WHY I WONDER DOES NOT CHANNING POLLOCK GO TO CHURCH?

By Clarke C. Chappell, D. D.

In a recent Reader's Digest, Channing Pollock has an article entitled, "Why I Do Not Go To Church." The author is a brilliant and religious man. He is also a clear and forceful writer. But having read this article with considerable care I feel myself still completely in the dark as to the author's real reason for refusing to attend church. This is the case because the reasons given are not in any real sense reasons at all. They strike me rather as a mixture of false assumptions, and of thinly disguised alibies parading in the borrowed garments of reason. Let us take a candid look at these so-called reasons one by one.

1. Mr. Pollock does not attend church because he worships God in the wide open spaces. His article begins with the story of his worshipping on the deck of a vessel in the Red Sea. "The groves were God's first temples," he quotes with approval. To all of which every good churchman can say, "Amen." But why should worshipping in the open exclude one from worshipping in the sanctuary? Certainly Mr. Pollock no more believes that God is confined to the open spaces than the churchman believes that he is confined to the Church. The author knows also that worship is social as well as individual. Therefore, the fact that he was worshipping God in the open and alone was no good reason for his refusal to join his fellows in worshipping him in the sanctuary. Had he joined with other religious people he might have helped both them and himself. But instead, for reasons not given, he holds himself aloof. Sadder still he seems to have spent the remainder of the voyage proudly nursing a martyr complex because somebody said he was not religious.

2. The second reason this religious man never goes to church is that, "going to church has no more to do with religion than listening to Fourth of July orations.
or singing the Star-Spangled Banner has to do with patriotism. But it so happens that these things do have to do with patriotism. How did we seek to arouse the patriotism of our people during the first World War? One was to get them together to hear patriotic orations and to sing patriotic songs. How has Hitler stirred Germany into such a patriotic fervor? Partly by his orations. How is Churchill seeking to steady and nerve hard-pressed Britain? In part, by patriotic orations. I daresay these are also foolish enough to sing, "God Save The King," now and then. Just as such practices stir our patriotism, so church attendance tends to stir our religious fervor. The two are related as cause and effect. The reason, therefore, that the author gives for staying away from church is a most valid reason for church attendance.

3. The author seems to hint that he stays from church as a protest against the expenditure of so much money on the part of the Church for its houses of worship. "This money," he says, "ought to have been expended for the feeding of hungry minds and hungry bodies." How cheap and stale that is. It does not sound like the criticism of a keen and honest man such as Mr. Pollock. It rather has the flavor of one who is suffering from mental blindness. Of course some churches spend too much for their buildings. Far more, perhaps spend too little. Be that as it may, Mr. Pollock knows far better than I that it is the Church that has done most to feed the hungry minds. It is the Church that founded Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and other of our greatest educational institutions. He knows further that it is the Church that leads in the feeding of the hungry bodies of men. Take the donations that come from the pockets of the members of the Church out of our eleemosynary institutions, out of our Community Chest, and many of them would not be able to carry on. In truth, any fair facing of facts will show that the builders of churches have as a rule been the builders of all else in our civilization that is really worthwhile.

4. The author indicates that he does not attend because of the kind of ser-
vices that the Church is promoting. Naturally he is not very trustworthy here, since he never attends church except when he preaches himself. His is therefore hearsay evidence. Yet, though absent, he seems to know just the type of service the churches are having and just what the preachers are doing. One time, for instance, while addressing a certain congregation he uttered a witicism that caused a laugh. For this humor he was rebuked by the pastor. At once this rebuke became proof positive that all church services had become so dehumanized as never to be lighted by a smile. This is a fairly trivial criticism. But my chief objection to it is that it is about seventy five percent false. A great many of the services of the Church are quite human and cheerful.

This absentee also knows the subject matter of the preacher's sermon. He knows that the average minister is spending almost all his time speaking of the vague rewards of a future life instead of addressing himself to present pressing problems. In fact it is amazing how much this brilliant writer knows about the sermons he does not hear. Now, most ministers do believe in the rewards of a future life. Yet, I doubt if the average regular church attendant has heard half a dozen sermons on this subject in the past quarter of a century. Whereas not a few congregations hear a discussion of present pressing problems at every service.

On the surface Mr. Pollock seems quite logical in his position. He indicates that the minister preaches after this fashion because he is unfit to preach in any other. This is the case because the minister lives in an ivory tower. When I read this I wondered where was the author's sense of humor. Naturally, there are some ministers that live apart. But these are the exception rather than the rule. It is my conviction that the average faithful pastor knows life as it is lived better than any other man in the community with the possible exception of the family physician. But this failure of the minister to know life is not the author's real reason for refusing to hear him. This is evidenced by the fact that, though he
"Why, I Wonder, Does Not Channing Pollock Go To Church"

confesses that he knows hundreds of ministers who are men of fine mind and character, yet he does not hear them. Why he does not attend the church of one of these hundreds of gifted men I have not the foggiest idea.

5. Finally, Mr. Pollock becomes so poverty stricken in reasons as to appeal to the majority. "Whatever statistics may say," he declares boldly, "the majority of people do not go to church." Naturally Mr. Pollock sides with the majority because the majority is always right. How utterly ridiculous! For years the author has been an earnest and able advocate of peace. But at this moment his position is being voted down by a vast majority. The greater part of the world is at war. I suppose therefore that Mr. Pollock is now ready to confess with shame that there is nothing to this thing called peace and that he has been wrong all the time.

No, we do not settle such matters by popular vote. Instead of the voice of the majority being proof positive of the rightness of a position it is almost uniformly proof of the opposite. Every advance that has been made in either science or religion has been made, not by the majority, but by the minority. If the majority is always right then Socrates was a clown and his murders were philosophers. If the majority is always right then Jesus Christ was a madman while the fanatics that crucified him were wise. Of course the author no more believes in the infallibility of the majority any more than you and I.

The author closes with the pathetic story of the dancer, Ruth St. Dennis. One day when news came to her of her mother’s death, having been reared a Methodist she turned for consolation to the Church of the little village where she happened at that time to be. But the building, the singing, the sermon were so hideous that the dancer hurried away and finished the morning listening to an orchestra in a movie theatre. So what? By this Mr. Pollock seems to mean that no bruised soul ever turned to the church for help without going away in disappointment. But this does not necessarily follow.

Here for instance is another pitiful story:—A few days ago a broken man went
out into a grove, God's first temple. But instead of worshipping there he hanged himself upon a bow of one of the trees. Yet, no fair minded man would think of using this for an argument against worshipping. In fact, this story of the dancer simply fails to make sense. As in the case of the author's reasons it simply does not come to grips with the matter in hand. It is not surprising, therefore, that after reading these so-called reasons, I am still wondering why Channing Pollock does not attend church.
SUPPORTING THE CHURCH

The subject given to me is "The Support of the Church." I count myself happy to speak to you as fellow churchmen on this subject, because I am a convinced and unabashed churchman. It is to the Church that I am happy to belong. It is to the Church that I owe a supreme debt. The Church is my spiritual mother. The Church gave me a Christian name. The Church gave me an opportunity for an education. I was dedicated at the altar of the Church in my young and tender years. It is to the Church that I am indebted for a place to serve. Therefore, I am a lover of the Church. In spite of the fact that the seat of the scornful as well as the seat of the sorrowful is well occupied, I am glad to be a part of the Church.

This I say realizing, I think, as clearly as any of you the frailties and follies and shortcomings of the Church. The Church is a divine institution, but it is also human. Therefore, it is imperfect. The fact that it is imperfect is one reason that we should be a part of it. If the Church were all that is ought to be, then it would not have any need for you and me. But since it is not being all that it might be and not attaining all that it might attain, it is at once our duty and privilege to give it our support.

Not only are the imperfections of the Church a reason for our being a part of it; it is also the reason we are permitted to be a part of it. I am familiar with the superior chap who declares boldly: "Show me a perfect church, and I will join it." But the fallacy of his position is that he would do no such thing. If the Church were perfect, it would have no place for any of us. If the Church were perfect, it would have no place for any of us. All we could do in a perfect Church would be to mess it up. We would embarrass our fellow members and they would embarrass us.
I

What is the Church? I am using the word in its broadest meaning. It includes both Jews and Christians. When Jesus began to gather about Him the nucleus of the Christian Church, He called his followers "disciples". What is a disciple? A disciple is a learner. These early Christians were pupils in the school of Christ. The Church is made up of those who have been enrolled in the school of religion. They are seekers after God. If, therefore, our critics remind us of our ignorance, we confess it. We make that very ignorance a reason for our enrolling in the school of the Church. If they remind us that we have not arrived, we also confess that. We only claim to be on the way. If we are accused of being very lacking in goodness, that too we confess. The Church is not a place for good people; it is a place for those who have realized the beauty of goodness and are seeking to make it a reality in their own lives.

The Church, therefore, is an organization made up of men and women who are believers in and seekers after God. Of course, there is a profound sense in which every man is God-hungry and God-thirsty. God has made us for Himself and we never find rest until we find it in Him. But the trouble with many is that while they are conscious of having missed that something that makes life supremely worthwhile, they are so often mistaken as to what they have missed. One day my wife left me to watch our first-born. Everything went well until the little chap waked up. Then he made the welkin ring! I grabbed up a fragment of Woolworth's Store and shook it at him, but he yelled all the louder. At last his mother came, took him up, and he was quiet almost immediately. In indignation, I said to him, "Why didn't you tell me what you wanted?" But his very silence answered me, "I didn't know myself, but I knew when I got it."

"As the hart panteth after the waterbrook, so panteth my soul after thee, oh God." That is the cry of a churchman of the long ago. It is in a sense our cry. Once as a boy I was working in a field that was skirted by the Buffalo
River. I heard the baying of hounds in the distance. By and by I saw a spent deer coming toward me with the pursuing dogs close at his heels. Why was he running toward me, his natural enemy? He was doing so because just beyond me was the river. If he could only reach the river, he might throw his enemy off his track. If he could only reach the river, he could slake his burning thirst. If he could only reach the river, he would escape death and find life. The churchman is the God-thirsty.

Jesus called these seekers after God the salt of the earth. That is a significant word. Salt is the great preventive. Every disaster that has come to this world has come because there was not enough saving salt to prevent it. Salt gives a tang to the feast of life. A small boy was called upon to write an essay on salt. He wrote one that was the essence of sanity and good sense. "Salt," he began, "is that stuff that makes food taste bad if you don't put it in it." Wherever there is a shortage of faith in God, life goes stale and insipid. Salt is a bit of a luxury. But it is far more; it is a necessity. The Church is a luxury, one of the greatest, but it is also a necessity. Without it men lose a sense of God. Without it the individual and society tends to rot down. This is not to say that there is no goodness or decency outside the Church. I have met those who declared, "The best people I have known did not belong to any church at all." Well that is not exactly my experience. I have known some very lovely and helpful people who were not members of the Church. But all of them had learned their ethics from the Church. Then my experience differs in that the best people I have known have been members of some church. They are as a rule the most public-spirited people in the community. A certain critic said in a magazine article not long ago that the Church ought to use the money that it has put into its fine buildings for feeding the hungry bodies and the hungry minds of men. To this I repeat that the Church has done more to feed the hungry minds and the hungry bodies of men than any other institution on earth. All our oldest educational institutions were founded by the Church. Almost all our elemosynary institutions
have been founded and kept up by the Church. Take out of the coffers of the Community Chest and other charity organizations the funds contributed by the members of the Church, and most of them would have to close their doors.

II

Since the Church is a necessity, since it makes a contribution that no other institution has made or can make, somebody ought to help keep it alive. Who is that somebody? Answer—that somebody is you. That somebody is myself. I make bold to say that not only is it every man's high privilege to belong to the church, but it is every man's solemn obligation, both to his family, his community, and to his God.

This is the case first of all because the Church, while a divine institution, is also human. Just as our civic clubs, it must be kept up by people. In order to destroy your club, you do not have to become angry, you do not have to denounce its purpose. All that is necessary is to let it alone. To destroy your business; however strong it is, all that is necessary is to neglect it. To wreck your home; however beautiful it is, it is only necessary to neglect it. That is all that is necessary in order to wreck the Church of which you are a part, or to help to wreck it if you are not a part of it.

There are those who stand aloof from the Church because they have never thought the matter through. There are those who stand aloof because of a false humility. They declare that they are not good enough to belong to the Church. It would be equally reasonable to say that a boy or girl does not know enough to go to school. The Church, I repeat, is not for good folks, but for folks who are conscious of their imperfections but who are seeking after goodness for themselves and others.

Then, there are those who hold aloof from the Church because they are too good. They cannot afford to associate with church people because there are so many hypocrites in the Church. Well, the answer to that is that there is always
room for one more. But such a position is, of course, utterly silly. You refuse to play the game because the fellow members of your team are not perfect, but the trouble is there is no perfect team. Even the New York Yankees lost the last World Series. Even Dimaggio strikes out sometimes. If you have to have a perfect team, you will never play. Everybody ought to belong to the Church.

2. Having become a part of the Church, everybody ought to support it. We ought to support it by our money. I have never been squeamish about asking folks to contribute to the church. It is the best possible investment. Some of you have made investments that have failed but here is one that is sure. A Church that did not need to be supported would soon die. We love no institution except the one to which we make a sacrificial contribution. Every man ought to contribute to the Church of his means.

But while it is every man's duty and privilege to give of his means, that is not enough. We must give of ourselves. The man who contributes to the Church and refuses to attend is seeking to build up with one hand while he tears down with another. The man who makes it his business to attend Church is casting his vote on the side of a spiritual interpretation of life. He is preaching a sermon as he turns his feet toward God's House to the fact that man should not live by bread alone. I appreciate the way that you make this club your business. You do not ask before you decide to come about the state of the weather. You do not ask before you decide to come who the speaker is to be. You do not even ask if bread pudding is to be served! It is your club and you make it your business to be there. Bring that same loyalty to bear upon your church and see what happens!

Not only is it your privilege and duty to belong to the Church and to support it by your means and by the gift of yourself, but it is your privilege to keep your membership in the community where you are. The only time that we have to help is now. The only place we have is here. One of the wisest of philosophers uttered this fundamental principle: "So act that your conduct is worthy to become a principle of universal law." That is, so act that if others acted in the same
fashion we would build better individuals, better homes, better churches, better schools, a better world. Our tragedy is that so many of us want to be exceptions to the rule. If everybody refused to take his church membership when going into a new community, ninety-five percent of the church would be destroyed.

III

As I speak to you we are passing through the most trying and tragic ordeal that our world has ever known. What hope may we have for tomorrow? There is no hope apart from God. Men everywhere are coming to realize that however they may differ in other matters there is none other Name given under heaven whereby we must be saved. We cannot stand if we reckon without God. Soon our casualty lists are going to be vastly enlarged. When there is vast tragedy, there is always increasingly vast need. During such times men are going to find a real hope or a false hope.

Where can we find a hope that is real? We can find it in the God of the Church. "And now, Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in thee." When this red hell of war is over and our boys come back, some of them with broken bodies, some with warped minds, where are they to turn for help and healing? They must turn to those values offered by the Church. Therefore, I maintain that the greatest contribution we can make to the demands of this desperate hour, the greatest contribution that we can make to the world of tomorrow is by building here and now the best possible Church. It is in this faith that I live. It is through this faith that I sing with another churchman,

"I love Thy Church, O God!\nHer walls before Thee stand,\nDear as the apple of Thine eye,\nAnd graven on Thy hand.\n
For her my tears shall fall,\nFor her my prayers ascend,\nTo her my cares and toils be given,\nTill toils and cares shall end."
WHY JOIN THE CHURCH?

My business with you is very simple. I am going to talk to you about the privilege and opportunity offered by the best loved and best hated institution in the world, the Church. My first declaration is one that I believe would appeal at once to the reason and conscience of every one of you, and that is this: It is the duty of every man, woman, and child in Birmingham to be actively identified with the Church of their choice. This I say without the slightest qualification.

I.

Every man ought to be actively identified with the church of his choice because there is no real reason against it. However intelligent you are, however keen you may be at debating, no single one of you can give a reason that can stand before the bar of your own intelligence or of your own conscience for not actively identifying yourself with the church of your choice. It has been a part of my business to listen to reasons given sincerely and otherwise for neglecting this privilege and duty. But I have never found one that could satisfy either the speaker or the listener.

1. There is the man who stays out of the Church to keep from associating with hypocrites. This individual is not so numerous as he used to be. This is an excuse that has lost caste. It is a bit threadbare and out at the elbows. It lacks either intellectual or moral respectability. I have had it given a number of times, but I think it not unkind to say that it is no man's real reason. Almost every man who gives it, and every man, so far as I have been able to judge, is playing the hypocrite himself in giving it.
2. Now, are you staying out of the Church because you have obligations to some other church, or to the church in some neighboring village or city? When we move, there are some things that we can leave behind and there are some that we cannot. Among those that we cannot leave behind are our obligations. Here is a law of ethics that none of us will dare to dispute. No man has a right to take a course that if taken by all his fellows would end in disaster. But those people who leave their membership behind them when they move into a new city are taking just that course. If every church member were to leave their membership in the church that they originally joined, there could hardly be a live church in Birmingham or in any other city.

The help that you are receiving day by day comes from the church and citizenship of the city of which you are a part. The opportunities that come to you to serve day by day come to you not in some distant field where you are not, but in this present, prosaic spot where you are. The only place you can serve is here. The only time you can serve is now. To withhold your allegiance, therefore, to the local church of your choice is to fail in your duty. It is to rob that church of what it has a right to expect of you, without rendering any compensating service to the church left behind. It is every man's duty, therefore, to identify himself actively with the church of his choice in the city where he lives.

3. Then, nobody is staying out of the church because they are not able to belong. It is true that the church must be kept up by the voluntary contributions of its membership. It is true that money is necessary for the carrying on of the work of the church. But surely it is not the only necessity, nor is it the first necessity. A church membership that contributes
nothing but money would have a dead church. A church cannot live by bread alone any more than can a human soul. What does the church need? It needs you. It needs your presence, your faith, your prayers, your loyalty, your enthusiasm.

But, you say, "I am not going to stay out of the church permanently. I am going to wait until I get on easy street financially, and then I am going to take up again the vows of the Church that I am now neglecting." But assuming that you are unable to pay a single penny to the church, and there are quite a few who belong to this church who are in that condition, does that fact excuse you from making any contribution of any kind? Why not say, "Even if I cannot give money, I can give that which the Church needs even more - I can give myself." I know that to remain without the fold till you are able to contribute makes an appeal. But it is an appeal to your pride. To give what you can, even if you have no money, must appeal to your reason and to your conscience. No man, therefore, has a right to stay out of the Church because he is unable to pay. The work of the Church is not to get but to give. We do not pay our way into it. Every man has a right there. Every man has an obligation there, whether he can pay a single penny or not.

II.

Then, everybody ought to be actively identified with the church of his choice, not only because there is no good reason against it, but because there is every reason for it.

1. You ought to be actively identified with the church of your choice in Birmingham because that is a worthwhile way to invest your life. It is not necessary for me to sell the Church to you. You know that the Church with all its faults has been the supreme friend of righteousness and the supreme foe of
evil throughout the years. You know that you would not live in a community where there was no church. You know that the Real Estate of any city would not be worth 5¢ on the dollar without the presence of the Church. You know the Church is the supreme safeguard both of the wealth that is material and of that which is spiritual. But, if the Church continues to do this work, somebody must keep it up. Whose business is it if it is not yours and mine?

2. You ought to belong to the Church because you need its influence and its moral support in the living of your life. I am not saying that there are not many moral and upright people outside the Church. I am not saying that if you do not join the Church you will become a rake or a wreck. I am saying that the Church fills the need in your life that no other institution can fill. Jesus knew human nature as none other ever did. He sought to help it as none other ever did, and the best way He knew how to help was by building the Church. You need the Church for the strengthening and the upbuilding and the saving of your own life.

3. Then, you ought to join the Church because the Church needs you. You can do something for the Church that none other can do. You can fill a place in it that none other can fill. When Christ fed the multitudes he said, "Gather up the fragments, let nothing be lost." And the Christ that hasn't a crust of bread to be thrown away certainly has no human soul to be thrown away. The Church needs you. This church needs you. There is a church standing at the center of this city. If it prospers, all other churches prosper. If it fails, all other churches tend to fail. Members are constantly going out from its altars into other churches. More must be constantly recruited, strong tides of young and
vigorously life, in order to continue to grow.

Now, the sin of sins is to stand face to face with the call of need that you know and to which you respond, and refuse to respond to it. There is one book in the Bible that fairly flashes with lightning, and crashes with the thunder of indignation. It is the book of Obadiah. That which makes the writer of this book fairly shriek with indignation is, that when Israel was being sorely oppressed by the enemy, when Israel was in desperate need, the people of Edom stood aside indifferent and aloof and saw a nation crushed by defeat, when, if they had helped, it might have triumphed. This is a needy day. What are you doing to meet that need? You cannot do anything toward building up the Church unless you yourself are a part of it. If you want your friend to become a member of the Church, the first step in inducing him to that high decision is to become a member yourself. Every holy relationship that is yours is a reason for your uniting with the Church. Every friendship that is yours is a reason for your uniting with the Church. Jesus is calling for your allegiance. Here is a way to invest life so as to enrich yourself, and in so doing, to enrich others. To refuse it is to miss the best. To refuse it is to sin. For, "to him who knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin."