

# **THEODORE ROOSEVELT AND THE LOCAL CHURCH**

***“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together,”  
Hebrews 10:25***

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**Divine Viewpoint**

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## Theodore Roosevelt and the Local Church

During one Easter vacation, Theodore Roosevelt wrote to his father, "I spent today, Sunday, with the Welds and went to their church, where, although it was a Unitarian Church, I heard a really good sermon about the 'Attributes of a Christian'."

Roosevelt had a clear view of the importance of the local church in the community and he wrote, "in the pioneer days of the West, they found it an unfailing rule, after a community had existed for a certain length of time, either a church was built, or else the community began to go downhill. In these old communities of the eastern states which have gone backward, it is noticeable that the retrogression has been both marked and accentuated by a rapid decline in church membership and work. The two facts being so interrelated, each stands to the other party as a cause and partly as an effect."

After viewing the *self-indulgent* Sunday in contradiction to the *church-going* Sunday, he wrote, "I doubt whether the frank protest of nothing but amusement has really brought as much happiness, as if it had been alloyed with and supplemented by, sane minimum meeting of obligation toward others. Therefore, on Sunday go to church. Yes, I know the excuses; I know one can worship the Creator and dedicate oneself to God living in a grove of trees, or by a running brook, or in one's own house, just as well as in a church, but I also know as a matter of cold fact, **the average man does not thus worship, or thus dedicate himself. If he stays away from church, he does not spend his time in good works, or in lofty meditation.**

"He may hear a good sermon at church, from a man who, with his good wife, are engaged all the week long in a series of wearing and humdrum and important tasks, for making hard lives a little easier, and both this man and his wife are, in the vast majority of cases, showing much self denial and doing much for humble folks of whom few others

think, and they are keeping up a brave show on narrow means.

"Besides, even if he does not hear a good sermon, **the probabilities are that he will listen to, and take part in, reading some beautiful passages from the Bible, and if he is not familiar with the Bible, he has suffered a loss which he had better make all possible haste to correct.**

"He will meet and speak to good quiet neighbors. If he doesn't think about himself too much, he will benefit himself very much, especially as he begins to think chiefly of others.

"I advocate a man joining church work for the sake of showing his faith by his works.

"Micah's insistence upon love and mercy, and doing justice and walking humbly with the Lord's will, should suffice, if lived up to. Let the man not think overmuch of saving his own soul. Let him try in good earnestness to look after his neighbor, both in soul and in body, remembering always that he had better leave his neighbor alone, rather than show arrogance and lack of tactfulness in the effort to help him.

"The Church, on the other hand, must fit itself for the practical betterment of mankind, if it is to attract and retain the fidelity of the men best worth holding and using. The man who does not in some way, active or not, connect himself with some active working church, misses many opportunities for helping his neighbors and therefore, incidentally, for helping himself."

In an address at the old Historical Church of Johnstown in Pennsylvania, Roosevelt made a great plea for the Church of the new democracy, and laid stress upon the fact, **unless individuals can honestly believe in their hearts their country would be better off without any churches, these same individuals must acknowledge the fact, it is their duty to uphold, by their presence in them, the churches which they know to be indispensable to the vigour and stability of the nation.**

He said, "A giant work looms up before the churches in this country, and it is the work which the churches must do. Our civilization has progressed in many ways for the right. In some ways it has gone wrong. The tremendous sweep of our industrial development has already brought us face-to-face on this continent, with many a problem which has puzzled for generations, the wisest people of the old world. With that growth in the complexity of our civilization, of our industrialism, has grown an increase in the effective power alike, of the forces that tell for good, and of the forces that tell for evil.

**"The forces that tell for evil, as our great cities grow, become more concentrated, more menacing to the community, and if the community is to go forward and not back, they must be met and overcome by forces for good that have grown in corresponding degree.** More and more in the future, our churches must realize that we have a right to expect that they shall take the lead in shaping those forces for good.

"I am not going to verge on the domain of theology, and still less dogma. I do not think that at present time there will be any dissent from the proposition, after all in this work-a-day world, we most largely judge men by their fruits, that we cannot accept a long succession of thistle crops as indicating fig trees. **We have the right to look to the churches for setting the highest possible standard of conduct and service public and private, for the whole land. The Church must make itself felt by finding its expression through the life work of its members; not merely on Sunday, but on week days, not merely within these walls, but at home and in business.**

"We have a right," he continued, "to expect you will show your faith by your works. The people who have the inestimable advantage of the church-life and the home-life, should be made to remember that as much has been given them, much will be expected of them; they must lead upright lives themselves and be living forces in the war for decency among their surroundings. We have

a right to expect of you and those like you that you shall not merely speak for righteousness, but do righteousness in your own homes and in the world at large."

Dr. James M. Ludlow was the Pastor of the Church of St. Nicholas, in New York, when the Roosevelt family went there to worship. He told how Theodore Roosevelt the boy, interested him by his quick-minded attention and his power of observation. So conspicuous was this faculty, when some one asked Dr. Ludlow in what part of the body the mind was located, he replied, "In Theodore Roosevelt, it is right back of the eyeballs."

"One Sunday," Dr. Ludlow said, "I imagined Theodore was paying more attention to the flowers upon the altar, than to the sermon. He was intense for knowledge, and I think he was botanizing those flowers more carefully than he was analyzing the sermon."

But his mind did not fail to take in the message of the preacher, for Dr. Ludlow told of the result. "I remember well when Theodore came to me as a sixteen-year-old boy. It was in my study 44 years ago. "Doctor, I'm thoroughly convinced your doctrines are true and I feel I ought to say so. May I come to your church?"

"And it was here," said Dr. Ludlow, "I knew the boy and he was a boy to the end. His was a loving, boyish heart, swelling with tenderness for humanity. It is his message of boyhood I would give you. Simply, it was this: **'If you believe a thing is good or true, if you see a duty, do it.'**"

"In this actual world, a churchless community, a community where men have abandoned and scoffed at, or ignored their religiousness," said Roosevelt, "is a community on the rapid down-grade. It is true, occasional individuals, or families may have nothing to do with church or with religious practice and observances, and yet maintain the highest standard of refined ethical obligation. But this does not affect the case in the world as it now is, and more than the fact, exceptional

men and women, under exceptional conditions have disregarded the marriage ties without moral harm to themselves, interferes with the larger fact, **such disregard if at all common, means the complete moral disintegration of the body politic.**

“For all those whose lives are led on a plane above the grimmest and barest struggle for existence, church attendance and church work of some kind, means both the cultivation of the habit of feeling some responsibility for others and the sense of braced moral strength, which prevents a relaxation of one’s own fibre.

“The great exhorter or preacher, the priest or clergyman, or rabbi, the cardinal, or bishop, or revivalist, or salvation army commander, may, by sheer fervor and intensity, and by kindling some flame of the spirit which mystics have long known to be real and which scientists now admit to be real, rouse numbed conscience to life and free seared souls from sin; and then the roused conscience and the freed soul will teach the bodies, in which they dwell, to practice the great law of service.

“But such stormy awakening of the spirit, though often of high usefulness, loses all savour unless, in the times of calm which follow the storm, the work-a-day body makes good in its round of life and labor, the promise given by the spirit in its hour of stress.

“Far more often,” Roosevelt continued, “the betterment must come through work which does not depend on the gift of tongues; that is, through consistently persistent labor, conducted with wary wisdom, no less than with broad humility. This may take the old form of individual service to the individual; or visiting and comforting the widow and the fatherless and the sore-stricken, or personal sympathy and personal aid.

“It may take the form of organized philanthropy. A form not merely beneficial, but absolutely essential where a dense population increases the mess of suffering and also the mess of imposture and of that weakness of

will, which, if permitted, becomes parasitic helplessness, but a form which needs incessant supervision lest it lose all vitality and become empty and stereotyped, so as finally to amount to little, except a method of giving salaries to those administering the charity.

“Under the tense activity of modern social and industrial conditions, the Church, if it is to give real leadership, must grapple zealously, fearlessly and cool-headedly with the problems of social and industrial justice.

“Unless it is a poor man’s church, it is not a Christian church at all, in any real sense. The rich man needs it, Heaven knows, and is needed by it, but, unless in the church he can work with all his toiling brothers for a common end, for their mutual benefit and for the benefit of those without its walls, the Church has come short of its mission and its possibilities.”

**President Theodore Roosevelt manifested his Christianity all during his public and private life, as illustrated in this statement, when he first came to Washington:**

“When I first came to Washington, I did not know there was any Dutch Reformed Church there, and went with my wife to the Episcopal Church. But, on becoming President, I learned that there was a little obscure, red brick building tucked away on the back of a lot, and I immediately selected that as my Church. It is a church of the plain people. **There are persons of means and culture among them but most of them are common people, to whom I am partial. If there is any place on Earth where earthly distinctions vanish, it is in the Church, in the presence of God. The nearer the people get to the heart of Christ, the nearer they get to each other, irrespective of earthly conditions.**”

After a brief pause, the President said, “**I am engaged in one of the greatest moral conflicts of the age; that of colossal lawless corporations against the government. The oppression of lawless wealth, and the purchase of lawmakers by it, have wrecked most of the empires of the past, if not restated and defeated, will ruin our Republic. As**

**Executive of this Nation, I am determined that no man, or set of men shall defy the law of the land. The rich and powerful must obey the law, as well as the poor and feeble, not any better, nor any worse, but just the same, just the same,"** with great emphasis. Then more quietly, he went on, "After a week of perplexing problems and in heated contests, **it does so rest my soul to come into the House of the Lord and worship, and to sing and to mean it, the 'Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord, God Almighty,' and to know that He is my Father, and takes me up into His life and plans, and to commune personally with Christ. I am sure, I get a wisdom, not my own, and a superhuman strength, for fighting the moral evils I am called to confront."**

Sunday School, which Roosevelt mentions and to which he gave himself very faithfully, proved a big test of character. "It was a great temptation," he recalled, "to go over to the other fellow's house on Sunday afternoons where open house was kept by friends of his, and it was very hard either to refuse their invitations from the beginning, or to leave the merry parties early Sunday morning and return to Cambridge and to be at his post to teach unruly little people of the slums of Cambridge."

So deeply, however, had the first Theodore Roosevelt **impressed his son with the necessity of giving himself and the attainment with which his superior advantages had endowed him to those less fortunate than he**, that all through the first three years of college life, he only failed to appear at his Sunday School class twice, and then he arranged to have his class taken by a friend.

Truly, "when he put his hand to the plough, he never turned back."

So other things than games and exercise attracted Roosevelt's attention while at Harvard. His father had been active in the work of public aid, and he died while the boy was at college, and young Roosevelt sought to walk in his footsteps.

He became Secretary of the Prison Reform

Association and acted on several committees. In addition, he became a teacher in a Sunday School.

His family faith was the Dutch Reformed, but he found no church of that denomination at Cambridge, and drifted into a Mission School of the high church of Episcopalian faith. He did not stay there long. One day a boy came to his class with a black eye. He acknowledged that he got it in a fight, and that, too, on Sunday. The teacher questioned him sternly, and the fact came out that Jim, the other boy, had sat beside the lad's sister and had pinched her all through the school hour. A fight followed, in which Jim was soundly punched, the avenger of his sister coming out with a black eye. "You did right," was Roosevelt's verdict, and he gave the young champion, a dollar, and this pleased the class, highly. It appealed to them as justice.

But when it got out among the school officers, they were scandalized. **Roosevelt was already a black sheep among them** in other ways, in that he did not observe the formalities of the High Church service as they thought he should.

They asked if he had any objection to them. "None in the world, but I am Dutch Reformed." This did not help matters and in the end, Roosevelt left this field of labor and entered a Congregational Sunday School nearby, where he taught during the remainder of his college term.

In addressing the American Tract Society in Washington, D.C., March 12, 1905, he stated, "One of the best things done by that Society and by kindred religious and benevolent societies, was the supply in our American life today, of the proper ideals."

He went on to say, "**It is a good thing to have had the extraordinary material prosperity which had followed so largely on the extraordinary scientific discoveries, if we use this material prosperity aright. It is not a good thing, it is a bad thing, if we treat it as the be-all and end-all of our life. If we make it the only ideal before this nation; if we**

**permit the people of this republic to get before their minds, the view that material well-being carried to an ever higher degree, is the one and only thing to be striven for, we are laying up for ourselves, not merely trouble, but ruin.**

“Wonderful changes had come in the last half century, the railway, the telegram, the telephone, steam, electricity, all the marvelous mechanical inventions of these last five decades, have changed much in the world itself. But after all, in glorying over and wondering at, this extraordinary development, I think we sometimes forget, compared to the deeper things, it is indeed, only superficial in its effect.

**“The qualities that count most in man and woman, now, are the qualities that counted most 2,000 years ago. And as a nation we shall achieve success, or merit failure, accordingly as we do, or do not, display these qualities.**

“The gun changes, the ship changes, but the qualities needed in the man behind the gun, in the man who handles the ship, are just the same as they ever were.

“So it is in our whole material civilization today, the railroad and the telegraph, all these wonderful inventions, produce new problems, confer new benefits, and bring about new changes. Cities are built up to enormous size, and of course, with the upbuilding of the cities comes the growth of the terrible problems which confront all of us who have to do with city life.

“Outward circumstances change, but the spirit necessary to ensure the triumph that we must and shall win, is the same now that it has always been.

“This is the spirit which lies behind this society, all kindred societies, and we owe to this society all the help we can afford to give, for it is in giving to our people, a service beyond price, a service of love, a service which no money could buy.”

Roosevelt wrote about the “Spiritual Structure.” “It is, of course, unnecessary to say that the things of the body must be cared

for, that the first duty of any man, especially of the man who has others dependent upon him, is to take care of them, and to take care of himself.

**“Nobody can help others, if he begins by being a burden upon others. Each man must be able to pull his own weight, to carry his own weight, and therefore each man must show the capacity to earn for himself and his family, enough to secure a certain level of material well-being. That must be the foundation. But, on that foundation must be built, as a SUPERSTRUCTURE, THE SPIRITUAL LIFE.”**

Theodore Roosevelt wrote his sister, June 16, 1881, from Paris, in connection with his artistic wanderings in the Louvre. “I have not admired any of the French painters much, excepting Greuze. Rubeens’ ‘Three Wives’ are reproduced in about 50 different ways, which are a mistake. No painter can make the same face serve for Venus, the Virgin, and a Flemish Lady.”

And again, on August 24th, from Brussels, he wrote, “I know nothing at all, in reality, of art, I regret to say, but I do know what pictures I like. And I am not fond at all of Rubeens. He is mentally a fleshy, sensuous painter, and yet his most famous pictures are those relating to the Divinity. Above all, he fails in his female figures. Reubens’ women are handsome animals, except his pictures of rich Flemish housewives, but they are either ludicrous, or ugly, when meant to represent either the Virgin, or a Saint.”

“I think they are not much better, as heathen goddesses. I do not like chubby, Minerva, a corpulent Venus, or a Diana who is so fat that I know she could never overtake a cow, let alone a deer. Rembrandt is by all odds, my favorite.

“Perhaps the pictures I really get most enjoyment out of, are the landscapes, the homely little Dutch and Flemish interiors, the faithful representations of how the people of those times lived, and made merry and died, which are given by Jan Steen, Van Ostade,

Teniers, and Ruysdael. They bring out the life of that period in a way no written history could do, and interest me far more than pictures of saints and madonnas. I suppose this sounds heretical, but it is true.

"This time," he said, "I have really tried to like the holy pictures, but I cannot; even the Italian masters seem to me to represent good men and insipid, good women, but rarely anything saintly or Divine. The only pictures I have seen with these attributes are Gustav Doree's. He alone represents Christ so that your pity is lost in intense admiration and reverence."

All these criticisms by Roosevelt, were as a young man of 23, and they have their value, because they show so distinctly, the character of the young man, himself. You can see the interest which he takes in his humankind, as represented by certain types of Dutch pictures, and also his love for spiritual beauty, when not belittled by insipidity.

Perhaps the last sentence of this letter is most characteristic of all of his own vital spirit. **"He does not wish to pity Christ, and he almost insists that pity must be lost in admiration and reverence."**

Pity always seemed to Theodore Roosevelt, an undesirable quality. Tenderest sympathy he gave and craved, but never pity.

There was joy and humor in their Christianity which displayed itself from time to time. On the 27th day of October, Theodore Roosevelt celebrated his sixtieth birthday in the quiet portal of his beloved home, and as usual, his sister sent him her yearly message in which she always told him what the day meant to her; the day when into this world, this confused, strange world that we human beings find so difficult to understand, there came his clarifying spirit, his magnetic personality, his great heart, ready always to help the weak and lift the unfortunate, who were trying to lift themselves. She used to tell him that as long as he lived, no matter what her personal sorrows were, life would retain, not only happiness, but also glamour for her.

In answer to her birthday letter, an answer written on his very birthday, in his own handwriting, he sent her the following message. Intimate as it is, she gave it in full, for in these few short lines, there seems to breathe the whole spirit of her brother, the unswerving affection, the immediate response to her affection, and the wish to encourage her to face sorrows that were hard to bear, by reminding her of the rare joys which she had tasted. The manner in which he joined his sorrows and joys to hers, the sweet compliment of the words which infer that for him, she still had youthfulness, and at the end, the type of humor which brought always a savour into his own life and into the lives of others whom he closely touched. All were part of that spirit.

The letter:

Sagamore Hill  
October 27, 1918

Darling ...

"It was dear of you to remember my birthday. Darling, after all, you and I have known long years of happiness, and you are as young as I am old."

Ever yours,

METHUSALEH'S UNDERSTUDY

Another occasion of such humor was the fact his children had pets of their own. Among them, guinea pigs were the stand-bys. Their highly emotional nature fits them for companionship with adoring, but over-enthusiastic young masters and mistresses.

Then there were flying squirrels, and kangaroo rats, gentle and trustful, and a badger whose temper was short, but whose nature was fundamentally friendly. The badger's name wee JOSIAH; the particular little boy whose property he was, used to carry him about, clasped firmly around what would



have been his waist, if he had had any. Inasmuch as when on the ground the badger would play energetic games of tag with the little boy and nip his bare legs, "I suggested," said Roosevelt, "that it would be uncommonly disagreeable if he took advantage of being held in the little boy's arms to bite his face; but this suggestion he repelled with an acorn, as an unworthy assault on the "CHARACTER OF JOSIAH. He bites sometimes, but he

never bites faces," said the little boy.

We also had a young black bear whom the children christened JONATHAN EDWARDS, partly out of compliment to their mother, who was descended from the great Puritan divine, and partly because the bear possessed a temper in which gloom and strength were combined in what the children regarded as "CALVINISTIC PROPORTIONS."

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