

# The Church and Amusements

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

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*The sermon argues that the Church should prioritize spiritual work and not engage in amusement and entertainment that may distract from its purpose.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:24, Mark 8:36, Acts 9:31, 1 Corinthians 8:1, 2 Corinthians 13:10, Ephesians 4:12

**Topics:** "Church Life", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas addresses the question of recreation and amusement in the Church, emphasizing the importance of aligning all activities with the principles of the New Testament. The purpose of the Church is to witness to Christ, win souls, engage believers in His work, and nurture their spiritual growth. The sermon delves into the place of amusement in Church life, highlighting the potential conflicts with evangelization and edification. It stresses the need for spiritual focus over social elements in Church activities, cautioning against the detrimental effects of prioritizing entertainment over spiritual growth.

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## Transcript

The question of recreation and amusement as a part of parochial work and organization has become so prominent of recent years that it demands special attention at the hands of all who are, or expect to be clergymen; and the subject has so many and such serious bearings that it seems essential to discuss it in the light of first principles. "The Church and Amusements." Much will depend upon what is to be understood by the term "Church" if we are to decide what comes legitimately within the scope of its life and work.

Section 1. The Purpose of the Church.

In Article XIX the visible Church is described in a well-known phrase as "a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered." We may sum this up for our present purpose by saying that a Church is a Society united to Christ. The object of the Church's existence is fourfold. It is to witness to Christ, to win men for Him, to set them at work for Him, and to keep watch for their souls as those who belong to Him. Or, to put it still more briefly, the Church exists for the twofold purpose of Evangelization and Edification. It may be confidently stated that everything connected with Church life in the New Testament comes under one or other of these aspects of the Divine purpose.

Section 2. The Place of Amusement. Amusement suggests its meaning at once by its etymology, "a-muse," that is, something that does not call for "thought," the entertaining, recreative element in life. The question at once arises whether this can be regarded as a legitimate part of the purpose of the Church. Most people think that the predominant and exclusive idea of the Church is to make people "muse," or think, rather than to provide that which is as a rule the very opposite.

But we will subject the question to a careful examination. 1. Let us look at it in the light of the New Testament record. We have sketches of Church History during the first thirty years of the existence of Christianity, and we find no place whatever given to the element of amusement. 2. Let us look at it in the light of New Testament examples. We have the life and work of great Apostles and Evangelists, as well as of ordinary members of the Church brought before us, and not a single hint is given that they used or favoured this idea of amusement as an integral part of their Christian service. 3.

Let us look at it in the light of New Testament principles. Does amusement evangelize? Does it edify? Christian experience shows that it is frequently antagonistic to these ideas, that it fails to win the outsiders, and often plays spiritual havoc among young Christian converts who ought to be growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord. The fact is that amusement has only quite recently been made part of our Church life; and when we think of the two great purposes laid down by our Lord with reference to His disciples: "Ye are the salt of the earth," "Ye are the light of the world," we cannot help seeing that the element of amusement provides neither the "salt" nor the "light" intended by Christ.

The real problem is the relation of the spiritual to the social. It is often said, and said with truth, that the Church should be made a home for the people; but it must never be forgotten that it is intended to be preeminently the "Father's House"; and if the Jews were not to make the Temple a house of merchandise, it may be gravely questioned whether the Christian Church is right in making the House of God a house of play. Whenever the social element is emphasized and made prominent in Church work, it scarcely ever leads up to the spiritual, while, on the other hand, if the spiritual is put first and ever kept uppermost it will provide the right atmosphere in which everything that is rightly social finds adequate expression.

It will often be found that the entertaining element is absolutely prejudicial to spiritual work, occupying time, thought, and strength which should be devoted to other and higher purposes. Wherever entertainments are prominent in a Church, Prayer Meetings and Bible Classes tend to become not only secondary but also non-existent; while on the other hand, where spiritual work predominates, there is simply no room or time for the purely amusing and entertaining. The social atmosphere is easy to create, but the spiritual is more difficult.

One thing is perfectly certain, that any element of amusement must constantly be dominated by a strong, pure, rich, spiritual life in our Church, and it may be safely said that where the latter is found the former tends to disappear. The question of amusement in connection with the Church naturally raises the further problem as to where the line is to be drawn. Some Churches are content with concerts; others include dances, amateur theatricals, and even whist-drives. The mere mention of these things seems to indicate how far we are removed from the spiritual simplicity of New Testament Church membership.

The problem is further complicated when this amusement element is utilized for the purpose of raising money for Church work. One of the most valuable points in the last Charge of the Bishop of Liverpool, Dr. Chavasse, was his reference to some of these current methods: - "He earnestly asked them to exercise the utmost care in the means they employed to raise money for religious purposes. A sale of work,

properly managed, might be a real blessing not only to the parish which needed funds, but to those who worked for it.

But lotteries and raffles ought to be entirely forbidden. They were illegal, and they helped to foster that growing spirit of gambling which was one of the greatest curses of the people. Whatever view they might take individually of dancing, theatricals, and of whist drives, their employment to raise funds for Church purposes wounded the consciences of a large number of the best Church people, and gave a handle to the adversary to find fault. How far such means raised or lowered the spiritual tone of a congregation and brought the kingdom of heaven nearer to it they themselves were judges."

The Bishop of Wakefield not long ago spoke some earnest words against whist drives: - "I have no hesitation in expressing my opinion that it is most undesirable that religious movements should be supported by such methods. They appear to entail no sacrifice, which is the essential condition of a charitable offering. They hold out a fair expectation of winning money on a game as much of chance as of skill. Even if you do not win a prize, the feeling is induced of having helped forward religion, while as a fact you have only enjoyed a pleasant evening.

There is an all too prevalent idea among a certain sect of Churchmen of getting back as much as you can out of your charitable gifts. The further fact that they cause scandal to some devout minds and scruple and doubtfulness to many, though not in itself decisive of a moral question, at least forms a plea which no Christian can afford to disregard." And in the same way, the Archbishop of York recently laid the strongest possible emphasis on the need of spirituality, and warned his hearers against the danger of Church work becoming unspiritual.

"In the endeavour to be interesting and attractive he was afraid that much Christian effort was on the downgrade. The other day he was passing through a northern town, and he bought a local newspaper. Looking through a long list of advertisements of the services of the churches and chapels, he came across the following subjects: 'The Two Dogs: A Social Contrast'; 'Why I left the Italian Opera'; 'The Call of the Off-shore Wind'; 'Palace P.S.A.; First Appearance of the Border Soprano'; and 'Lonely Womankind: A Growing Danger'.

It was a positive relief to come to one at the end of the list which seemed to sum up the whole lot - 'Humbugs: Spiritual and Religious'." The extent to which the question of Amusements in connection with the Church has gone may be seen in a very significant way by an article in one of the London halfpenny papers on "Hustling in Church". [Daily Mirror, April 29, 1908.] "It is scarcely possible that hustling should long be dissociated from religion, or competition long kept out of Church.

The approved method, all over the world, for making a thing 'go' is to advertise it. Now, Churchgoing is notoriously not so popular as it once was. Hence, to get people to Church, clergymen are finding it necessary to advertise the attractions of Churchgoing. ... These functions will be eminently successful as Sunday entertainments of a miscellaneous sort. But as services of a religious kind they will be failures. That is the point. The craze, so common nowadays, for enticing people to religion by dressing it up in mundane garments can only have one effect - the effect of alienating the truly religious people who go to Church already.

The others, the non-religious, may possibly be won for a very short time. ... These attractions will wear off when the worldly discover that they are merely the bait intended to entrap them into religion. When they have discovered that, they will go where they can get the bait without the trap. ... Churches are trying to

become popular, amusing, exciting. Well-meaning clergymen are endeavouring to meet the worldly man on his own ground. They cannot do it. No Church can compete successfully with a music hall as such.

You can 'draw' a few music hall lovers, indeed, by giving a 'variety' atmosphere to your services. But they will come only because the music halls, properly so-called, are closed on Sunday. And they will go away when the true variety shows, hampered by no religious restrictions, are open again. Meanwhile, other people too, as was said, will go away - those who like Churchgoing. These like it - to them it is a pleasure as well as a duty - partly for the very reason that in Church they can forget the ordinary worldly things and the habitual hustle of the open street.

To introduce the world, and its competitive methods, into their place of rest and worship will be to take away its power of solace for them. Hence the fact [is], as a result of hustling in religion, that you drive the religious away and do not permanently retain the hustlers. Hustling is an excellent thing in its place - on Wall Street, in a business office, or in the underground railway. But it ought to be kept to its place. In Church it is a mistake - in policy as well as in taste."

These words from the secular press carry their own sad and searching message to all who desire to keep the Church pure and true to her Master's purpose. At a Church which shall not be further characterized, it was announced that a subscription dance would be given in order to provide funds for replacing one or more of the present unsightly windows with more artistic stained glass. The price of a ticket was 7s. 6d. which would include supper. Now there can be no doubt that quite apart from the idea of a dance, this method of money raising is absolutely wrong in principle.

If people want a dance and a supper, they should have it as private persons without making any pretense that they are doing Church work by such methods. Whenever we receive back, we are not "giving" in the New Testament sense; and the sooner we revert to the simple spiritual principles of New Testament proportionate giving, the better it will be for all concerned. But it may be asked, what about bazaars? As to this, the same New Testament principles of giving are equally applicable.

A wide distinction must necessarily be made between an ordinary sale of work in a poor parish, by people who have only service to give, and the usual bazaar which is frequently considered to be the only possible way of raising a large sum of money for the Church. In a very helpful article some time ago in the Church Family Newspaper, Mrs. Ashley Carus-Wilson had some wise words to say about bazaars. While frankly admitting that a bazaar is well meaning, she expressed her disapproval of it on three grounds. (1) It is a clumsy and wasteful expedient; for the amount of money paid in expenditure if given to the Church direct would go far to meet the financial needs. (2) It is a double-minded and inconsistent expedient; it attempts to do two things at once and does neither well.

It is a failure from the philanthropic, and incongruous from the religious point of view, for people who amuse themselves at a bazaar are certainly not fellow workers with those who are devoting their very life to missionary work abroad. (3) It is misleading and mischievous. It mixes up the two totally different questions of expenditure on amusement and gifts for the service of God. And Mrs. Carus-Wilson believes that the bazaar, wasteful, misleading, and incongruous, would die a natural death if principles of giving were understood and emphasized.

It is the plain duty of every Christian to give proportionately to the service of God without expecting any equivalent for himself. Such giving to the upkeep of his own Church is in no sense charity, "but payment for services rendered," and the efficient maintenance of the Church is the common concern of all

members and should be dealt with along proper New Testament lines. In 1909, the Church Pastoral Aid Society sent a letter to its Grantee Vicars, emphasizing the absolute necessity of spiritual methods in Church work, and the wide response of appreciation and approval of the Society's letter was a striking testimony both to the need and the value of true methods of work.

### Section 3. The Principles of the New Testament.

There is one word used frequently in the New Testament which suggests the special characteristic of all Christian life, individual and corporate. It is the word "edification" (Acts 9:31; 1 Cor. 8:1, 10:23, 14:26; 2 Cor. 12:19, 13:10; Eph. 2:21, 4:12). "Let all things be done unto edifying." Everything associated with Church work in the New Testament has edification for its keynote. The preaching of the Word, the public worship, the two Sacraments, and all service by disciples are intended to conduce towards edification. The same great principle is found in our Prayer Book, whether we think of the Services, the use of Holy Scripture, or the administration of the Sacraments. It may be said without contradiction that there is nothing in the Bible or the Prayer Book that is not intended in some way to "edify". When this is realized, it soon settles the question of amusement and entertainment. The note of the Bible is that of earnestness, not sadness, and certainly not gloom, and no Christian Church should occupy its life with matters that are not in some way included in the great principle of "edification". Secular methods not only lower the tone of those who adopt them, but what is worse, they produce a low idea of religion in the minds of those whom it is sought to win. In view of the extraordinary lengths to which the secular spirit has gone in many of our parishes today, it is scarcely possible to think that a modern preacher was wholly exaggerating when he spoke in very plain terms of "the Devil's Mission of Amusement". Spiritual work by spiritual men through spiritual methods is the one guarantee of spiritual blessing. In the light of New Testament Christianity all unspiritual methods are not only futile, but fatal.

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