

A Church Home: Oscar Mitchell's 1916 Cornerstone Address

Oscar Mitchell made extensive remarks at the 1916 cornerstone ceremony for Pilgrim's current building which provide some insight into the attitudes of the lay leadership of the church in the first half of the twentieth century. Mitchell had a presence at Pilgrim Church unlike any other. He joined Pilgrim in 1895 and became a Trustee in 1900. He was elected Chair of the Board of Trustees in 1903 and served in that position continuously for 34 years, until his death in 1937. Mitchell was a central figure in much of what happened at Pilgrim during the first part of the 20th century, including construction of the 1917 building and the search committee which selected Noble Elderkin (Pilgrim's minister, 1920-1930). As lawyers and investors with widespread business interests, Oscar Mitchell and his partners Jed Washburn and William Bailey (Washburn, Bailey and Mitchell) became wealthy. In 1924, Mitchell built a fine Georgian style home with spacious grounds one-and-a-half blocks (2516 East Fifth Street) east of Pilgrim's new building. Mitchell's comments at the cornerstone ceremony provide us with a bit more understanding of how Noble Elderkin could have been offered Pilgrim's pulpit.

Noble Elderkin would seem to have been an unlikely choice for Pilgrim's minister in 1920. Elderkin had been embroiled in controversy severe enough to threaten his tenure at the three churches he served before coming to Pilgrim (see my paper *Noble Elderkin Comes to Pilgrim Church* for details of events cited in this paragraph). He was outspoken in advocating social reform in his first parish: defending "...the gospel that hurts business, the gospel that assails public jobbery, the gospel that disturbs one's pleasure in indolent ease..."; and criticizing ministers who "...maintained a dignified silence in the face of monstrous injustice...". Elderkin was a pacifist during World War I when such views were distasteful to many and treason to some. At the time he was offered the pulpit at Pilgrim, Elderkin was employed by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, forerunner of the American Civil Liberties Union and a defender of unpopular civil rights. Two weeks before Pilgrim's search committee formally announced his selection, Noble Elderkin, in Chicago, gave the invocation opening the first national convention of what would become (later in the convention) the Farmer-Labor Party which adopted a platform advocating: public ownership of natural resources, railroads and utilities; disarmament; full and equal civil and political rights for all regardless of sex or color; an end to private banking; an eight hour work-day and forty-hour work week; and guarantees of civil liberties.

The seven well-established professional and business men who comprised Pilgrim's 1920 search committee could not, of course, have been sympathetic with all of

Elderkin's activities and political positions. However, there is evidence that Pilgrim, from an early period, attracted a congregation sensitive to social injustice and the needs of the less fortunate.

In his 1916 cornerstone address, Oscar Mitchell, spokesman for the 1920 search committee, attributes to Christianity many concepts central to social justice. He repeatedly cites "...the brotherhood and equality of man...". Mitchell writes favorably of "...organizations of charity and benevolence through which man recognizes his relation to, *and his responsibility for the condition of, his fellow man...*" (the italics are mine). Similarly, he states that "...Every movement which has for its purpose a fairer distribution of the benefits and burdens of organized society has its fundamental basis in the doctrine that all men are brothers and equal in the sight of their Maker and alike entitled to the benefits of organized society...". Specifically, Mitchell writes that the "...spirit of Christianity...has caused the establishment of schools where society provides for the education of all of its children; it has caused the enactment of laws for the establishment of social justice; laws regulating the hours of labor; laws requiring the employer to furnish safe working conditions; ventilation in mines; safety appliances of all sorts on railroads; workman's compensation laws which impose upon the industry the obligation to compensate for injuries, even though the employer may not have been at fault...".

Throughout his 1916 cornerstone address, Oscar Mitchell stresses the importance of the individual in both Christianity and the American political system. Mitchell writes: "...A fundamental doctrine of Christ's teaching is that each individual has a direct personal relation and responsibility to his Maker..."; and later in his address, "...the growth of the fundamental idea of Christianity, that of a personal, as distinguished from a national, relation and responsibility to God, developed the idea that churches, as well as governments, must be based upon liberty of conscience and freedom of the individual...". At another point he writes that "...men who contended that the development and protection of the individual was the supreme end of all human government, of necessity, demanded a church organization based on the right of the individual to answer only to his own conscience for his religious belief and the form and practice of his worship...". Mitchell makes it clear that he feels the Congregational Church is the "...natural church home..." for such individuals. Oscar Mitchell does not discuss potential conflicts between programs which provide for "...the fullest and freest development of the individual even if at a loss in the efficiency of the state..." and programs which promote the well-being of all individuals (i.e., those which flow from the idea that one has responsibility for the welfare one's fellow human beings).

Oscar Mitchell's 1916 cornerstone address is wordy and cumbersome. It generalizes and overstates influences ("...This spirit is directly responsible for all of the genuine reforms in our federal, state and municipal governments..."). It also is, I believe, an honest statement by an influential Pilgrim a century ago which tells us something about his motivations.

Appendix

Address Delivered by Oscar Mitchell, Chairman of the Board of Trustees at the Laying of the Corner Stone of Pilgrim Church, Sunday, October 22

The Church is the organized force of Christianity at work in society.

It has changed the fundamental conception of the relation of man to God, and of the relation of men to each other.

At the birth of Christ, men's conception of the Creator was that of a national God having no personal relation to the individual. A fundamental doctrine of Christ's teaching is that each individual has a direct personal relation and responsibility to his Maker and the result of that doctrine, has been to change the entire conception of the relation of man to God.

At the birth of Christ individuals of different nations were considered as natural enemies. Jesus taught the fatherhood of God, that is, the direct personal relationship and responsibility of each individual to his Maker and the consequent brotherhood and equality of man.

The development and application of this fundamental principle of Christianity has caused the founding and maintenance of all the institutions of society that have for their purpose the elevation of mankind, the relief from suffering, the giving of aid to the helpless and the countless organizations of charity and benevolence through which man recognizes his relation to, and his responsibility for the condition of, his fellow man.

The spirit of Christianity has established and now maintains without number, hospitals, almshouses and charities of every kind and character. It has founded and now supports and maintains the Red Cross work, an organization of devoted Christian men and women who are, without stint, giving their life services and, in many cases, life itself, for the relief of suffering. It has founded, throughout the civilized world, branches of Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations where trained workers are giving devoted service to their fellow men and women. It has founded, supported and now maintains missions in which men and women give lives of service and through which the individual members of the Church support institutions for the spread of the doctrines of Christianity in every portion of the globe.

The spirit of Christianity has permeated the organizations of government; it has caused the establishment of schools where society provides for the education of all its children; it has caused the enactment of laws for the establishment of social justice; laws regulating the hours of

labor; laws requiring the employer to furnish safe working conditions; ventilation in mines; safety appliances of all sorts on railroads; workmen's compensation laws which impose upon the industry the obligation to compensate for injuries even though the employer may not have been at fault.

This spirit is directly responsible for all of the genuine reforms in our federal, state and municipal governments. Every movement which has for its purpose a fairer distribution of the benefits and burdens of organized society has its fundamental basis in the doctrine that all men are brothers and equal in the sight of their Maker and alike entitled to the benefits of organized society.

Since the dawn of the Christian era there has existed a struggle between two fundamental conceptions of the purpose and end of organized society. One considers the individual as existing for the benefit and glory of the state; the other considers government and all its institutions as existing to secure and protect the rights of the individual. One exalts and glorifies the state at the expense of the individual; the other seeks the fullest and freest development of the individual even if at a loss in the efficiency of the state as an organization.

The war in Europe today is the latest, and God grant it may be the last, armed conflict of these opposing conceptions.

Each organized church has reflected the views of its founders on this fundamental conception of the purpose of organized society. Men who accepted, understandingly or otherwise, the theory that the individual exists for the state were satisfied with a church where the individual is submerged in the organization; while men who contended that the development and protection of the individual was the supreme end of all human government, of necessity, demanded a church organization based on the right of the individual to answer only to his own conscience for his religious belief and the form and practice of his worship.

Christianity has had a natural growth and development; it has been a directing force in shaping the institutions of society, and, in turn, the institutions of society have reacted upon and influenced the forms and practices of organized Christianity. Having its early growth and development under monarchial forms of government where, in theory, and, to some degree, in practice, the individual existed for the benefit of the state and not the state for the good of the individual, organized Christianity, the Church, came, in time, to take on somewhat of that form; but the growth of the fundamental idea of Christianity, that of a personal, as distinguished from a national, relation and responsibility to God, developed the idea that churches, as well as governments, must be based upon liberty of conscience and freedom of the individual.

The growth of the desire for individual freedom of thought and action in Church and government came with the development of the intelligence of the individual. Our independence was achieved and our government founded by men who repudiated the doctrine that government exists for the benefit of the governors, and declared that every just government rests in the consent of and exists for the benefit of the governed.

The doctrine and practice of the Congregational Church was a perfect adaptation of the principles underlying the establishment of our government.

The basis of both is to be found in the fundamental teaching of Christ that each individual has a responsibility to God, and that the individual can not be relieved of this responsibility and the duties it entails by any organization, whether of church or state.

The Congregational Church, founded on the fundamental doctrine of Christ's teachings, the personal responsibility of the individual to God, and emphasizing, in all its teachings, liberty of conscience and freedom of the individual, has had a vital and controlling influence in the secular as well as the religious affairs of our country. It is the natural church home of those who believe in the divine origin of Christianity, the personal responsibility of the individual to his Maker and that the end and aim of all just government is the development and protection of the individual.

In the United States the Congregational Church has at all times been a leader in the establishment and maintenance of missions at home and abroad in the organization and support of benevolences and charities, in the establishment and maintenance of Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Association and in the development and support of all institutions designed to further the cause of Christianity or aid in accomplishing the purposes of organized society.

The influence of the Church is not limited to its membership; its activities are not confined to its own organization; it develops the individual and arouses in him the desire to serve his fellow man.

Pilgrim Church, since its founding, has furnished of its membership leaders in all movements for the upbuilding and betterment of our community. It has furnished its members, men and women, for places of responsibility on the Boards, and as executives in our Christian Associations and in our charitable and benevolent institutions, and has at all times, by precept and example, inculcated the highest ideals of Christian character and citizenship.

We believe, in the providence of God, Pilgrim Church is destined to exercise a still greater influence on the life and development of our city and to accomplish this it has seemed wise to change our church location.

The same spirit of individual service and sacrifice for the benefit of the community that has characterized the Congregational Church in all its history has enable this building to be erected and now, in light of the history and achievements of the Congregational Church, with a realization of the work of Pilgrim Church in the past and with supreme confidence in her future, we lay this cornerstone.