

The Church Through Twenty Centuries

NO organisation could remain in existence for nearly two thousand years and not undergo a certain amount of change; certainly not an organisation as deeply rooted in the lives of its members as the Christian Church, and since to deviate in belief is to alter some part of the Church's structure, change has meant, over the centuries, dissension, schism, and revolution.

It is to show these changes and the circumstances under which they took place that is the purpose of the new BBC programme entitled *The Story of the Christian Church*, which will begin from the four YC stations on February 18. However, the programme does more than tell the story of the Church historically. The speakers—there are six of them—have been chosen for the variations in their religious denominations and the diversity of their ideas. They are Methodist, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Baptist and Congregationalist. Each takes an important or critical period in the Church's history, examines it, and tries to find if there is anything there relevant to today, any similarities or warning parallels. The total effect is to present the story of the Church as something that matters in the world of 1951.

John Foster, Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Glasgow University, speaks first on "The Church Under Fire." The first three centuries were times of spasmodic persecution; Christians, in Roman eyes, were different and therefore suspect. They would not conform, for instance, to the State's laws

for worship and sacrifice. Moreover, and this made them appear even more dangerous, they were members of a closely-knit society which had for its aim something that was not necessarily for the welfare of the State they lived in. Many were tortured to death, and many went, blinded and lamed, to work in the mines. There is not far to seek for a parallel in our own age.

"The Church in a Collapsing Civilisation" is dealt with by Father Gerard Culklin, Lecturer in Church History at Ushaw College, Durham. During the 5th Century the face of civilisation changed rapidly. The Barbarians were eating into the Roman Empire from the north, and the power of the Pax Romana was decaying. The Church, after two centuries of peace under Christian Emperors, was trying to struggle free of its close association with the State. As well as this, because of the new, popular interest in Christianity, it was fighting continually against heretics and heresies within itself. This was the age of the Fathers, of the great Councils, and of the formulation of orthodox doctrine, and it was here that the Church began to stand openly by itself.

But not, unfortunately, for very long. There were quarrels, authority misused, division, and then the Reformation. Norman Sykes, Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History in the University of Cambridge, calls it, with the growth of Protestantism and the splitting off of the Church of England from the Church of Rome, the "Great Division." It was here that the present schisms in the Christian Church began, but it was also here that,

in the non-Roman Churches, the use of Bible and service-books in the common tongue was begun.

Ernest Payne, who is General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, looks at the Evangelical Revival and the growth of enthusiasm for "personal" religion. The impetus of the Reformation had carried religion into the Eighteenth century, where it had begun a new decline. However, almost before the decline was fully evident, what Dr. Payne calls "New Awakenings" could be seen throughout the world. These revivals were shown in Home and foreign Missionary movements, and in attempts to carry simple and easily comprehensible beliefs out to the new industrial classes.

"The Confusing Century," which Nathaniel Micklem, Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford, speaks of, is the century of Victoria and Marx, of Darwin and Newman. Although it was a time of exceptional Church attendance, and of revivalist and missionary movements, the Nineteenth century left many Christians floundering in doubt. Darwin's scientific approach to evolution, together with the new literary criticism of the Bible, seemed to make nonsense of what they believed. The Church survived, however, by taking either reactionary or new intellectual measures within itself.

The 20th Century has seen steps being taken in the direction of the reunion of the whole Church. In "The Church in This Generation," Canon Herklots, Vicar of Doncaster, asks the commonsense question whether it is necessary for division to continue after the need for



division has passed. He points to the growth of the Ecumenical Movement over the past years, and to the World Council of Churches, and in conclusion he echoes the ideas of Norman Sykes; Church unity should not be confused with Church uniformity—there must be on all sides, a generous agreement to differ.

The story of the Christian Church, as it is told by these six theologians, is not uncontroversial. The speakers take no pains to hide their points of view, particularly when they feel that a different idea might start their listeners thinking for themselves about something previously accepted. Nevertheless, there is a continuous story told, and one which may help to resolve differences and increase understanding between the various sects and denominations of the Church.

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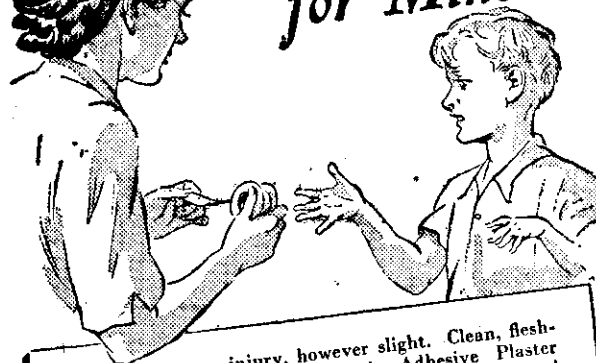
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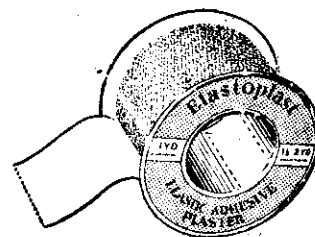
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