

# The Church of the Living God.

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## I.

**T**HE living God. This expression is not very common in Scripture, but it is one of the most remarkable and characteristic of those in which the Israelites tried to set forth in words the intensity of their experience of God.

It seems, first, to mark the contrast between the true God, and the dumb idols, which neither see nor hear nor speak. It is this that gives point and passion to David's protest : *Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?* (1 Sam. xvii. 36). The same contrast is taken up by St. Paul in 1 Thess. i. 9 : *Ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God* ; where Theodoret aptly comments : " He calls him living, as implying that they, the idols, are not living ; he calls him true, seeing that they are falsely called gods."

But, in the second place, God is called living as not merely creator but also restorer of life in those that are His. Twice over a Psalmist in exile, longing indescribably for the manifestation of God, cries out : *My soul thirsteth for the living God : When shall I come and appear before God?* (Psalm xlii. 2), and again : *My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord ; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God* (lxxxiv. 2), in parallel with which may be read : *My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee, in a dry and weary land, where no water is.* (lxiii. 1). It is perhaps with this in mind that the writer to the Hebrews, who uses this designation of God four times in his short Epistle, writes : *Ye are come unto the mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable hosts of angels.*

But more important theologically than either of these two aspects is the connection of the phrase *the living God* with God's providence. It represents the energy of God, that ceaseless watchfulness, by which His eyes reach from one end of heaven to the other, and His hand is outstretched to guide, to correct and to deliver. He is the God, to use our Lord's own words, who numbers the very hairs of our head, and without whom not a sparrow falls to the ground. In Biblical theology, the doctrine of providence is inseparable from the doctrine of election. God's purpose is to save the world, but He saves it always by choosing the *part* to be His instrument in His dealing with the whole. He chooses Israel to be His people, that Israel may be a light to the Gentiles, and God's salvation unto the ends of the earth. So, in the crucial passage where God's choice of Abraham is ratified by the covenant in which Israel is declared, as a nation, to be the chosen people of God, we find again this phrase *the living God*. *For who is there of all flesh that hath heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?* (Deut. v. 26). In the ark of the covenant, the living God manifests His presence among

His people, and ensures their victory (Josh. iii. 10). Note the recurrence of these ideas in Hebrews, where so much that is current in Old Testament thought is taken up, illuminated, and given its application to the new covenant sealed in the blood of Jesus. It is because of this solemn election and covenant that apostasy is so terrible a thing. *Take heed, brethren, lest haply there shall be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God,* (iii. 12). For the apostate, there is no more deliverance, only a certain *fearful expectation of judgment, and a fierceness of fire which shall devour the adversaries* (x. 29). *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God* (x. 31). As at Sinai, God reveals Himself in fire: *Our God is a consuming fire* (xii. 29). The phrase comes from the Septuagint of Deut. iv. 24, and takes us back directly to the covenant passages. If the people are faithful, then that fire is for the destruction of their enemies: *The light of Israel shall be for a fire, and his holy one for a flame, and it shall burn and devour his thorns and his briers in one day* (Isa. x. 17). But if the people are unfaithful, then the fire is turned against them, and there is no way to escape.

In the history of Israel, the principle of election is seen to work out in a new way, in the remnant which survives when the fire of judgment has been kindled against the nation as a whole. And from that remnant grows the new thought of the Servant of the Lord, in whom the purpose of the Lord can go forward, in both judgment and salvation. In the closing pages of the Old Testament, the Messianic hope brightens, until sometimes at least it seems that the nation and the remnant are both lost sight of, and the purpose is concentrated in one single chosen individual, the anointed one, who shall restore the kingdom of David, and is himself sometimes spoken of as David. It is noteworthy that in the four Gospels the phrase *the living God* occurs only twice, both in the Israelite Gospel of Matthew, both in crucial Messianic passages: *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God* (xvi. 16); this is the form in which Peter's confession is here recorded, as contrasted with the simpler version in Mark: *Thou art the Christ* (viii. 28). Again, *I adjure thee by the living God that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said* (xxvi. 63). The use of the phrase in these two connections can scarcely be fortuitous. They indicate, as many other New Testament passages do in other terms, that Jesus is Himself the incorporation of God's Israel, that at this crucial point, the purposes of God depend on Him and His faithfulness alone, and that He is the faithful remnant, the Son of Man, through whom Israel is to be reborn.

## II.

From the day of Pentecost, the Church comes into being as the Israel of the new covenant. The nation as a whole has rejected the counsel of God, and has crucified the Prince of life; but the purpose of God cannot be thwarted; once again the principle of the remnant comes into play. Those who have believed are few, but with the rejection of the Israel of the old covenant, which is now becoming old and waxing aged, and is therefore near to vanishing away (Heb. viii. 13), all the promises and privileges are transferred to the new

Israel, in which, by the revelation of the new and mysterious purpose of God, the Gentiles are co-heirs and incorporate in the Body of Christ (Eph. iii. 6.)

But within the Church itself, this same principle of the remnant is seen in operation. All are called and chosen, and should be faithful ; but, from a very early date, mixed motives, corruption, selfishness and unbelief make themselves felt. The whole people of Israel were sharers in the covenant ; yet it was only through the faithful that the purpose of God was operative. Yet for centuries faithful and unfaithful existed together in one body, until the judgment went forth, and the kingdom was destroyed. So it is with the Church. The whole Body is holy, as set apart for God and His service in the world. But it is recognised that all are not of the body, that throughout this dispensation there will be good grain and tares within the one field, that there will be scandals and offences. This will continue until the judgment of God manifestly goes forth, as in old times against Israel ; and then judgment will begin at the house of God (1 Pet. iv. 17). It is this which gives the Church its ambiguous and disappointing aspect. It is the divine society, yet the fashioning of it has been so largely left in the hands of men, imperfectly sanctified and affected by their all too human environment, that often the divine character is well-nigh obscured by the imperfections, and the remnant is hidden and out of sight. This is a cause of scorn and stumbling to those that are without. It cannot cause surprise or dismay, though it may cause a great deal of discomfort, to those who are accustomed to think in Biblical terms. As God has ordered the world, it cannot but be so. The Church is holy, not as being already perfect, but as being that Body of Christ which has within it the power of the risen life, and has the gift of holiness available for all those who by faith will become partakers of its reality, and not merely accept formal incorporation in it.

This is not to say that the Church can ever accept its own imperfection as the final word, or take a lax view of its obligations and responsibilities. It is by its vocation the Body of Christ ; it must ever strive to be visibly and in reality what it already is in the divine purpose. This is a not infrequent Biblical paradox. God by His favour constitutes us what we are not yet in fact. He accepts us as righteous through faith, when actual righteousness is yet in the future. He grants the adoption of sons in Christ, when we have yet to learn the rudiments of sonship. Through baptism He gives us the rights of the kingdom, when we have as yet no idea how to use them. This is not fictional or irrational ; it could not be otherwise in a world where He works on the principle of election. What we are by status depends wholly on His gracious calling, and not on what we are in ourselves. Our task is never to take the initiative, but to respond to the prevenience of His grace : not to aspire to something which we are not, but to strive to become what in fact we already are, children of God, members of the Body of Christ, inheritors of the Spirit, saints by divine vocation. That answer in the Church catechism on the effects of baptism is a much more accurate statement of Biblical theology than is sometimes allowed. If taken as an excuse for laziness in making

sure of our possessions, it can, of course, be disastrous ; rightly understood, it sets us firmly in the lines of God's purpose, and in a right understanding of what we have to do.

The Church of the living God is, then, that body, which through the new covenant mediated in the Blood of Christ, has taken its place as the people of God in the world. Its task is to carry on and to carry to completion the work inaugurated by Christ : *The works that I do shall he do ; and greater works than these shall he do, because I go unto my Father* (John xiv. 12). This work it can only fulfil by being made like to Christ the Head. And here it must be noticed that, though the Church depends for its life on the glorified Head, unto whom all power is committed in heaven and on earth, it is to the Head in the days of His humiliation and His incarnation that the Church is to be made like. These are days of pilgrimage, not of rest, of conflict, not of assured peace. We are bidden not to know Christ after the flesh. Yet surely one of the purposes for which the earthly life of the Master was recorded was just that we might know the conditions of our service, not through any slavish attempt to imitate the outward aspect of His life—which is in any case impossible, and if it were possible would be frustrating—but through consideration of the way in which He faced the tasks of earthly service, and met the toils and sufferings of a pilgrimage which is the exemplar and model of our own. Of the many ways in which the Church, the new Israel, is called to be conformed to the life and death of the king of Israel, I have selected only three, which seem to me to be central in the Church's task.

### III.

1. *He charged them that they should not make him known : that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying, . . . He shall not strive nor cry aloud ; neither shall anyone hear his voice in the streets* (Matt. xii. 17-19). This passage well represents the tension and paradox of our Lord's life. It was lived in public and created a stir ; the fame of Him went throughout that country, and multitudes flocked to hear Him. Yet from the start He realised the perils of that publicity and popularity. When they came and would have made Him a king by force, He left them and withdrew beyond the confines of the Holy Land into the territory of Caesarea Philippi. He could not altogether avoid the crowds ; it was necessary that the Gospel should be preached to the poor, and when multitudes were gathered together, the power of God was present to heal them all. Yet very soon it became clear that this kind of faith was not that on which the new Israel could be built up, and that the real work of the kingdom could go forward only in secrecy and without observation—*The kingdom of heaven cometh not with observation*. There were true believers other than the twelve, of whom we have occasional notices in the rest of the New Testament. But the central work of the ministry is not the public preaching of the good news, but the preparation of the living nucleus, from which after the resurrection the Church is to grow. More and more as the ministry goes forward, He desires to be alone with them. At the last supper, when His final testament is given, it is in the hearing of the twelve alone that it is uttered. The

ministry to the crowds is much more conspicuous. But it is in the quiet talks with Nicodemus and the woman by the well that souls are born again.

I believe that this tension exists throughout the whole life of the Church. For the first three centuries it remained inconspicuous, emerging into clear light only at times of persecution. We have very little record of the way in which it spread. But we do see that great churches came into existence without observation—Antioch, Rome, Alexandria—through the silent unnoticed work of those who passed on the faith from mouth to mouth and from hand to hand, and gathered together those minute groups of believers in many places, so firmly rooted in the truth of Christ, though doubtless their apprehension of that truth was often very imperfect, that fire and terror could not separate them from it. In our own day, and in a quasi-Christian country, the Church cannot but be in a measure conspicuous. It is concerned with a public ministry, it is required on great occasions (like a coronation) to manifest itself in robes of state, and to play a part on a stage which is watched by the eyes of all the world. Yet we shall greatly mistake if we think that this is the essential work of the Church, or allow ourselves to believe that success in playing this public part can guard the Church against inner inanition. The work on which the future depends is not done in this way. It is done in secret. It is done when the faithful Christian, following the example of His Master, rises up a great while before day that he may hear the voice of God and know His will. It is done when two or three are gathered together in His name, to strengthen one another, and to realise with intensity that fellowship in Christ which, according to His purpose, is to spread and be realised throughout the whole Church. It is done when the members of a family gather to sanctify the life of the home by calling down the blessing of God upon it. It is done when the ministers of Christ (and here the term minister includes all those who by the Holy Spirit have been commissioned to the work of bearing witness, and not only those who in ordination have received the special and limited commission of the Church) sits in the upper room or by the well with that one individual whom God has picked out from among the multitude to receive at that time the Word of God. God's work is going forward in the world; but we much mistake its scope and nature, if we look too much at the outward manifestations and measurable achievements—statistics of communicants, baptisms in mass movement areas, and so forth—and forget that it is in the secret places that forces are generated, which only after long germination find their way upwards in results that the eye can recognise and appraise.

#### IV.

2. *This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them. A friend of publicans and sinners.* This was the unique and most startling feature of our Lord's work as prophet. All taught the doctrine of repentance and amendment. He alone had the secret of going to the sinner in his sin, making him feel at home, and yet never compromising His own lofty standards and the purity of His own mind and purpose.

The Church is alive only as it carries on this aspect of the Master's work. But to be a friend of sinners is no easy task. It means walking all the time on a razor's edge. The Puritan, conscious of his own virtue, tends to think of salvation in terms of conformity to outward precepts, and to close his eyes to the real desperateness of the position in which men find themselves in the presence of God. The man who passes as tolerant is in danger of giving the impression that, after all, sin does not matter so very much; and that is just the Gospel that the sinner most desires to hear: to reconcile himself with respectability without having to face the devastating reality of his sinful state. The member of the body of Christ has to avoid the dangers in both directions. On the one hand, he has to be unflinching in his maintenance of the standards of Christ, so much more exacting than those of the Puritan. And, after all, in one way that is not so difficult. The teachings of Christian morality, on such a subject for example as marriage and divorce, are so simple that they can be written out in full on a postcard. That the applications of the principles may at times be perplexing, and that there may be a place for Christian casuistry, does not affect the simplicity of the basic principle. But the Christian is saved from censoriousness in relation to those that are out of the way by his sense of the infinite value of human personality, even in the least attractive and apparently least valuable, and by that sense of desolation at the wasting and spoiling of personality by sin, which turns criticism into compassion. On the other hand, he learns to mingle gentleness with severity from the very exacting quality of his love, which cannot remain content that anyone called to be a child of God should remain content with a second best, and should be turned aside from the highest by a cheap compromise with reform or by evasion of the deeper issues of reconciliation with God. Is it not the case that the Church is, on the whole, timid and hesitant in its relations with those that are without, that it lacks the gift of the Master for making them feel at home, and yet leading them to realise that they never can be really at home until they return to God, who alone is the home of their spirits?

## V.

3. Then, third, the Church is always the Church under the Cross. *I have given them Thy word; and the world hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.* There is this unappeasable opposition between the world—the state and civilisation of man organised in disregard of God—and the children of the kingdom, and it will go on as long as the world lasts. It is easy to see why it must be so. The Church has added the fourth dimension of eternity, of which the world is unaware, even if it does not deny its existence outright, whereas the world is concerned only with the affairs and triumphs of time. These two view-points may run together for a time, but they can never really be married. The Church may find it possible in some things to work with the secular power, and to bless the projects of the state; it is deluded if it imagines that the secular and the Christian can ever be completely harmonised.

The state is interested in education; so is the Church. But whereas

the Church is concerned with training of citizens of eternity, and must needs view all knowledge with reverence and humility as a manifestation of the being of God, the state wants citizens of a certain type, technicians in adequate numbers and so on, and is much more concerned with education as a source of power than as a means to the good life as such. The point may be reached at which the Church has to regard state education as an invention of the devil, and as a chief means for the establishment of his kingdom. The Church is, by its commission, concerned about the welfare of the poor and needy, and must needs rejoice at every measure which tends to alleviate their lot and to make life happier for them. But it cannot undertake to bless, without qualifications and reserves, a national programme of security, since mere safety is not a thing which Christ has commanded us to seek for its own sake ; we are sometimes called to adventure and to the loss of all things, and it may happen that comfort and security sap the energies of the soul and leave it enfeebled and inert.

There are many among the gods of the modern world, to which the Church can never bow down. Among these is the false god of *nationalism*. The Christian accepts the existence of nations as part of the divine ordering of the world ; such associations of men for living a common life produce varieties of outlook and patterns of living, which enrich the whole world community. Patriotism is in itself an ennobling emotion. Yet the Christian can never for a moment forget that he is a member of the most international organisation in the world, that its sovereignty is above all national sovereignties, and that if its interest demand it, his obligations to God must take first place above every human or national obligation. This is hard doctrine for the modern man ; yet it has become so obvious in the totalitarian states, that the opposition of the Churches to the regime, and their consequent history of persecution and suffering, have to be taken as almost a standing feature of the modern scene ; and the end is not yet.

*Racialism* is another of the modern evils from the contamination of which the Church, as the Body of Christ, must always preserve itself. The ugliest form of racialism is anti-Semitism ; but it is only the most conspicuous of a large and bad brood. The moment it is admitted that there are different categories of men, some intrinsically superior to others, it is all up with the message of the Gospel. We may feel thankful that anti-Semitism has so little hold in this country. Yet there have not been wanting signs that even here it might take root, not indeed altogether without provocation from those who would become the objects and the victims of it, and that there are soils even in this country in which it might grow and flourish. We may feel thankful for the generally bold and Christian line taken by the South African Province of our Church on the tangled and thorny issue of race-relations in the Union ; we may endeavour sympathetically to understand the points of view of Christians of other races and churches which have not felt able to take quite the same attitude. But there is the warning plain for us to read, that it is not easy for the Church to exist in the world without taking the colour of the world ; and that where it manifests itself uncompromisingly as being not of this

world, it cannot but become the object of dislike, or it may even be of furious hate and denunciation. This need not surprise or dismay us; there has never been an epoch when the Church, if it has remained true to itself, has been able to square its doctrine with the ideals and the practices of the world around it. Dislike and disapproval will not come as a surprise except to those who live in the illusion that men will necessarily love the highest when they see it. The only thing to be sure of is that dislike when it comes is directed against things of which we have no need to be ashamed, of which rather we should be proud as representing in a measure at least the Spirit and the commands of Christ, and not against our Pharisaism, our sourness or moroseness, or our failure to carry into the practical affairs of life that charity of which we speak so readily in the language of devotion.

## VI.

There is one other feature of the modern world in relation to which it seems to me most important of all that the Church should prove its other-worldliness, its capacity to live and judge all things by standards of its own. The worst evil of modern civilisation is its threat to the *individual*. That was not only so in Germany, where the Nazi leaders showed themselves superbly able in the base art of training men to think and act and feel in the mass and not as individuals. The tendency is the same everywhere throughout the western world. Mass production is the order of the day. The radio, the daily papers, advertisements, all try to plan our lives for us and settle what we should eat and wear and think and be. Propaganda is organised to a fine art. The educational authorities are well aware of the danger of education being turned into a mere machine for mass production of standard articles, and are doing their best to guard against it; yet as the machine grows more complex, and results are demanded, it becomes increasingly difficult for the school of separate and individual character to hold its own. As schools get larger and larger, the personal influence of the teacher grows less and less. The human individual is in danger of being deprived of those lovable oddities and personal idiosyncrasies which make us all different from one another. Is not this danger acutely felt by the most sensitive spirits of our time? Is not this one of the reasons for the cult of the bizarre and the outlandish in art and literature? The balanced man, sure of himself, does not have to attempt to be an individual; he is one. The man who is uncertain of himself and of his own personality has to try and persuade himself and all others that he is an original genius by that straining after originality, which in the end is certain to destroy it, if it ever was there at all.

Here, we of the Body of Christ have a message to proclaim, which we neglect at our peril. The concern of God is always with the individual. After all that I have said, you will not suppose that I am denying the immense importance of the Body of Christ as the medium and preserver of the redemption that is in Him. But, as we look back to the ministry of the Master, who is our only teacher in this matter, we find that it is in the end always the individual to whom He looks, about whom He is concerned, for whom He prays. I suppose

He might have passed under that sycamore tree without looking up, and salvation would not have come that day to the house of Zacchaeus; I suppose that He might have been so pre-occupied with His own sufferings as not to be concerned about that other sufferer on the Cross. But He was not. In the sight of God, each individual is irreplaceable; if his note is missing in the harmony of the heavens, the conductor will miss it, and to him the harmony will be imperfect.

## VII.

Kierkegaard surely was right when he taught that a man never realises to the full what it means to be an individual, until he stands in the presence of God. There no man can answer for him. There nothing that he has inherited or acquired—nationality, rank, education, even piety—counts for anything. That all falls away from him, and he stands as he is, in his infinite insignificance, in his sin and alienation, but also in the supreme dignity of his manhood, as a member of that species which the Son of God was pleased to honour by taking its nature upon Him and being found in fashion as a man, as that individual for whom, if there had been no other in the world, the Son of God would have thought it worth while to die and so to redeem him. It is this standing in the sight of God which alone gives man the right dimension, the right idea about himself, which assures him of his importance in the universe without leading him astray into self-importance, and gives him dignity without arrogance. In these days, the Church may ere long find itself alone in maintaining this conception of man and the honour due to him as an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven; it is already plain that alternate or opposing views are very much in the field.

The basis of all totalitarian systems is the principle that the individual exists not for himself but for the state—a plausible parody of the Christian conception that man does not live unto himself, which has proved its demoniac effectiveness and drive in the experience of Europe in the last twelve years. All states are becoming increasingly totalitarian; regimentation is of the order of the day. The ideal of a strong government is a docile and orderly people, in which aberrations of conduct or outlook are permitted only within very narrow limits. The individual can be allowed to be an individual only within strict limits, as long as he does not exert his individuality in any fields which government has marked as its own and in which it claims the right to decide on what is the best life, for man. It is clear that this type of state can produce a closely integrated and successful society, and can produce a tolerable, even happy life, for those who can adapt themselves to the life of the bee-hive or the ant-heap. But this can be achieved only by reckless sacrifice of the individual, only by the ironing out of individual difference and variety, by the successful application of education, propaganda and, if necessary, coercion. This individual is fitted into the mass by making him smooth in all directions, and removing the roughnesses and angles, which might make him difficult to fit into the pattern.

Nothing could be more alien than this to the whole Christian conception. The indwelling of Christ in the soul of men does not

make men all of a type ; it does not override individual personality by imposing upon it a single Christian norm. Quite the contrary. The indwelling of Christ is the very thing that sets men free to be themselves and to develop to the full their various capacities. In Him, though all are impressed with a certain unmistakable likeness, they yet become more different from one another than they were before. Of all the works of Christ this is perhaps the most mysterious, and the least explicable on any other ground than that He is very God Himself, with all the infinite range of the power of God to work on human material. This is the point so clearly seen and so penetratingly expressed by Browning in *A Death in the Desert* :

Christ's word

That He will grow incorporate with all,  
 With me as Pamphylax, with him as John,  
 Groom for each bride ! Can a mere man do this ?  
 Yet Christ saith, this He lived and died to do.  
 Call Christ, then, the illimitable God  
 Or lost.

The earthly state may prosper by suppressing or limiting the individuality of those of whom it is composed. The kingdom of heaven can be populated only by those in whom individual character has been developed to its full potency and in its infinite diversity. The work of the Holy Spirit is to make of every Christian a witness. But a witness is not an echo ; he has to give an individual, personal testimony, different from that of anyone else, and for which the testimony of another cannot be substituted without loss to the whole. To form a community of this kind is very much harder than to form the secular community with its limited objectives and its qualified regard for the sacredness of human personality. Yet it is to nothing less than this that we are called. It goes without saying that the Church has both to realise its vocation and to live up to it. It is all too often content with a Christianity which is mere repetition of old formulae and conformity to old established standards of respectability ; it is content with preaching which is no more than the restatement of old orthodoxies, not the exhilarating discovery of what the Spirit is saying to the Churches to-day.

It is good that Scripture calls us back constantly to a vision higher and nobler than that of our everyday conceiving, and challenges our daily work with its own incomparable ideal. It is a living Church, the Church of the living God, in which we are called to live and witness. That Church must be builded, not of inert material, but of living stones. Of those living stones, no one can take the place of any other, because in God's plan each is irreplaceable and necessary. Our part is to wonder at, and to co-operate in, the patient miracle by which God shapes His raw material, and makes it fit for its eternal place in that habitation of God after the Spirit which day by day is being fashioned before our eyes.