

- O God, mercifully regard the gifts which we bring, the prayers which we offer, and the lives which we now dedicate to thee, that as our gifts lie upon thy altar, the fires of pure devotion may burn in our hearts and that throughout this week, throughout our lives, we may glorify thee by our witness for thy son, our Lord Jesus Christ, amen. (solemn music)

- My dear friends, the passage, which is our text upon this homecoming occasion, is a cluster of verses concluding the second chapter of the Book of the Acts, from which President Knight read so impressively a while ago certain excerpts. I read now the 42nd through the 47th verses. They met constantly to hear the apostles teach, and to share the common life, to break bread, and to pray. A sense of awe was everywhere, and many marvels and signs were brought about through the apostles. All whose faith had drawn them together held everything in common. They would sell their property and possessions and make a general distribution as the need of each required. With one mind they kept up their daily attendance at the temple, and breaking bread in private houses, shared their meals with unaffected joy, as they praised God and enjoyed the favor of the whole people. And day by day, the Lord added to their number those whom he was saving. May God bless again the reading of his word. One who was present has told of the occasion when Toscanini walked toward the podium to conduct his final concert. He was 85 years of age and they had built a slender railing for him. He touched it gently with the fingers of one hand and then he raised his baton. The large orchestra, as a single man, moved easily into the first quiet movement of the great symphony. Then, as the volume developed, one by one, the first violin, the viola, the cello, and the bass lifted eyes from the notes in front of them and fastened those eyes upon the face of the maestro standing there with a wistful little smile upon his countenance, and all the music they had in them swept up toward that face. There is, in this story, a suggestion at least of the sense of fascination and of the unutterable loyalty to the risen Lord, which characterized the little company of Christians who had gathered together on the day of Pentecost. The second chapter of Acts records it, for it is the story of the beginning of the Christian Church and of the inauguration of its witness. It is the story of the coming of the spirit of God. Now the spirit of God had come before this, but he had never come in this fashion before. This was a new departure in the economy of God. He came intimately and fully into the lives of certain apostles and women, and Matthias and Mary and the brothers of Jesus who were together upon that occasion, and the experience of his coming must have been something like the experience that caused Saint Paul to cry out in his letter to the Galatians, "I am crucified with Christ. Nevertheless, I live. Yet not I, but Christ liveth in me and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." And all the music they had in them swept up toward that face. I would have us explore together in these brief morning moments certain identifiable characteristics in that early Christian Church, which it seems to me are reproducible in our time. First of all, I would suggest that New Testament Christianity had a sense of community, a sense of community based upon a common teaching, a common ritual, a common fellowship, a common prayer life. There is strength and vigor in community, and every good enterprise must retain the moral adrenaline of its own purposeful identity if it is to focus its efforts meaningfully. The Christian Church's deliberate merger into the total community of a secularized society may be something like the dropping of a tablespoonful of

white paint into a gallon of black paint. The white is no longer discernible at all and the black is still black. The Christian community, moving properly out of its pious cloisters, must exercise every caution that in its response to the challenge of secular society, it does not sacrifice the sacred character and countenance which have always produced for it its accuracy of insight and its thrust of power. Sometimes when we speak of listening to the world or of permitting culture to compose the agenda for Christianity in our time, I think we are inviting the vast peril of a lost identity, a well-intentioned, but ultimately fatal, capitulation to Harvey Cox's intriguing idolatry of secularism. Somehow I simply cannot picture the prophet Jeremiah as tempering his mood to the extent that he would've been able to celebrate the anonymity and the profanity of his native Anathoth, or of turbulent Jerusalem during the malpractices under King Jehoiakim. Jeremiah kept always his identity as the prophet of the Lord and he never insisted that his religion be made subservient to the secularism of his nation's dying days. New Testament Christianity had focused power because it had a sure sense of community. It never forgot, even for a moment, what it was, and then in the second place, I'm impressed by the fact that New Testament Christianity kept its sense of wonder and expectancy. It is extremely difficult for men to believe in God in an age which has lost, to so large an extent, its awareness of beauty and mystery, and its sense of awe. Modern philosophy has so little of the beautiful in it. So it is with modern fiction and drama and poetry. The contemporary poet, James Dickey, came to the campus of Emory & Henry College a few years ago to give readings from his works. After his program, we were having coffee together and I recall that I asked him the question, "Why did 17 of your 24 poems, Mr. Dickey, deal with the idea of death?" He was startled, he said, "I didn't realize that this was so," but then he smiled and rejoined, "I suppose it is the times in which we live." A student came to my office at Emory & Henry one afternoon and very courteously requested permission to attempt to convert me to the Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre. I had no ready excuse which would make this experience less likely to occur, so I acquiesced, and for two hours, he sat in my office and with a kind of obsession, with occasional logic and with frequent eloquence, he pled his cause. Finally, he looked up into my face and said, "Now what do you think?" I reacted with absurd oversimplification. I said, "I think, sir, that there is not sufficient place in your thought for the beauty of a rose or for the song of orioles and golden robins." I read in an old essay the other day a statement one man made about another. It was this. "He seemed always to sit loose with regard to the things of time." What a beautiful, beautiful description of a human personality, and yet, my friends, in a world of color television and automatic toothbrushes, it isn't easy for a man or a woman to sit loose with regard to the things of time. Contemporary philosophy and the scientific method, with all of their great validities, operating as they do in the context of present-day luxury, make it extremely difficult for religion's awe and wonder to stay alive in a modern Christian soul, and this is one of the fundamental problems the Church confronts in our time. Then in the third place, New Testament Christianity met human need head on and dealt with it effectively. I've never believed that this passage constitutes a New Testament documentation for the idea of communism. As a matter of fact, every public religious feast in Jerusalem had a temporary community of property. No man purchased lodging. Lodging was shared for such an occasion. Our passage says they sold their possessions and parted them, and surely this means that this little company of Christians had had to remain in the city longer than they had planned and some adequate provision for their physical needs had to be arranged. There seems to be ample evidence in the Bible, particularly in Paul's Corinthian correspondence, to suggest that the Church in Jerusalem never had an absolute community of property, unless for a very short period of time. What this passage really means is that New Testament Christianity, at its earliest institutional moment, met human need head on and dealt

with it effectively. L. P. Jacks has given philosophical expression to this action in his definition of the Church as the union of those who love for the sake of those who suffer. There have been a great many things said about the Church in recent years that I do not understand and some with which I cannot agree, but to me, at least, the most authentic word that has come about the Church in modern days is the word which describes it as the servant Church, and this means that you and I who are Christian people must move out of the vaulted architecture of our elegant sanctuaries, out into the ghettos of human suffering and human sin and carry with us the message of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. It means that human values must always have priority over property and prestige and power. It means even that the institution itself is legitimately expendable for the sake of the cause it represents. Someone put it memorably when he said, "The Church exists for the sake of those who are not yet in it." When I was a student at university, I remember one of my professors said, "87 cents out of every \$1 raised by the Church goes for the purpose of keeping its own machinery in motion." If this is so, my friends, there is no wonder that anti-institutionalism is rampant in our day. No, the servant Church must go out wherever there is human distress, wherever there is human sin, wherever there is ignorance and illiteracy, wherever there is disillusionment and dismay, and the Church must relate itself relevantly to those conditions in the name of God and in the spirit of Jesus Christ, but it must not go to save itself. It must go because there is where its mission lies. And again, I am convinced that New Testament Christianity had always a sense of joy and fellowship. A man or a woman cannot live without this, my friends. I suppose I have held the two loneliest jobs that the Methodist Church could give to a person. I've been a college president and now I'm a bishop, and I must confess to you that I do not believe very many people really care a great deal for either. Sometime last year, the oppression and the loneliness of my task closed in around me like a dismal cloud, and I went to my study and called a university made of earlier years, a minister in another city. I said to him, "I don't want anything except to hear you talk a while." He said to me, "Well, that's a switch." And it was because I don't remember ever having wanted to hear him talk a while before, but I needed the sense of companionship and fellowship that came across the wires and through the miles. Years ago I heard the distinguished editor, Dr. Orien W. Fifer, tell an interesting story of an occasion when he was concluding a Pullman journey. He was coming down the steps of his car early one morning. Standing at the foot of the steps was an old negro porter, administering to each of his passengers as he departed. In front of Dr. Fifer, there was a gentleman who evidently had had a rough night, and as the old porter began to brush him, this man commenced to curse him. After a while, the cursing ceased, and the old porter only smiled and said to the man, "Well, anyway, sir, I hope you have a good day." Dr. Fifer reached the foot of the steps next and he said to the old negro porter, "I must ask you, my brother, how it is that you can hear a fellow human being curse you as this man just cursed you and make no retaliation." The old porter was silent for a moment and then he began softly to sing, "I'm living on the mountain underneath the cloudless God. I'm drinking from a fountain that never shall run dry. I'm feasting on the manna from a bountiful supply for I am dwelling in Beulah Land." Very quietly he turned to Orien Fifer and said, "I have some of God's poetry in my soul." This is true of the Methodist people at their best. The only valid book of theology the Methodist possesses is the "Hymnal." We have always been convinced that we ought to sing our great doctrines rather than systematize them or debate them, and therefore there has always been, at the root of our theology, a kind of doxology, a spirit of authentic joy. It's this, dear friends, that helps a man or a woman to stand when the storms of life and the persecution break across his or her life. Finally, I am persuaded that New Testament Christianity had constantly the ability to influence men toward God. Evangelism in our time must be more ingenious, more subtle, more insistent,

more hope than ever before. It may be that some of the old methods won't work anymore, although as Bishop Kennedy has recently reminded us, "Not all of us should be sure because we haven't really tried them." The real peril of evangelism in our time is our own debilitating lack of Christian faith. The problem is theological and not methodological. We are simply no longer sure that God is a redeeming God and that man is lost without that redemption. The experience of salvation does not mean enough to us to cause us to covet it for other people. Real evangelism is always that spontaneous, irrepressible desire to share with another person a possession so precious that it simply cannot be selfishly hoarded. The method of the sharing is always secondary to the fact that it must be shared. Compassionate compulsion will find a way, either old or new. Cleverly, we have developed a sophisticated philosophical rationale for our unevangelistic doubt. It has two points. The first is that any attempt to persuade another person to a particular religious point of view constitutes an invasion of his privacy and an abrogation of his liberty. The second point insists, without any regard for historical evidence to the contrary, that a man's inner life can be transformed through the alteration of his environment. Thus it is that evangelism becomes the civil rights movement and the war on poverty. Now granted that these are important and basic considerations in our time, it does not require a great deal of spiritual insight for people like you and me to determine that these positions are poles away from the New Testament teaching about evangelism. Receiving people by transfer into your membership from another denomination, relocating new residents in the community where they now live may be important pastoral functions of a Church but they are not evangelism. Evangelism is leading a sinner to God. Evangelism is convincing a doubter. Evangelism is persuading a socially insensitive man to make his business ethic, his racial attitude, and his politics Christian. Evangelism is persuading an avid secularist to consider spiritual values. Evangelism is reminding a disillusioned person that there is still meaning in life and an atheist that God is yet alive. Church will have great problems in this area in the years just ahead. I mention only two. In the era of a more inclusive Christian fellowship, how will the Church determine to evangelize with regard to social class, to race, and to national origin, and what method and message will be determined effective for the conveying of the gospel to the academic community, to the working man, and to the world of arts and letters, three conspicuous examples of the Church's failure to communicate in our time. Long years ago, John Wesley said, "The only thing you have to do is to save souls," but I doubt if even he realized how delicate and how difficult and how demanding that task could be in 1966. However, beyond statistics, beyond architecture, beyond program, the authentic measure of the efficiency of a Church is still its ability to influence men and women toward God. Let me close with a story. When I was a university student, I had a friend who was the proctor in our dormitory, at least most of the time he was my friend. There were occasions when I violated his rules and the friendship was suspended, but this afternoon, everything was all right. I came in from the library and passed his room. I saw him lying on the upper bunk of a double-decker bed, waved to him, and then I did a double take. He was reading the "Methodist Hymnal." No, I knew him fairly well. He was a grand guy, but he wasn't religious. I'd helped him upon many occasion to fix his tie as he was prepared to go out for a party or a dance a particular evening. He motioned me to come into the room and to be seated, and then he began to read to me "The Korean Creed," and as his voice marched bravely down those magnificent sentences, a spell of awe fell on both of us. Finally, when he was through, he tossed the book aside and he said, "Earl, you know, I'm proud to be part of an outfit that believes something as great as that." That was all, went on to my dinner, but two years later, I remembered, when LeRoy Walton went down in the waters of the Pacific during World War II, I remembered what he said. "I am proud to be part of an outfit that believes something as great as that." If

God will help you and me to realize afresh the implications of being part of an outfit that believes something as great as that, then perhaps, as was true the night his musicians played for Toscanini, all the music that is within us will sweep up toward that face. Grant to us, O God our Father, clarity of mind, warmth of heart, and resoluteness of will that in our time, we may recapture, for the Church we know, certain qualities which the Church of long, long ago possessed. In the name of Jesus Christ, now make grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be among us and abide with us forevermore.  
(congregation singing)