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Archives and the Witness of the Church

GEORGE BOYLE

THERE is probably no phase of the Church's work which evokes less interest among the clergy and laity alike than that of the collection and maintenance of its archives. This is, in part, the result of the constraint which is laid upon the Church by its evangelical mission which precludes its serious involvement in work which has no apparent relation to its primary responsibility. In the face of overwhelming problems arising from the abnormal expansion of communities in every part of Canada, there is great reluctance to expend time and energy on what may appear a peripheral matter. However, this does not entirely account for the Church's present disinterest in its archives, for at no time has the Church in Canada seriously undertaken to preserve its archival treasures. Periodically persons sensitive to the Church's responsibility in this regard have protested, and church courts have solemnly legislated for the collection of records, but, with the "shouting and the tumult," such measures died.

Of course the Church is not unique among institutions in Canada in its attitude to archives. The Massey Report on the *National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences* reveals the grave concern of the Commission over the carelessness with which even the most important government offices have treated their records, and over the absence of any uniform policy governing the preservation and maintenance of documents and correspondence vital to the proper understanding of the history of the nation. Accordingly the Commission made specific recommendations for the amelioration of the existing situation, many of which have been implemented under the vigorous leadership of the Dominion Archivist, Dr. W. Kaye Lamb.¹

The source of our trouble is twofold: the inadequate understanding of the nature and purpose of archives; and the almost complete failure on the part of the Church to appreciate the significance of its history. The connection between these will be immediately obvious, for any history of the Church that is worthy of the name can be written only on the basis of the authentic records and documents of the Church's courts and congregations. The importance of the archives of the Church therefore can be assessed only in relation to the importance of the history of the Church.

In a previous article in this Journal, Professor T. R. Millman has drawn our attention to the difficulty which Church historians experienced in attempting to establish Church History among the respected disciplines of the British universities.² In Canadian theological colleges Church History

1. Report, Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, 1949-1951. Ottawa, Edmond Chantier, 1951, pp. 111-122, 335-345.

2. The Study of Canadian Church History, *Canadian Journal of Theology*, Vol 1, No. 1.

has its place among the major disciplines. But to the Canadian, history frequently refers only to the ancient past, and Church History to that phase of the Church's existence prior to its advent on this continent. Church History, insofar as it concerns the Church in this Dominion, has not achieved the position which is its due, either in the curricula of our colleges or in the interests of students. This is one of the anomalies of Canadian Church life, for the achievements of the Church in Canada in the fields of political freedom, human rights, and the amelioration of social evils, to say nothing of its own peculiar work of preaching and teaching the Gospel, are surpassed by few in the history of Christendom, and among its leaders are those whose names can rightly find their places in the annals of the great.

The history of the Christian Church in Canada is part of the sociological and cultural history of this nation. The present separation of Church and State, and the Church's apparent ineptitude in the political arena, must not blind us to the role which it has played in the national development. A churchman, assessing those factors influencing the growth of this nation, may give undue prominence to the Church, but it is a sign for our encouragement that secular historians are moving toward a deeper appreciation of the Church's part in the shaping of many of our institutions and in the moulding of the thought and character of our people.³ Whatever can be said for the influence of such factors as geography and economics upon the development of the national culture, the completely authentic story of the Canadian people can be written only when the historian takes due cognizance of the life and work of the Church.

For the Church, of course, its history is not merely an academic interest. The thought, opinions, convictions and reactions of a people are conditioned by their education. The study of Canadian history is part of the education of a large body of university students, many of whom find their way onto the staffs of our secondary schools. If these people have been introduced to and instructed in the history of Canada by historians who all but ignore the work of the Christian Church, they will, with few exceptions, teach the history of Canada from this essentially sub-christian and therefore distorted point of view. We are fully aware that history taught in the secondary schools is of necessity very elementary, but nonetheless such teaching moulds the thinking of the adolescent, and unquestionably contributes to the student's secularistic approach to life. Moreover there are thousands of university men and women who, though they have studied Canadian history, are left without any real appreciation of the contribution of the Church to this nation. These people, in the course of a generation, comprise a large and influential group of Canadians—leaders we like to think—in important positions in Canadian life. If their leadership has a fundamental, secularistic bias, it can be attributed in a large measure to the completely secularistic interpretation of Canadian history.

However, lest we should be accused of unfairly criticizing the secular

3. *Vide* George W. Brown, *Canada in the Making*, p. 19.

historian, we must hasten to point out that the Church has not made this aspect of his task easy, if at all possible. The Church may try to place the onus upon the historian for an equitable assessment of its influence in this nation, and so it can, only if it has first provided the historian with materials from which such influence can be judged. This the Church has not done. The prodigality with which we have wasted our records is scandalous. The Church and not the historian stands under condemnation, for the neglect in Canadian historical writing of a fair assessment of its contribution to the development of this nation.

The history of the Church, however, is important not merely as an aspect of the national history, but primarily because of what that history means for the Church itself. At the risk of being commonplace, we must note that the doctrines and affirmations of the Christian Church are interpretations of certain historical events which comprise the history of a people. These historical events have meaning because they are conceived as revealing the redemptive activity of God, and therefore something of His mind, will and purpose. These events culminated in the life and teaching, or rather in the Person and work of Christ, so that at the very centre of our faith stands a Person, who has his place within the realm of profane history, beginning His ministry in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius, and dying under Pontius Pilate. He is no legendary figure, but One who, as Brunner says "stands exposed to the full light of history."⁴ A historical Person, yes, but more—the Eternal Logos of God become man. In fact the very essence of the Christian faith is based upon an interpretation of the Person *and work* of Christ, conceived as nothing less than the redemptive work of God Himself.

But if the faith of the Christian Church is so grounded, an integral aspect of that faith is the conviction that God continues, through the Holy Spirit, His redemptive activity in the *ecclesia*. Just as at the Exodus, God created a Holy People, so at Pentecost, the *ecclesia* is created as the Community of the New Age—a community which, while born of the Spirit, and eschatologically oriented, is in fact an historical reality in that its normal existence takes form within the framework, and in relation to the framework, of so-called profane history. To think of the Church as other than an historical reality as conceived in these terms, does violence both to the doctrine of the Incarnation and to the doctrine of the Church itself. The significance of the Incarnation lies in the fact that Jesus the Christ is the God-Man and here Christian Orthodoxy has rightly refused to compromise even in the face of inscrutable mystery. Christ is God and Man; otherwise there is no incarnation. If then this Person must be taken seriously as an historical person, that which he called into being, and which St. Paul boldly called his Body, must also be taken seriously as an historical reality. It is at this point that I find myself taking issue with Prof. Karl Löwith in his *Meaning in History*.⁵ It is true that the Christian Community is not an historical-political entity such

4. *Eternal Hope*, p. 34.

5. *Vide* pp. 194ff.

as the People of Israel constituted, but on the contrary, neither is it a collection of so many individuals as Löwith seems to suggest.⁶ It is also true, as Löwith points out that the call of the Gospel is to repentance in order that men may enter the Kingdom, the coming of which is of the very heart of the New Testament message. The Christians are members of a Kingdom, a Kingdom which is more real than was that of the Jews. This Kingdom, the fulfilment of which must await the *parousia*, is in fact an historical reality and the members of it are organized by the design of Christ himself into the *ecclesia*. This community emerged from the People of Israel by the creative work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, and the events which transpire within it, are of an order similar to the life of Israel and to the life of Christ. They are of a similar order, but not of the same order. The difference lies in this, that while the history of Israel reveals the will and purpose of God, a revelation which culminated and was completed in Christ, the life of the Christian Community does not reveal the mind and will of God in the sense of unfolding that which has hitherto been hidden. Rather it witnesses to the continuing redemptive work of God which He has established in Christ and which He effects through the Holy Spirit. That "God is the same, yesterday, today and forever," is not a truism, it is a confession of faith, and its content is this: that the God who acted redemptively in Israel and in Christ still acts to save His people. We, therefore, who are called to bear witness to Him must bear the total witness; and of this the history of His Church is at least a part. Hence as Professor Skydsgaard writes: "At the centre of the History of the Kingdom of God stands Jesus Christ. Before His incarnation, the history of the Kingdom was enacted within Israel's national history, which steered towards Him and which was full of the expectation of His coming. Since His crucifixion, the History of the Kingdom has taken place within the Church, which lives in the expectation of His Second Coming."⁷

There is, however, general reluctance thus to understand the history of the Church because so much has transpired within the *ecclesia* that is obviously inimical to the work of the Holy Spirit. The history of the Church even in our own land and of recent times is not always something about which to be proud. The needless intolerance of differences on peripheral matters, the heartless cruelty which has been cloaked in the guise of a fight for righteousness, the weakness and irresolution in the face of social injustice, to mention but a few such things, stain the pages of its annals. Something better than this ought to pertain if the *ecclesia* is in fact what it has been portrayed above. Hence the question: how can such claims be substantiated in the light of these grave accusations?

The question betrays, of course, a misunderstanding of the important doctrines of the Holy Spirit and of the Kingdom of God, a misunderstanding which is all too prevalent in the Christian community today. As we have

6. *Op. cit.* p. 196.

7. *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 4, p. 388.

said, the *ecclesia* is the sphere of God's redeeming work, where through the Holy Spirit He seeks to destroy the power of evil which holds sway over the lives of men. This is to imply that the *ecclesia* far from being the community of the perfect is in reality the community of those who are being redeemed. As Karl Barth puts it: "the people who see a great light are still the people who also walk in darkness."⁸ Even though their lives have been touched by His Holy Spirit, and while they have been drawn to God within the orbit of the *ecclesia*, their lives still manifest the imperfection and the sinfulness of fallen men. Therefore, the life of the *ecclesia* will manifest, and frequently in tragically disproportionate degrees, both the power of sin and the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is true that with Christ, the power of the Kingdom of God invaded the world and that that power continues to exert itself through the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit is but the *arrabon*⁹ of that Kingdom, its first instalment, as it were, and when we lose sight of this, we lose the proper perspective concerning the life and therefore the history of the Church. The real kingdom is here—not a shadow of it. This is the significance of St. Paul's thought of the Holy Spirit as the *arrabon* of the Kingdom. The power of the Kingdom, the *arrabon* of which we have in the Spirit, is not different from that which will be manifest in the *pleroma*—except insofar as a portion differs from the whole. Therefore we must affirm that here in the Church is manifest the redeeming power of God, and that the history of the Church is the witness to that power.

The state of affairs that is normal in the Christian Church is one in which the power of God is in conflict with the power of evil, and there is tension just because these two powers are pitted against each other in a battle that has individual as well as cosmic significance. At times, it is the power of evil which appears the more evident as through indifference or slothfulness or outright rebellion members of the Church resign themselves to its sway; but that must never intimidate the Church from asserting that even here the power of God is manifest.

The history of that struggle is in fact the history of the *ecclesia* and because in the course of it, defeat and frustration are all too frequently evident, faith demands that we perceive here the Spirit of God in dynamic confrontation with evil. There is a reality here to which faith answers, a reality which manifests itself in the creation of new men and in the redemption of nations from darkness and demonic evil. It is this that gives the Church's history its deepest significance. Thus we cannot ignore the history of the Church, unless we choose to ignore the witness to the redemptive work of the Living God among succeeding generations of His people. And this is a choice which is not ours to make.

There is one dependable source for the Church's history—its archives. Their importance cannot be denied in the light of the importance of the

8. *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 347.

9. *Vide* II Cor. 1:22, 5:5, Eph. 1:14.

Church's history. If through carelessness any of these have perished, the Church must surely stand under judgment. The Church must preserve its archives and administer them in accordance with the best archival principles.

It is difficult, if not impossible to define precisely what we mean by or include in the term "archives". In his presidential address to the Society of American Archivists in 1954, Wayne C. Grover stated: "I imagine even at this late date we could not agree precisely on what archives are."¹⁰ Archives must inevitably be defined in relation to the institution which created them and in terms of the purpose for which they are preserved. There is a mass of material to which no self-respecting archivist would afford housing space and yet an archivist must never allow such subjective factors as his own particular interests to determine the nature of the material which he collects. He must always determine, as objectively as possible, what of the material he is offered is genuinely necessary for the most thorough historical studies relating to the aims, objectives and responsibilities of the institution concerned. It is almost as fatal to the ultimate purpose of archives to accumulate unimportant material as to fail to preserve that which is important, for in the accumulation, that material which has value may be lost.

Church archives consist of documents created by the courts of the Church as well as those created by parishes or congregations. The former will include minute books, reports of standing and special committees, reports of commissions appointed for specific purposes, and all significant publications including the denominational publications. To this will be added the important correspondence received and written by the executive officers of the Church's courts and boards.

In addition to these official documents, the archives of the Church must also acquire any material from private persons which has bearing on the life and work of the Church. Such material consists of diaries, journals, and letters of those who have taken leading roles in the early days of church life in Canada, for these documents are a source of information on aspects of church life not normally found in the official record. Since the teaching and thought of the Church in any period is most fully reflected in the sermons and addresses of its ministers and teachers, the collections of these cannot be neglected, and the collection ought not to be confined to incumbents of famous pulpits. For historical purposes, collections of sermons must be as representative as possible, otherwise they will not serve as the basis for the adequate study of the preaching of a particular period.

In addition to this material which falls within the professional definition of archives, there are certain publications which are integral to the study of the history of the Church. These are the published books and pamphlets on theology, biblical study, church history, social and ethical problems and missionary work. The most important of these should be available in the

10. *The American Archivist*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, January, 1955, p. 4.

libraries of our theological colleges, but since libraries are subject to the changing interests of teaching staffs, to say nothing of the generosity of Boards of Regents, some valuable works may not be purchased. Further, college libraries are generally embarrassed by the shortage of stack room and books no longer on the curricula are frequently discarded. Hence it is conceivable that even major religious works of past generations could be destroyed causing serious gaps in the historical picture. Therefore it falls to the Church archives to ensure the preservation of all such material which everyone would recognize as indispensable to the understanding of the life and work of the Church.

The maintenance of this material is a major administrative problem for it must be preserved from loss or damage through fire, dampness or negligence and at the same time made available for all persons having a right to its use. The material must be maintained according to the best archival principles of filing, cataloguing and indexing; otherwise, valuable hours will be wasted in fruitless searching for data, and students, and historians will have little confidence that all extant material bearing on their study has been placed at their disposal. The major archival holdings of the Church will be those which have reference to the Church as a whole, and they should be located in the same city as the denomination headquarters, preferably on the campus of a university, and, if possible, related to the Church History department of a theological college. In a country such as ours it is impracticable and undesirable to concentrate the entire archives of the Church at one centre, for some documents and records should be collected at a centre within the province to which they relate. Such a system fosters the interest of the local groups in their history and at the same time provides facilities for historical research without the prohibitive expense of travelling to a distant centre. A master index of the holdings of all such centres must be maintained at the central archives, so that the Church archivist knows the nature and extent of material available for historical studies, and can advise researchers of the location of documents held at places other than his own centre. Only under such a system can the Church establish and maintain an archival organization adequate to meet the needs of historical research.

Our nation is in the midst of its greatest period of expansion, and the resources of the Church are greatly taxed in the effort to keep pace with this development. But the very fact of this expansion makes the collection and maintenance of our archives imperative, for in the transfer of people from one area to another documents which for decades have lain unmolested in attics and cupboards are frequently destroyed. The Church in Canada must act now to save further losses of irreplaceable historical documents. It must also encourage students and historians to engage in historical research, in order to recapture its witness to those things which God has wrought through and on behalf of this people.