

"The Church of God"

By the REV. J. GRESHAM MACHEN, D.D.. Litt.D.



**A sermon preached at the concluding service of the First General
Assembly of The Presbyterian Church of America in the New Century
Club, Philadelphia, Sunday evening, June 14th, 1936.**

This sermon is not printed for profit. Additional copies may be secured at the following prices, all postpaid:

**3c each
25c a dozen
\$1.00 a hundred.**

**Address:
The Presbyterian Guardian Publishing Company
1212 Commonwealth Building
Philadelphia, Penna.**

"The Church of God"

"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28).

THIS text certainly presents a very startling phrase. "The Church of God which he hath purchased with his (God's) own blood." How can one possibly speak of the blood of God? It is a startling phrase indeed.

Many commentators have thought that it is so startling that it cannot be right. The Bible speaks of the blood of Christ, but can it possibly speak of the blood of God? So they have followed inferior manuscripts at this point, or they have interpreted the text of the best manuscripts in some way other than in accordance with its natural meaning.

I am rather inclined to think that the efforts of these scholars are unnecessary. The phrase, "the Church of God which he (God) hath purchased with his own blood" is certainly a startling phrase, but then, you see, the Bible that contains it is a very startling book.

The Bible does plainly teach that the man who hung there upon the Cross, whose hands bore the print of the nails, whose side was pierced by the lance, was God—infinite, eternal and unchangeable God. He was man, and only because He was man could His blood be poured out; but from all eternity and to all eternity He was God.

The Bible, moreover, uses terms taken from the human nature of Christ to designate the person of Christ even in places where the di-

vine nature is particularly in view, and it uses terms taken from the divine nature to designate the person even where the human nature is particularly in view. Hence we ought not to be too much surprised if our text really speaks of the blood of God. Certain it is that the One who shed His blood there on Calvary was "over all, God blessed for ever."

Such is the person who is meant by the text when it speaks of the One who purchased the Church with His own blood. But what does it mean by "the Church?"

Not a Building Made With Hands

One thing at least it does not mean. It does not mean a building made with hands. We often use the word "church" in that sense today. What is that fine edifice, says the sightseer, that stands on a prominent corner in this city or that? Oh, that, he is told, is the First Presbyterian Church! A splendid edifice indeed! How many hundreds of thousands of dollars it must have cost!

That sense of the word "church" occurs nowhere in the New Testament, and certainly it does not occur here. If you had walked through that city of Ephesus, whose elders Paul is addressing in the passage from which the text is taken, you would have seen many beautiful buildings. You would have seen the great temple of Diana, one of the most magnificent buildings in the world; but if you had asked your guide, "Where then is the Christian Church?", there would have been nothing that he could say. Nowhere in that great city would you have found a building large or small that could be called a church.

You would have found little groups of people gathering in private homes; a few years earlier you would have found an audience gathering in the lecture-hall of a certain Tyrannus, perhaps at the hours when the proprietor's classes were dispersed. But nowhere would you have found an edifice called the Christian Church.

Yet there was a Christian church at Ephesus in those days, and our text tells us that Christ, who was very God, purchased that church by a price far greater than was ever paid for the costliest buildings—that He purchased it by His own blood. Even at Corinth there was a church. It was not visible to the eye of man as an imposing structure, but was composed of little groups of slaves and humble tradesmen meeting here and there in private houses. Not a very impressive thing, one might say. Yet at the beginning of his two great Epistles Paul calls it "the Church of God."

So it was elsewhere in the apostolic age. Little groups of humble people without great buildings, meeting here in an upper room, there perhaps at spare hours in a rhetorician's school. Yet it was the Church of the living God, the temple of the Holy Ghost.

What can we learn from that, my friends? Well, surely we can learn at least this—that buildings large or small are not essential to the Christian Church.

Church Buildings Versus Christ

Please understand me when I say that. I did not say that buildings—even great and beautiful buildings—are not *important* for the Christian Church. I only said that they are not *essential*. I, for my part, think that they are important. I think great architecture can be truly part of the worship of almighty God.

Stand before a great medieval

cathedral, for example, built at a time when art was a living thing, when every humble workman, carving figures so placed as scarcely ever to be seen by human eye, labored not for money and not for fame but for the greater glory of God. One century labored at the foundation, another contributed its quota in the middle distance, another added a spire that points upward to the skies. How the soul of the pious beholder is lifted high and yet higher until it seems to stand in the very presence of God!

Is it sinful to worship God by such means? I think not, my friends. The cult of ugliness, the cult even of plainness, is no really integral part of the Reformed Faith. I cannot for the life of me see why the love of beauty, like other parts of man's endowments, may not be consecrated to the service of God. The sight of a noble building, the roll of a great organ that peals with solemn sound—these things may well be received with thankfulness as gifts of our heavenly Father.

Yet even the best of God's gifts may become a snare if they are clung to at the expense of faithfulness to our Lord.

So church buildings are at the present moment leading many away from Christ—church buildings useful, commodious, beautiful, hallowed by precious associations. How often in these days, when men put church buildings on one side and Christ on the other, do they choose the buildings and let Christ go!

Doing Evil That Good May Come

With church buildings stand many other things — endowments, human associations, apparent opportunities for effective service. These things stand on one side and Christ stands on the other. How often in these days

have we been tempted to cling to them!

It is a very subtle temptation, my friends. It is not a temptation to bald and obvious selfishness. It is not a temptation to put ease and pleasure above Jesus Christ. No, it is a far subtler temptation. It comes from the most deceptive part of Satan's arsenal. It is the temptation to do evil that good may come.

See how that temptation comes to men just now. Shall we remain in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. or shall we depart? Which course shall we choose? Many are asking themselves that question tonight.

Well, to what conditions must a man submit if he chooses the former alternative — if he remains in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.? I think there can really be little doubt about that. It is written practically in black and white in these decisions of the Syracuse Assembly, and the principles of those decisions are being ruthlessly enforced.

Supporting "Another Gospel"

If a man remains in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. he must support the propaganda furthered by the boards. That propaganda is in part a plainly Modernist propaganda quite hostile to the gospel. Yet even that part must be supported by a man who would obey the Mandate now so rigorously enforced. The Mandate says, "Support the official program." If Modernism is part of the official program then, according to the Mandate, you must support Modernism too.

Of course you may perhaps sneak out of it. You may simply put nothing into the collection plate when it comes around. This new church discipline which makes support of benevolent agencies a tax has not yet attained its full efficiency. You may

evade the tax collectors of the boards. You may as an ecclesiastical slacker perhaps get by. I say you *may* do so. But if you are a pastor I hardly think you will do so. Even if you fail to contribute yourself, you will be compelled to advise your people to contribute. And is that really any better? Which is worse—to sin yourself or to advise Christ's little ones to sin? I think our Lord gives the answer. "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:6). Such is the picture of the man who advises his congregation to give to these Modernist or indifferentist boards.

At any rate, no one can now readily be received into the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. who will not promise to support the program of the boards—Modernism and all. You who are already in the ministry may perhaps slip by the meshes of the ecclesiastical police net, but hardly the luckless candidate. He is at the mercy of any single Modernist who wishes to ask him the fatal questions, and then he is at the mercy of any presbytery that refuses, on the basis of his answers, to receive him. It is unlikely that many presbyteries will now fail to be subservient to the secret inquisition which wields such despotic power.

So you must support Modernist propaganda if you remain in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. That seems fairly clear. Directly or indirectly, by your words or by your gifts, you must help give a false answer to the question of the man who asks you: "What must I do to be saved?" Instead of pointing out to him the way of life, you must help point out to him the way that leads

to eternal death. Do you take a light view of such a sin ? I do not know whether you do or not. But I know one thing. No light view of it is taken by the final Judge. Better were it for us, my friends, that we had never been born than that we should be guilty of such a sin as that.

Putting the Word of Man Above the Word of God

But there is also something else that you must do if you remain in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Not only must you support the Modernism now being furthered by the boards, but you must agree to support whatever program may be established by them or by the General Assembly in the future. You must agree to submit your message to the shifting votes of majorities in human councils, commending Christian missions this year if the General Assembly wills, and Modernist missions next year, again if the General Assembly wills.

I know that is not exactly true for all of you in practice. I know, moreover, so far as theory is concerned, that even a judicial decision of the General Assembly cannot change the Constitution of the Church. You may say still that you appeal from the principle of these decisions to the Constitution. But how utterly empty and futile such an appeal has now become! Here are the doors of the ministry being tightly closed to men who will not deny their Lord. You sit by and remain in a company that perpetrates a crime like that. You give the right hand of fellowship to those who deny Christ; you refuse the right hand of fellowship to those who are faithful to Him: and then you comfort yourselves with the thought that so long as you stay where you are and do not venture to cross presbytery bounds you may your-

selves escape for a time denying Him yourself in so many words. Was there ever evasion more pitiable than that?

God is not deceived by such evasions. It is "for Christ or against Him" in this matter, my friends. There is really no middle ground.

Well, then, if the issue is really so clear, why is it that so many are deceived? How is it that in the face of plain considerations like that so many Christian people are remaining in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.?

Satan's Ancient Snare

I will tell you exactly how it is. It is because these Christian people are being deceived by one of the oldest and most effective of Satan's snares. It is the snare by which he bids people do evil that good may come.

Ah, how often, and in what enticing forms is that snare laid for us today! Do just a tiny, tiny little bit of evil, says Satan, that a vast amount of good may come.

A man talks to the pulpit committee of a big vacant church. They like his sermon; then they visit him in his study. They ask him how he stands on the matter of the boards of the church.

What shall he say? They are ignorant, those inquirers, that pastor says to himself, but they want to do what is right. They will do what is right if only they can be made to see it. Now if he becomes pastor of the church he can make them see it in time. He can gradually educate them as to the Modernism in the Church, and so get them to oppose it. But if he tells them at once what he thinks about the conditions in the Church they will call some other man. The other man will be nearly certain to be a Modernist, and a wonderful op-

portunity for the guidance of those people will have been lost. Far better than that is it just to go a little easy, in that first conversation, about one's opposition to the boards. What a world of ultimate blessing a little tact at the beginning will bring!

There we have the temptation. Conceal the truth just a tiny little bit at the beginning in order that the truth may triumph in the end; do a tiny little bit of evil in order that a vast amount of good may come!

Or a student is deciding which seminary he will attend. One seminary has ousted from its control those who were standing for Christ, and has conformed to the current of the age. It is characterized by an orthodoxy of a nice easy kind which never causes unpleasantness, an orthodoxy which permits a man to sit side by side with Auburn Affirmationists on judicial commissions which rule all troublesome doctrinal issues out of court. Now our student, with Christian parents' teaching not yet altogether forgotten, may not altogether like an orthodoxy such as that. He may have a notion that it is dangerous. He may prefer an orthodoxy of a somewhat more vigorous kind. But there is one thing about that seminary. It is the seminary that you should attend if you want afterwards to get a church. What, under those circumstances, is the thing for that student to do? Why, obviously, says he, it is to go to that seminary, but preserve, when he is there, his independence of mind. Has he not been born again? Cannot a man who has been born again resist a bit of middle-of-the-roadism in his seminary course, and even put a bit of a middle-of-the-road label on himself in the shape of a seminary degree, and yet stand vigorously for the gospel when he comes out?

There we have it again. Join forces with those who compromise with unbelief in order that afterwards you may win a vantage ground whence unbelief may be more effectively attacked; do just a tiny little bit of evil, in order that untold good may come!

Or a man is already pastor of a church. He loves his people and his people love him. He is converting sinners and building up saints. Then come these troublesome people of the Independent Board. They insist on not letting well enough alone. They raise troublesome issues. They "divide conservatives" into hostile camps. The Modernists in control of the machinery of the Church become aroused. They pass the 1934 Mandate; they forbid criticism of the boards; they require of candidates for the ministry blanket promises to support programs that human councils may set up.

When these things are done, our pastor does not like it at all. These things are bad, he says, very bad indeed. Well, then, we ask him, what are you going to do about it, my friend? Are you coming out with us? Are you severing your connection with the church that has done these things, and are you going to unite yourself with a true Presbyterian Church?

At that point he draws back. "You do not understand my situation," he says; "you see, I am a pastor, and I have my people to consider. I love my people, and the Lord has been blessing my work. If I depart, a Modernist will no doubt be put in. Our endowment, given by godly people, will probably be turned over to the propagation of unbelief. Our building, hallowed by many associations and now used faithfully for the preaching of the Word of God, will be used for the preaching of something else.

I sympathize with you brethren of the Presbyterian Church of America. I wish I could go with you. But I have a responsibility to my flock. I must stay in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1934 Mandate and all. Thus will souls continue to be saved in this place; thus will Christian people be nourished with the bread of life. I do not like these decisions of the General Assemblies. I do not like these Modernist boards. But I must put up with them for the present in order that I may not desert the people over which God has made me an overseer.”

So many pastors are arguing today. Deceptive, is it not? Yet it is just another variety of the same old temptation to do evil that good may come.

How Help the Tempted?

How do you feel toward those who are struggling with that temptation? I tell you how I feel toward them. I sympathize with them with all my heart. I sympathize with them, I say, and I want to help them. I want to help them to get free from Satan’s wiles.

How then can I help them? Well, I will tell you one way in which I cannot help them. I cannot help them by condoning their sin. I cannot help them if I say to them: “Brother, I came out from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., but you stayed in, and we simply adopted different methods of serving our common Lord.”

If I said that, should I be practising Christian love? I tell you, No. That would be a selfish, worldly, Satanic urbanity masquerading under the guise of love. If we really love these men who are staying in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. we shall never for one moment condone their sin. They can never have peace so

long as they continue in their present course, and it is our duty to tell them so with all the plainness that we can command. There should be no bitterness in our hearts towards them, but if there is love in our hearts we shall plead with them to break with Satan and make Christ alone their King.

But how shall we plead with them; how shall we help them to get free from Satan’s snare? I do not think we can do so merely by pointing to our own example, merely by saying: “Look at me; I came out; will you not do the same?” They may say that their sacrifice by coming out would be greater than mine, or they may say, in general, that my example is not normative for them.

Yet still I want to help them. They are entangled in Satan’s net. I long to help them to escape. I long to share with them the joy that I have in being in a true church of Jesus Christ.

How shall I do so? Well, perhaps I might do so if I could point them to some example better than my own. Could I not find someone whom they honor, and who passed through the same temptation as that through which they are passing, yet was not deceived?

The Example of Our Lord

I think I can find such an example, and to find it I do not need to look into any very out-of-the-way place. I do not need to ransack church history to find it; I do not need to shake off the dust from Fox’s Book of Martyrs. I can find it in a much more accessible place than that.

I think you will recognize the story when I tell it to you. Here is the story: “Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and saith unto him, All these things will

I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.”

What was that crowning temptation of our Lord? Was it that He should take the kingdoms of the world that he might do evil with them? No, I think not, I think the temptation was that He should take the kingdoms of the world in order that He might do *good* with them.

Ah, what good would have been done if Jesus had seated Himself at once upon the throne of the kingdoms of this world! What crimes would have been avoided, what untold blessing gained! There could have been no Nero, no Attila the Hun, no Genghis Khan, no massacre of Saint Bartholomew, no Napoleon, no Hitler, no Trotzki, no Mussolini, no tragic march of the conquerors over the ghastly figures of the dead. What a blessed world it would have been, to be sure, if the Prince of Peace had taken His seat upon the throne of the kingdoms of this earth.

That, I think, was the temptation that Satan brought to our Lord. “God has permitted me to have possession of this world,” said Satan; “bow down and worship me and all shall be yours; bow down to me for one little moment, and I abdicate forever; the world will henceforth be yours for your reign of good.”

Is that temptation so unlike the temptations that we have just enumerated, the temptations through which men are passing today? I think not, my friends—not so very unlike. Does not the Scripture say that He “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin?”

No doubt in our Lord’s case the temptation came in an infinitely higher degree. Yet in His case as in ours it was a temptation to do a little bit of evil that a vast deal of good might come. Just a momentary

obeisance to Satan and then a whole world of good!

But what said our Lord? Did He count consequences; did He balance the vast good against the little evil to see whether after all it might not be so vast as to tip the scale? No, He adopted a shorter method, He simply said to the Tempter: “Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.”

The Devil left Him at that word, but only for a season, and then returned with the same temptation in yet subtler form.

Our Lord’s followers had been leaving Him one by one. Then He said to the twelve, “Will ye also go away?” Then Peter said: “Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.” How brave and loyal Peter was! Then a little later, at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus said to His intimate disciples, “Who do ye say that I am?” Again Peter stood the test. “Thou art the Christ,” he said, “the Son of the living God.”

Brave, loyal Peter! What better friend and follower did a man ever have? Yes, he was a good friend and follower; and for that reason he was just the man for Satan to use. “Be it far from thee, Lord,” he said when Jesus spoke to him of the coming Cross.

What then did Jesus say? Was He easy on Peter? Did He say: “Peter is a good man, and I must not be too hard on him if He bids me choose the easier path?” No, He did not say that. What He did say was: “Get thee behind me, Satan.”

It was the same old temptation that had come to Him in the wilderness, the temptation to use Satan’s methods in order to accomplish God’s ends, the temptation to do evil that good might come.

Shall We Lower the Colors?

How often does that temptation come to us in these days! It comes to us, as to Jesus at Cæsarea Philippi, through the lips of able and good men. Here is some great gospel preacher, we say; he is just as orthodox as anyone; he has fought with the Christian forces bravely in previous years against the forces of unbelief: well, if he remains in the old church, may not I?

Yes, Satan speaks to us through the lips and through the example of good men. And then he does seem to demand of us so little. Just a moment's acquiescence in an Assembly's Mandate; just a little silence when presbytery approves the missionary program; just a little period when we shall preach the gospel but avoid criticizing the Modernism of the Boards; just a little promise, as a condition of entering presbytery, that we will support the missionary program of the church.

Ah, how light and easy are Satan's demands! Just a little dip of the colors and then the Christian army can go freely on. "Like a mighty army moves the church of God." A fine brave, united army, The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.! Two million strong it can move against the forces of sin.

Yes, the army marches on. But it is not the same army. It is now a loyal Christian army no more.

What a change, to be sure, that little dip of the colors made! That little dip of the colors made all the difference in the world. The Lord our God is a jealous God; He accepts no divided allegiance; He has said once for all: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

There are some who are not deceived, in this matter, by Satan's wiles.

These young men who are to be ordained tonight are not deceived. Some or all of them have suffered for Jesus' sake. Christ laid His hands upon them, but the hands of the presbytery were refused. We are now the humble instruments of Christ. We confer no blessing of our own upon them in the laying on of our hands. But we do pray that they may have the true blessing of Christ.

There are others besides these young men who are not deceived by Satan's voice. The Presbyterian Church of America is composed of such. It is not a large army at first, but a little company of weak and sinful folk. Yet it is a real branch of the Church universal, a real part of the Church of God.

How did it come to be that? How was it that we, this weak and sinful little group, came to belong to Christ? Was it because we gave ourselves to Him? The text of this evening gives the answer—"the Church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood." No, we belong to Christ not because we gave ourselves to Him, but because He bought us with His own most precious blood.

What constrains us to obey Christ's commands as we go from this place; what constrains us to face a world of enemies; what constrains us to separate ourselves from old and precious friends? Well, no doubt the almighty power of Christ our King; He is our God; He is our Maker; we are His creatures. It is His right to rule. Yes, He constrains us by His mighty power. But He also constrains us by something else. He also constrains us by His love. "The love of Christ constraineth us." He "loved us and gave Himself for us." He bought us with His own blood. What shall we give for Him?