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THE DEFECTS
OF THE NEGRO
CHURCH

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The Defects of the Negro Church

The writer does not undertake to point out all the defects of the Negro church. He does not lay any claim to omniscience.

The limits of time and the scope of the subject prevent him from discussing even what he knows in part. It is only some of the leading defects in the Negro Church which will be presented for discussion. It may be necessary to state at the onset that the writer is an optimist in his studies of questions relating to his race. If at any time he is compelled to use the surgeon's knife he will do so with the utmost sympathy and with a view to heal. It may also be necessary to state, in order to allay the fears of our friends and prevent the reckless criticism of our detractors, that the defects of the Negro church are found more or less in churches of other races. They are the same in kind but differ in degree, on account of difference in environment. They are not inherent in the race, but are found wherever the environments call for them. It may be laid down as an axiomatic truth that there has never been and there is not a perfect church. Of the twelve men who formed the nucleus of the Christian church and who had the advantage of the personal teaching of the Christ, one was a doubter, another was worldly-minded, a betrayer, and a son of perdition who sought relief from the stings of conscience by self-destruction; a third was a deserter and vacillator, who drew from the great apostle of the Gentiles a stinging rebuke for stultifying his conscience during that exciting controversy which was to settle once for all whether Christianity was to be a racial or a universal religion. But because there never was a perfect church is no reason why we should speak lightly or condone the defects of the Negro Church. Our ideal of the Negro Church is one which will have as few defects as possible. If we expose these defects it is because our aim is to correct them so as to reach as near as possible our ideal. We hope we shall not be misunderstood if we submit for investigation the following defects in the Negro Church.

I. THE TENDENCY TO LAY STRESS ON OUTWARDNESS RATHER THAN INWARDNESS

All life is known by its manifestations. The latter is the outcome, the effect of the former. The manifestations of life cannot by any means be more important than the life which makes them possible. Christianity is a religion of inwardness, it finds its root in the heart and soul of man, then effects the outward life. Whenever the inner or spiritual life is renewed, there follows from necessity a renewed exterior. There must be first life in the soul. Nor can there be any evolution of the soul or of society without a previous involution in them. The whole nature of man must be wrapped up in the image of God before any fruits of Godliness show themselves. The tendency in the Negro Church is to look for these manifestations rather than to work for the indwelling spirit who is the cause of such manifestations. Parallel with this tendency in the church, is the effort which is being made after expression of religious life when it should be directed along the line of impressing it. The church is in need of a deep spiritual life, nevertheless it is impossible to express what is not previously impressed in the mind.

There is a form of oratory prevalent among us, a mere jingle of sounds, an expression of nothing of much value. Under its spell the man of the world is caught, received into the church as a convert, but not being impressed with the divine life and ideal, he soon falls away. The mad rush after quantity rather than quality of converts is another indication of the outwardness of religion in the church. One of the most significant words spoken by Christ was, "Many are called but few chosen." The church seems to be carried away with the idea of the extension of God's Kingdom when it does not sufficiently grasp the idea of its intension. Because there is not depth in spiritual life, not intensiveness in the culture of souls, the church does not gain much in expansion. Again, the church is an organization, but an organization presupposes an organ. It is evident that if the organ – the instrument upon which all order and arrangement depend – is out of gear, the organization is valueless. All attempts to organize men without a spiritual organ must be a failure. The organization of a church is more than the putting together of bricks and other dead materials, it is the bringing together, in an orderly manner, of living souls possessed with spiritual power and renewed in the image of God. There is another form of outwardness to which the Negro church is tending at oneself and valuing oneself from appearance. It tends to make religion a puppet show. The growth of the church is estimated at number of dollars collected, number of churches built, and number of followers. The Negro is prone to fall into this error because of the many denials his critics make of his ability in self-government. It leads him to make a parade of his religion and a show of his capabilities. The purpose of religion is to deepen the spiritual life and help men to be in harmony with God and nature, not to satisfy critics and detractors. The work of the church is to lead men to have in full measure the life and light of the Spirit. It is in the nature of life and light whenever and wherever found to be active. They will assert themselves if they are in the church, not in a boastful spirit but with Christian modesty. Cause must precede effect. The foundation of the church must be securely laid before its superstructure is attempted. There must be a base of supply before the army marches to battle.

I have attempted to indicate briefly in what lines the church is exposed and is tending to outwardness. It lays greater stress on evolution of life; in eagerness for the expression of its life it neglects its impression; it emphasizes extensiveness rather than intensiveness, quantity rather than quality; it runs after the gewgaws of religion and does not look inward, deep down in the soul; its organization lacks an organ with a spiritual life deep enough to suppress worldliness.

II. NEGLECT OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

Another defect of the Negro church is her neglect of rural communities. From eighty to eighty-five per cent of the race is to be found in our small towns where ignorance and superstition prevail to an alarming extent. Among the causes of this neglect are:

- (1) The need of adequate funds for the support of churches.
- (2) The need of suitable men for these churches.
- (3) Discrimination made by church authorities in the sending of their best men to fill city churches on account of inadequate funds in the country churches.
- (4) The poverty of country churches and their inability to provide for the support of their pastors, especially those who are needed most in cities.
- (5) The repulsiveness of rural districts on account of inadequate protection and little justice given to the Negro.

Where there are supplementary grants or a reserve fund as aids to struggling churches, better work is done and suitable men are seen in the country churches. Suitable men are so rare that the city churches easily keep them by the offer of larger salaries. Even the city's need is not yet fully met. The demand is greater than the supply in both places but still greater in the country. For this neglect of country churches, a neglect by no means wilful, what are the results? We may mention a few.

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