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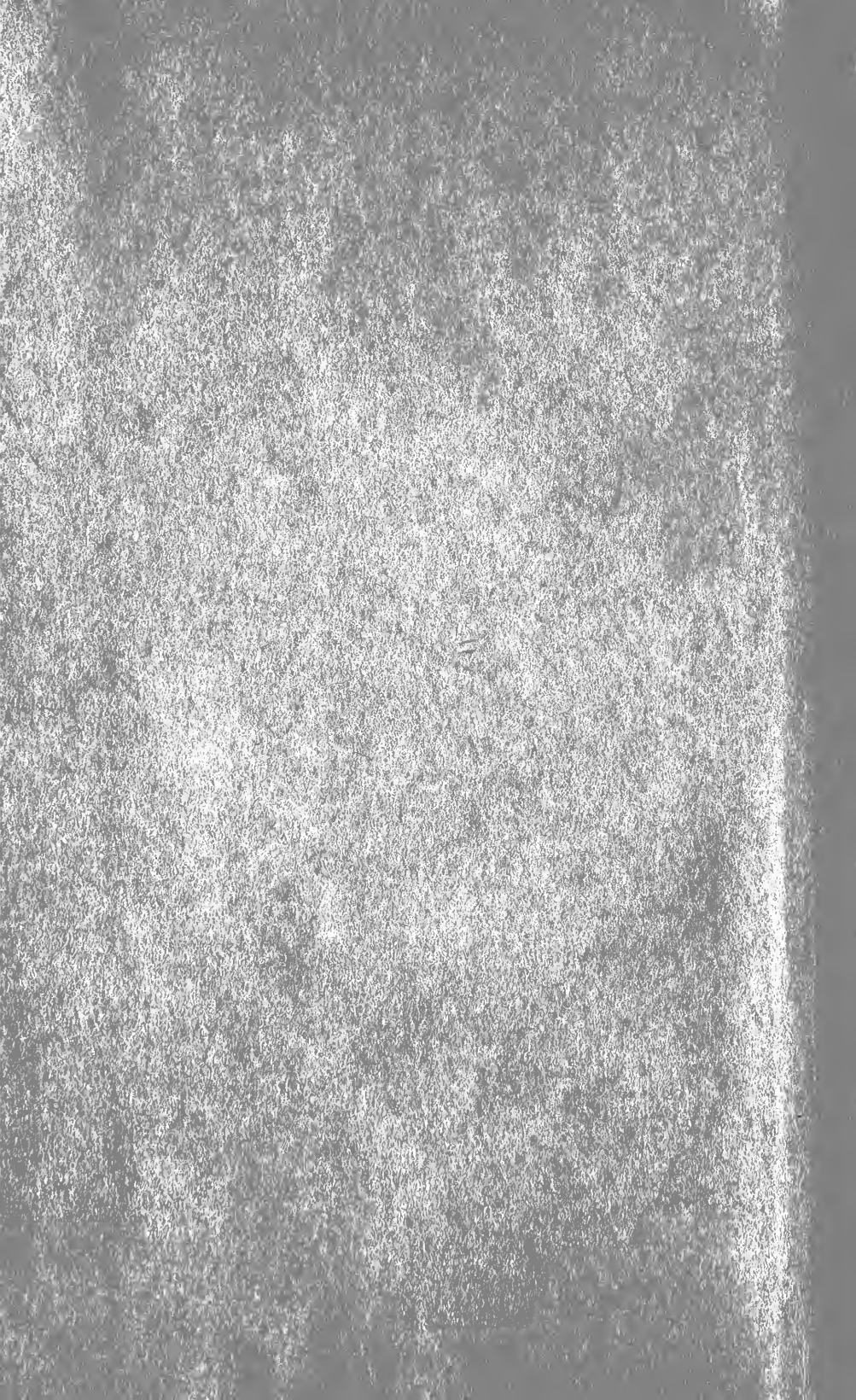
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THE
CHURCH AND THE MASSES.

BY
REV. JOHN CUCKSON.



AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,
BOSTON.

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“The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity ; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.” — ARTICLE I. *of the By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

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THE CHURCH AND THE MASSES.

THE Church and the masses! By the Church in this connection I do not mean any particular variety of Christianity, nor by the masses any special class of society. My object for the moment is to consider the position of the Christian Church in general as it stands related in our own time to the vast multitude of men and women who dwell in the great centres of population. It is obvious to every patient, discriminating mind that the subject is of the deepest importance, and raises questions which no serious person can disregard. Whether we look at the comparatively meagre attendance at most of the churches, despite the frantic and, for the large part, pitiable efforts which are continually being put forth, without avail, to reach the masses; or consider the drift of modern life toward worldliness and an absorption in secular pursuits and pleasures to the utter neglect of organized religion in any form,—the outlook, to say the least of it, is not encouraging. While it may certainly not be said that Christianity has lost any of its intrinsic power and grace, it nevertheless cannot be denied that from one cause or another its influence has not been commensurate with the needs of the age and the increase of population. And there is growing up in our midst, throughout every social grade, a disregard of its ordinances and an indifference to its

claims. It is not enough to say that there is more of it in the atmosphere, and that in some shapeless and undefined fashion it pervades the public mind. That may or may not be; but if it can be shown that the trend of life is toward material prosperity and self-indulgence, whether coarse or refined, and away from an institution in which are trained ideal faiths and unselfish hopes and affections, then there is abundant ground to fear that our common Christianity is losing its control of the forces which are shaping civilization.

A large part of the prevailing indifference to the Christian Church is the result of arrested spiritual development, — of persistent and habitual neglect of those faculties common to mankind, which, “be they what they may, are yet the fountain light of all our seeing.” It begins in the home. Religion has largely ceased to be a plant of domestic culture, and secularism grows out of a defective religious training, or from no religious training whatever. If children are born and bred in homes from which religion in every form is exiled, and are left to pick up their knowledge of God and Christ and sacred things from casual and, necessarily, fitful and imperfect teaching for a few brief years in the Sunday-school, the result must be disastrous to them. It matters little whether the home be one of wealth and refinement, or of commonplace mediocrity, or of hopeless poverty. If the prevailing atmosphere be secular, unideal, undevout, the result will be the same, — a generation of men and women, possibly free from vulgar vices, but with no sense of infinite relations, no enthusiasms for lofty ideals, and devoid of spiritual experiences.

Does not this fact alone let us into the whole secret of the alienation of so many young men and women in all ranks of life from religion and its institutions? Parents

and ministers bewail their indifference and isolation, look upon their estrangement with pain and sorrow, now reproach them for their carelessness and then ply them with tender and beseeching solicitude, but all to no purpose. The mischief was done in early life, and of all places in the home. No definite religious bias was given to the mind in the most sensitive and plastic period of its growth; and they who might have been ardent disciples of Christ and devoted church members, gradually drift away from all religious association, and soon come to be stolid pagans in the midst of a civilization which professes to be Christian.

Then the ranks of the unchurched are further increased by a growing body of men and women, mostly men, who profess religious opinions, and then take no further thought about them. They are nominal Christians, not unfriendly to the Church and its services, but simply indifferent. They do not ignore Christianity altogether, but distinctly and habitually give it the smallest place in their regards. The neglect of religion which goes to the length of atheism or agnosticism is not common; it is speculative, not practical, and can hardly be counted as one of the working forces of civilization. But the conduct which is logical and rational only on the supposition that religion is a matter of no consequence is lamentably common. In other words, there are thousands of men and women in whose daily lives there is only the most fleeting reference to God and scarcely any disposition to worship. They would be ashamed to doubt the verities which they systematically ignore. Their faith in God is a mere idol of the mind, a cold and passionless creation of the intellect and imagination. They believe in Christ, but shrink from anything like pronounced and helpful discipleship. The Bible may be all true from Genesis to Revelation,

— they would most likely say that it is, — but the book does not deeply interest them, and exercises no authority over them. The Church is a great institution, and they are not unwilling to admit its power and place in the community and recognize its beneficent influence upon life; but they respect it at a distance, and seldom, if ever, enter its precincts. Prayer is beautiful, but, so far as they are concerned, it is a lost art. Their lives are so thronged with other things, which touch them far more closely and affect them more vitally, that they have neither leisure nor inclination for spiritual worship. There is little reality and no force in their religion. It is wholly inoperative, and might just as well be called by some other name. Suggest to such people that for their own good as well as for the benefit of their children and neighbors they might make a difference between week-days and Sundays, and encourage with their presence the church which needs *them* far more than their good opinion or their annual subscriptions, and they will most likely indorse the suggestion, and promise to turn over a new leaf; but, once under the spell of religious indifference, repentance is difficult, if not impossible. Once relinquish worship, whether in the home or in the church, and it is hard to rekindle the ashes of a dead or a dying faith.

How to revive in the unchurched a lost devotion, and restore to religious fellowship a worldly backslider, is the toughest problem an earnest minister has to face. And the problem is all the deeper, if this otherwise good man, as frequently happens, is the head of a large family, or a person of commanding public influence and position. The better the man, the more insidious and wide-spread is his influence in this particular, both in the home and in society. His children and associates will take their cue from his habits rather than from his

precepts. Himself heedless of the claims of religion and indifferent to its institutions, he is apt to be reckless of the tendencies in his household. Whether his children go to church or stay at home is a matter of indifference to him, and it soon becomes of no concern to them; and it is not long before the last link between his family and his church is severed, and the pew once filled with a united and happy group is empty altogether or only occupied at intervals by an occasional visitor. Is not this a true story of religious declension written on the records of a thousand churches? When a man becomes oblivious for a long time to the eternal trusts, reverences, aspirations, and contritions of the soul, prayer becomes an unwonted and tedious experience, and anything worth the name of religion a forgotten story.

But, if we may judge by the multiform and plausible excuses for non-attendance at church, the chief obstacle of the delinquent to his full allegiance to organized religion is found in the existence of what he calls social caste. He does not tell us by what process the differences between wealth and poverty are to be obliterated either in the Church or elsewhere; but he somehow thinks that, so long as they exist, they constitute an insuperable barrier to fellowship. If he is poor, he flatly refuses to sit in a church which is mainly occupied and supported by the wealthy; and if he is rich, there is a strong disposition to go to church with his own class or not to go at all. And so there has sprung up a widespread sentiment against the costly church on the one hand, and the so-called mission church on the other. If we look deeply into the grounds upon which this prejudice rests, — for at its root it is nothing more than a prejudice, — we shall find that wealth and poverty are not movable at pleasure, but are here to stay. They exist in business, in politics, and in society; and nothing

that we can do will keep them out of the churches, and therefore the best thing is simply to recognize the fact, and eschew the demagogism which continually magnifies and emphasizes the difference between them, and sets them farther and farther apart, instead of doing everything that can be done to adjust their inequalities and bring them closer together.

Besides, the social character of a particular church is not determined on any abstract principle, but on the needs of those for whom and by whom it was built, and the character of the neighborhood in which it is situated. Even the size and seating capacity of the edifice is no unimportant factor in determining what it can do and what it cannot do in accommodating worshippers. A church is usually built to meet the needs and requirements of a limited number of people. A few families in a given neighborhood meet together, and decide to erect a church to suit their religious needs and tastes. It is to be a house of worship for them and for their children, and for so much of the general public as they are able to accommodate with seats. The sense of proprietorship and privilege enters, and I venture to say ought to enter, into all their plans. The church is for them and their families, and is their spiritual home in a sense in which it can never be the home of casual visitors and strangers.

You may say that this is exclusive if you choose, but it is an exclusiveness which is both inevitable and justifiable. It does not arise from social pride or narrowness, but from conditions, mainly outward and unavoidable, inherent in the constitution of voluntary religious societies, which have always existed and will continue to exist. If the State were erecting churches at its own cost, and to provide for the religious needs of the general public, then private ownership of pews and claims to

special privileges would be unjust; but when a limited number of people build a church for themselves first, and then for the outside public so far as their resources will allow, they are not to be reproached on account of the social character of the congregation. There is no reason whatever why, under the principles of Congregationalism, the members of any particular church should not regulate their own affairs without regard to the outside public; and, since they have to pay the annual cost of weekly worship, it is surely their business to adopt that plan of covering the expenses which best guarantees an adequate and permanent support, and which suitably provides accommodation for their families. To say that this is unsociable and undemocratic is to misunderstand the first principles of Congregational polity.

But, having done this, it may be fairly argued whether a church so constituted ought to stop at that point. Having satisfied the claims of its own people, if it is wise, it will provide one service on Sunday for the public, a service in which proprietorship and privilege are relinquished. And, wherever this is done, it ought to be done handsomely. In our efforts to be inclusive and to meet the demands of people who cannot be accommodated comfortably at our regular services do what we will, there ought to be nothing that seems like patronage. The working classes whom we long to reach because we believe that we have a gospel that will help them are averse to condescension. They don't want any inferior seats in our churches any more than they want our churches built meanly for the poor, and conducted just as meanly. If we are to do anything for them, let us give them nothing short of our best, and let whatever is done be done out of our abundance and not according to their necessities. Something of this kind has been attempted at Arlington Street Church, Boston. That

is, as you know, a proprietary church. Its pews are all owned, and are all taken; and at the morning service visitors have to risk their chance of being accommodated at once with seats. If they will only wait a little while, — and there is no earthly reason why they should n't, — there is never much difficulty about seating them. The owners of pews, there as elsewhere, with very rare exceptions, are courteous and hospitable to strangers. No man, however poor, is judged by his poverty. A seat is found for him, and books, and, unless he carries pride in his own heart and morbidly broods over social disparities, nothing happens to him to discount the truth there that rich and poor meet together, and the Lord is the Maker of them all. But at the vesper worship in the afternoon the entire church is given up to strangers, and a service is provided which in no respect falls behind that which is held for church members in the morning. It is not a service for the poor, and there is nothing poverty-stricken about it. It is a service for the masses; and of all the vast throng which gathers there from week to week, from October to the middle of May, not one man is made to feel that his self-respect is injured or that he is being patronized. If he wants to contribute something in return for his church privileges, he has an opportunity of doing so three or four times during the season, not, however, to the society itself, but to the various charities in which it is interested. It is true the church is comfortably furnished. Everything has been done which wealth and good taste can do to make it comfortable and attractive, but these ought to be helps more than hindrances. I rather pity the man who prefers to worship God in the open air or in some unattractive hall, and who makes the material surroundings of a church a hindrance to Christian fellowship. He is surely poor material to

work upon, and it is futile to attempt to conciliate him. Meet him on his own ground if you will, preach to him in public places and the slums, but do not permit his prejudice against decent and becoming surroundings to be cast as a reproach against the churches.

Then, further, it is alleged that the average minister and his message are out of date. We are told, until we are tired of hearing it, that the churches are deserted because their services are not in touch with the intellectual and moral requirements of the age. The forms of worship, it is said, are too stiff and ecclesiastical, and the preacher has seldom anything to say which is either new or true. The atmosphere of the church is mediæval, and the minister dwells too habitually upon thoughts and things which belong to antiquity. The non-attendant at church, it will be observed, is nearly always a superior person. He is apt to be more or less of an intellectual Pharisee. And his sweeping indictment of the mental condition of the churches usually rests upon very inadequate data. It is true enough of some churches and of some ministers, but it is absolutely false and unjust as applied generally to churches and ministers. The churches of Christendom at the present day are full of modern thought, and are keenly alive to their duty in respect to the social and industrial problems of the hour, even though some of them do continue to employ forms of prayer sanctified by long use, and born in an age of faith and deep spiritual repose, in preference to the crude, hectic, rambling, and often unspiritual utterances of an age in which faith is feeble, and repose is the exception and not the rule.

Then as to the ministers, they are not persons requiring much commiseration either as to what they are or what they do. And yet how much of it is condescendingly given to them! It is positively revolting to be

compelled to listen to the supercilious flippant criticism of the ministry from the lips of superior persons who boast how seldom they enter a church, and from men of the world. One wonders where they have studied the clergy, and whether they have attended church long enough or taken a sufficiently creditable part in religious work, to be able to speak with confidence of men who not only stand valiantly for the best things in modern civilization, but who give their lives unselfishly to every humane and righteous cause. There are no set of men more democratic in their sympathies than the clergy of all denominations; and when I try to recall the names of those who have contributed to the solution of the social, industrial, and economic problems of our age, not a few of them have been clergymen in active ministry or laymen who were once clergymen. A clergyman's first duty is, of course, to his parish. The work which is nearest to his heart is naturally that of which his church is the centre. He cannot leave the spot he is set to till, and the special task he was educated to perform, and which, if rightly attended to, will tax all his powers and monopolize the greater part of his time, and tramp the country as social agitator or partisan politician. His education, not less than his commission, defines and fixes the orbit in which he must move. To reproach him for not doing more, or not doing something which he apparently elects not to do, is often as unreasonable as it is ungenerous. But it is said, he is a man of leisure, and is moreover obsequious and the apologist of his wealthy supporters, and so the masses have little or nothing to expect from him. This is a misapprehension coupled with a rather contemptible implication of cowardice. What the clergyman of a great city parish is called upon to do, whether that parish be rich or poor, is best known to himself. He knows much better than any outsider what

are the responsibilities, the cares, the incessant toil of brain and heart, incidental to the effort to hold rich and poor, fervent and indifferent, loyal to the loftiest ideals and devoted to unselfish service and sacrifice. He knows all the demands which are involved in his pastoral duties and obligations, some of them easy and pleasant to the last degree, while others are a constant tax upon the nerves and heart. He knows how numerous are the calls upon his time and thought outside his parish and mainly in works of public charity; and the taunt so often levelled against him that on the whole he is more ornamental than useful, is inconsiderate, flippant, and ill-natured. And as for the obsequious clergyman, truckling to the rich and neglectful of the poor, subservient and cowardly, in my long experience I have never met him; and I do not believe that he exists anywhere except in the prolific imagination of a wretched demagogue.

So far we have considered alleged obstacles to the power of churches over the masses, some of which are obviously not very serious. They are either unreasonable or trivial or unavoidable. Let us now probe this question a little deeper, and see whether there be not something in the quality of our customary worship, its tone and spirit and purpose, rather than in its forms and material environment, which accounts in no small degree, if not entirely, for not a little of the popular indifference to churches. Have we settled in our minds very definitely and clearly what is the normal function of a church? Is it not too true that the popular idea of the Church is, like the popular notion of Christianity, somewhat hazy and ill-defined? To many minds Christianity is everything, and everything is Christianity; and it would almost seem as if the religion of Jesus were reduced to the alternative of being a conglomerate of metaphysical theories and conflicting principles or a cloud of nebulous mist.

Now it is spoken of as a general philosophy of religion, and is identified with speculations to which Jesus must have been an utter stranger; then it is held to be a cluster of rites and traditions in the custody of a privileged body of priests; here it is little more than higher criticism, and there nothing better than a code of ethical precepts.

The popular conception of the Church partakes of the same miscellaneous character. Sometimes it is set forth as a mere storehouse of ecclesiastical curios, old creeds, obsolete usages and customs. At other times it is either a platform for the discussion of all the problems in philosophy, science, and literature, or a bureau of charity. There can be little doubt, I think, that the nondescript and indefinite character of the Church militates against its popularity. We have not sufficiently emphasized the fact that the Church exists primarily and mainly to cultivate instincts and feelings and aspirations which ripen into character, and that, if it fail at this point, its failure is as disastrous as it is conspicuous. Our natures imperatively demand occasions for the exercise of religious emotion, for gratitude, reverence, contrition, sympathy, affection, opportunities for the growth of faculties which are as distinct from the reason and conscience as art is from logic or poetry from science, and for ages it has seemed to men that in the quiet of the sanctuary and the religious fellowship of kindred minds they found the conditions of worship not to be met with elsewhere or amid other surroundings. And so the true church has, and ought to have, a unique place in human regard. Its work is distinct, unrivalled. It is not that of the school or college or lecture lyceum or charity organization. It may, and it does, touch these at all points, but it exists to accomplish that which lies forever beyond their power. It is all the more necessary to emphasize this truth, be-

cause there is a strong tendency to think lightly of worship in itself, and a disposition to make the church purely educational and philanthropic, the centre of practical utilities rather than the temple of the religious imagination and the palace of the soul. But follow the movements of human history, examine the forces which have been most potent in the progress of humanity, and you will find that faith and worship have been the great factors in human civilization. Not brute force, nor material energy, not even intellectual prowess, but sympathy and affection, service and sacrifice, reverence and worship, have inspired the noblest pages of human history.

Do not misunderstand me, I have no desire to underestimate the value to the Church of scholarship and practical benevolence; but I want to state the plain, blunt fact that men and women owe more of what is highest and best in them to the church than to the college, to their prayers than to their possessions, to religious quickening than to fussy activity in any direction, to the preacher rather than to the essayist or lecturer. Turn where we will, to the silent, secret life of the individual, to the permanent well-being of the family, to the moral condition of the community, the energy that inspires and quickens is an impulse from within, a rich, full tide of invisible trust and affection, which can only arise in the heart of a religious man, and which meditation and prayer can alone create and sustain.

The thing I am contending for as lying within the special power of the Church is that rare something which constitutes the difference between life and creed, between sermon and essay, between the preacher and any other public teacher. Surely, the first object of religious services is to create an atmosphere which is stimulating and inspiring, which produces a conscious sense of communion with God and a conviction of life's infi-

nite and spiritual relations. We do not ask merely whether worship is useful or instructive, but whether it brings the worshipper into helpful and uplifting relations with the object of all worship, the source of all power, the God of all comfort. In other words, it is the special function and privilege of the Church to do for the average man and woman what Nature does in the summer, though in a different and perhaps less adequate way. In the sunny season of the year we abandon ourselves without reserve to the Infinite Spirit of the earth and sky. Our life with Nature is not so much a study as a delight. We look into the star-lit heavens with eyes of wonder and divine surprise. We gaze long and often upon the vast ocean, in storm and calm, thinking far less of its utilities and the vast commerce which rides upon its waves than of the Deity who, without weariness and without rest, holds its countless drops in the hollow of his hand. We ramble through the woods and are contented to be hushed by their solemn stillness and awed by their shadows. We gather wild flowers in the dells and meadows, not as botanists, but simply as lovers of the fragrant and beautiful creations of a mind that seems to riot in its own splendor. We allow the Spirit of the Universe to have its way with us, and yield ourselves to what Wordsworth calls "a wise passiveness." Now, it seems to me that the church and its services should be made to facilitate some measure of the same spiritual abandonment and communion. It ought to be the function of the written and spoken word, of the prayer and hymn, of the music and sermon, to kindle in a degree the rapture which glows in the face of Nature, — nay, to awaken emotions which Nature has no power to disturb. This is what the busy, crowded masses need: not simply instruction, which they can obtain in better form through a hundred channels outside the church:

not dreary homilies, which too frequently only deaden still further the moral sensibilities; not musical pyrotechnics, which encourage criticism rather than devotion; not a dull and cheerless treatment of secular topics, with which they are only too familiar in the monthly magazine and the daily press, but a devotional service which from its opening to its close lifts them for a brief space into unclouded regions of trust and hope, and gives them relief from their burdens of care and solace and healing for their sorrows. Call this sentiment, if you will, but don't forget that in religion, while thought may be necessary, feeling is indispensable: and the mass of people gather more benefit from strong and elevated emotion than from any purely intellectual exercise of which they are capable.

But it may be asked, Has the Church nothing more to do than to create religious ecstasy? Has it no other function than to kindle feeling? Well, if it can do that, and do it as it ought to be done, I venture to think that its power will be greatly augmented and its influence for good extended. We cannot afford to think lightly of services which, though they produce no tangible or material results, go right to the centre of life as nothing else does. We cannot measure the services of the Church by any mere utilitarian standard. Their best results are wrought where measurement is impossible. But why apply our prosy matter-of-fact tests to religion? We do not apply them to art or music or poetry. When we enter a gallery of great pictures, and are stirred by the form and beauty of the artist's creation, we do not stop to gauge the exact worth of our emotions, and wonder whether there is any utility in beauty. We simply yield ourselves to the inspiring sight, and then let it have its way with us. When we listen to the strains of Handel or Mozart or Beethoven, we do not drop into a mood of

prosaic questioning as to whether music produces results in us adequate to the time and money we give to it. No, we simply drink in the divine harmonies, and open every ear of the mind, that we may catch the sublime strains and enjoy the rapture of sounds we cannot hear too often, and with which we cannot be too familiar. When we read a great poem, and come under the spell of a mighty imagination, we no more think of dissecting it than we think of separating the colors of the rainbow, or analyzing the hues of black and gold which glorify the dying hours of an autumn day. So it is with religion. It is enough that it inspires, quickens, soothes, and sanctifies, and by going to the springs of human feeling controls all the currents of being and of action; and he who is able to open the fountains of strong and pure religious emotion to any extent need not envy any man his power for good.

But there is where our difficulty lies. There, if anywhere, is the secret of our spiritual impotency. It is no great task to wrestle with men's doubts, to grapple more or less successfully with the crucial problems of theology, politics, and social life; to enter into the arena of fierce controversy, and fight like gladiators against the champions of conflicting creeds, or to create by some theatrical device a passing sensation that will draw the crowd. But, to make men feel the reality of God instead of merely discussing him with them; to kindle their love for Christ until they give their hearts to him, instead of confusing and perplexing them with speculative Christologies; to present the virtues in such guise that they win men by their beauty and simplicity instead of telling the twice-told tale of the theory of ethics; to convince them that this life, despite its cares and sorrows and sore disappointments, is essentially beautiful, and may be made increasingly so, and that

the life to come is more than a shining possibility, is, in fact, "an everlasting day of perfect knowledge unbroken by a shadowing cloud or a deepening twilight," — that is a nobler and more difficult task, and one which taxes all the powers.

I have not by any means exhausted the long list of apologies for the neglect of religious fellowship. It would be impossible to do so, for human ingenuity has never been so sorely tried in anything as in finding plausible excuses for not going to church. Their name is legion. Every minister encounters them daily whenever he tries to quicken the sense of duty among the lax members of his flock. But I have tried to dispel some of the most powerful prejudices against the Church, and to correct some hurtful misrepresentations. The Church is fallible. It makes mistakes, and often sins against its best interests; and it is common enough for non-churchgoers of a certain kind to assume that light and liberty and progress are with them, and not with the churches. But while the Church may at times be slow in its movements and conservative as to change, it is, nevertheless, in close touch with the rising tides of knowledge and of duty. It is still what it ever has been, — a beacon light amid the gloom. It is the inspirer of the best living reforms, and the generous supporter of every just and humane movement. The strength of the best manhood and womanhood of our time is still consecrated to its service; and although beset and frequently hindered by prejudice and misjudgment, it is doing more than all other institutions put together to make and keep the world in which we live a safe and healthy place for human souls to dwell in.

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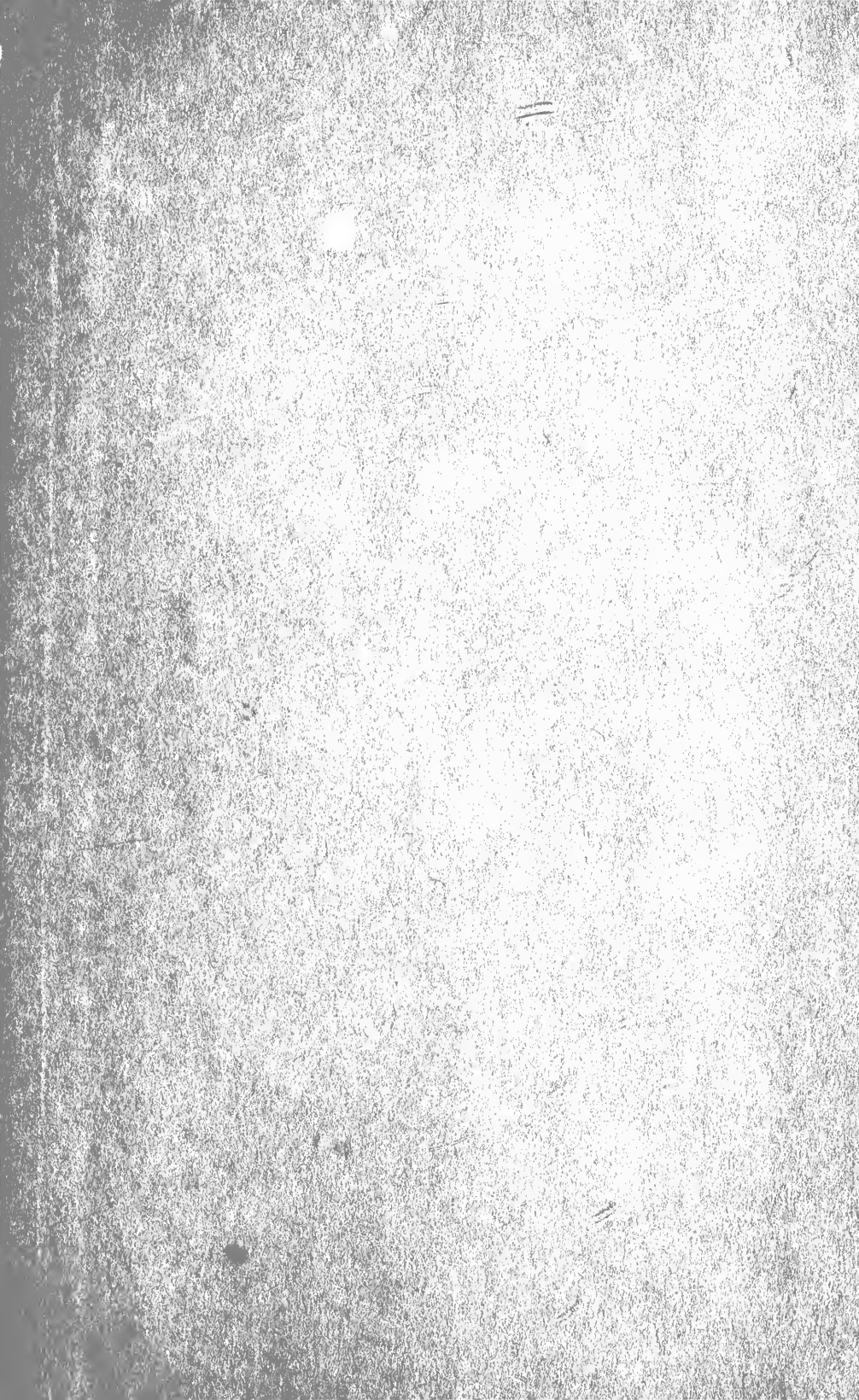
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