that we don't first do a lot of asking and inquiring but help where help is needed, and in whatever

way it is needed, because Christ Himself was also made partaker of our flesh and blood. This that Christ did is something very real to us, and when He identified Himself with us, we take that in all of its seriousness, so that we cannot deny any man any more without denying that love of Christ by which He became man. If He Himself had in any way made certain reservations, identified Himself only with a chosen group, suffered and died only for some, then we would have the right to say, "This one I will help; that one I won't help." But it is always in this faith of Christ, that He loved all and became man for all and died to take away the sins of all and rose again that He might be the living Savior of all. And that means that need is always there only to give God His opportunity to be God and Christ His chance to be Lord of all. The help that we give is always that men might know the help of God, the God who is so merciful that He helps. The good that we do is the interpretation of what we are and so the offer of Christ to be to others what He is to us and through us. Welfare work declares the glory of God when people, through their faring well by our efforts, praise the God who has created them and still preserves them; the God who has redeemed them by the blood of Christ; the God who has sanctified them as His temple; His place and manner and method of declaring Himself to be what He is in Christ and therefore to us and in us and through us.

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