

PARISH AND PARISH CHURCH

Being the Baird Lecture for 1935

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THEIR PLACE AND INFLUENCE IN HISTORY

Being the Baird Lecture for 1935

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TO THE
PARISHES AND CONGREGATIONS
OF
PETERCULTER, ABERDEENSHIRE
ST. BRYCEDALE, KIRKCALDY
AND
KELVINSIDE (BOTANIC GARDENS), GLASGOW
IN WHICH I HAD THE HAPPINESS TO MINISTER

This Book
is
Gratefully and Affectionately
Inscribed

FOREWORD

‘THE influence of the Christian congregation upon history, the contribution of the parish to the world, is a subject which is waiting for a historian.’

So wrote my old teacher, Principal Sir George Adam Smith of Aberdeen University, in a volume entitled *The Forgiveness of Sins*, published in 1904. The passage occurs in a sermon on ‘The Song of the Well,’ and continues :

‘He will lay bare almost a thousand forgotten wells, which from all the centuries still feed some of the strongest currents of human life. Many types of character, much that is imperishable in literature and art, much that has become worldwide in education and the organization of charity, have found their origins in congregational life. . . . We cannot forget that many of the finest ecclesiastical buildings were originally parish churches, and represent the piety and soul of local congregations. . . . Many of the enduring monuments of Christianity have been produced in the ordinary course of a parish ministry, and in order to meet some exigency of congregational experience.’

And then, after citing a wide variety of instances, ‘almost taken at random,’ to illustrate his theme, the writer concludes :

‘There has been in the past under God no instrument which He has blessed more than the ordinary routine of congregational ministry. Genius has found her

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occasions in its needs ; the greatest characters have traced their qualities to its discipline ; the most permanent and glorious fruits of our religion have sprung from its opportunities.'

The subject is still waiting for a historian. Toulmin Smith in the middle of last century wrote a voluminous treatise on the Parish, marked by an exhaustive research into English parochial records. It dealt, however, almost exclusively with the English parish, and was designed to prove the impossible thesis that the original parish, and not in England alone, was a purely secular institution. Similarly Sidney and Beatrice Webb, in their monumental work on English Local Government, devoted a large section to the parish as an organ of civil government and administration, but took the opposing and much more tenable view that alike in origin, character, and development it was a creation of the Church. Many volumes have been written on Church architecture, and many more on such kindred subjects as *Ancient Facts and Fictions concerning Churches and Tithes*, by the Earl of Selborne ; *Church and Manor*, by S. O. Addy ; *Parish Life in Medieval England*, by Gasquet ; *The Medieval Village*, by G. G. Coulton, and the like. General references to various aspects of the subject are to be found in most Church histories, and more specific references in the records of archaeological societies ; and of course scores of histories have been written of individual parishes and parish churches. But no essay has been made to explore the field as a whole—to trace the growth of the parish system from its inception early in the Christian era to its final establishment throughout Christendom ; to set forth in detail the unique organic unity of parish and parish church ; to record their manifold activities and their more recent

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development ; and, hardest task of all, to attempt a survey of their place and influence in history.

This book is such an attempt. It is an expansion of The Baird Lecture of 1935, the completion and publication of which has been delayed by the vicissitudes of the war years. It is not without interest that the Bairds of Gartsherrie, one of whom was the founder of The Baird Trust, have provided a modern illustration of one of the main ways by which the parish system came into existence. Throughout the Christian centuries pious donors were wont to erect chapels or churches within their own domains, to minister to the religious needs of their tenants and retainers. Many, perhaps most, of the parishes and parish churches in every land owe their origins to such private benefactions. In the course of the nineteenth century members of the Baird family followed this ancient and pious custom, erecting and endowing churches for their workpeople, contributing to the erection and endowment of others, and providing schools and teachers for the education, both religious and secular, of the children. Among the churches thus built and endowed, in parishes *quoad sacra*, and in one new parish at least, were those at Monkland, Holytown, Townhead (Glasgow), Knoydart, and Coats (near Coatbridge). All this was in the ancient Christian tradition, and sheds an interesting modern light on one aspect of this fascinating subject.

I am grateful to the directors of The Baird Trust for affording me the opportunity and incentive to write on a sideline of Church history which has not received the attention and study it deserves. Ever since I read the passage I have quoted from my revered teacher, through thirty years of a busy and exacting ministry, it has been often in my mind and never far from my thoughts in

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the course of my reading, gleanings from which form the staple of this book. I could wish it were more adequate to its theme. Its purpose will have been served, however, if it succeeds in awakening a more general interest, a livelier gratitude, and perhaps even a quickening of admiration and pride among those into whose hands it may come, Church members and parishioners alike, as they think of their own congregation and parish, and realize in measure the magnitude and splendour of the service which that unique institution has rendered, under God, to the local community and to the world.

P. D. THOMSON

Glasgow *April* 1946

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