ARTICLE IV.

MAKING RELIGION POPULAR.[1]

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"Shall horses run upon a rock? will one plow there with oxen?" (Amos vi. 12, Am. Rev.).

AMOS and his hearers had in mind some locality in the mountains where there were acres and acres of bare and rugged rock. That would not be a good field for a chariot race. The horses would go lame, and would develop no speed. There would be no use in putting an ox-team to plow there; for crops would not grow, even if the plowing were possible. Such attempts would not be merely futile; they would result in damage and loss.

The public men of Israel were proposing to save their country by political combinations, while they neglected personal morality and national justice and Jehovah. The prophet tells them that they might as well attempt a chariot race on yonder steep field of rock; or that they might as well attempt to cultivate its surface with ox-teams, and raise crops there. Their attempts will bring loss, and not gain.

One of the omnibuses that run from the Clifton Springs railway station has a large mirror in front. When the omnibus turns the corner you look into the mirror, and you see reflected there the big brick coal market near the station. You seem to be going toward that brick building, but the more you approach it the farther away you are. This experience is typi-

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cal of a surprisingly large proportion of our human activities. We seem to ourselves to be going toward some goal while we are really getting farther and farther away from it. In trying to accomplish results we make attempts that defeat their own purpose. We make efforts that turn out to be mere plowing upon a rock.

Once I called upon a sick parishioner. Within reach of his bed was a table with a dozen or more vials and packages upon it. As people came to see him each one recommended some different remedy, and he was trying them all, one after another! He seemed to himself to be making strenuous efforts in the direction of recovery, but his efforts took him in the opposite direction. He was plowing upon a rock.

The man who is too stingy in his business expenditures is making an effort for riches that defeats itself. So is the man who is foolishly lavish in his business expenditures. Both are plowing the rock.

In our religious activities we are plowing upon a rock, are making effort that foils itself, if we try to drive men to Christ instead of winning them.

In short, here is a generic form of human experience — experience that comes to us in our business, in our social life, in all our interests; this experience of defeating our purposes by the way in which we seek to accomplish them, so that the more strenuously we labor the farther we are from reaching the result we desire. The subject of the present sermon is — not this generic experience as a whole, but just a single instance under it. The idea which some friends of the church seem to have to the effect that we might make religion popular by letting down its standards of character and service and doctrine — is this idea good business? or is it a lure to an attempt that will defeat itself?

The religion of Christ, as heretofore offered, is a high-priced product. From one point of view it costs us nothing, salvation is free; but from another point of view it costs us everything, it demands that we surrender all. It calls for self-mastery, forbids self-indulgence, proclaims me in debt to God and all God's children, puts a mortgage on my resources and my person to secure the debt. Many persons refuse discipleship because of the stringency of the claims it makes. Would it not be better if Christianity were less rigid? Could it not do more business by adopting a scale of popular prices? by offering discounts? Would it not be well to follow the example of business men, trying to increase our circulation by cutting our rates, to extend the use of our product by lessening the cost to the consumer, to reduce the price in order to stimulate the demand?

I. To be more specific, some tell us that our fathers were too puritanical, with the implication that we might make our religion more attractive by letting down its standard of character and conduct.

If the fathers really were too puritanical, if they condemned pleasures that were innocent and wholesome, if their ideas of life were too repressive — I do not say whether these things were so, but if they were — then it was a case of plowing upon a rock, was a blunder which defeated its own purposes. The intention of one who is mistakenly puritanical is to magnify the beauties of holiness; the actual result may be that he makes holiness tiresome to himself and repulsive to others. If our fathers did this, let us change it, because it is wrong and ought to be changed. But do not cherish the illusion that changing it will have any particular effect in increasing the attractiveness of religion.

There are two reasons against trying to popularize religion

by making concessions to worldliness. First, the attempt is dangerous; and, second, it is useless.

The attempt is perilous. There are some things that will not mix; if you try to mingle them they destroy one another. An old sailor told me of an experiment made by an acquaintance of his in a fixture for an ocean vessel. The fixture in question is commonly made of iron, with an iron bolt through it. A better but more expensive quality is made of copper, with a copper bolt. The man got the idea that he could combine advantages by using a copper bolt with the iron fixture. The result was two metals in contact exposed to the action of salt water, and the result of that was that in no long time the affair was all eaten through with electrolysis. When people try to combine selfish worldliness with religion, they are likely to do it in such a way that electrolysis will set in, to the detriment both of their selfish plans and their religion.

And the attempt to make Christianity attractive by letting down its moral standards is as useless as it is perilous. The religion of Jesus was never intended to be alluring to unspiritual minds. Its attractiveness lies chiefly in the challenge it gives. The challenge offered in its difficulties is a stronger motive than any softened presentment of it can be. My golf partner and I followed a foursome over the course. We observed that from hole to hole the young men became more and more absorbed in their game. Afterward I heard one of them say it was the most interesting game he ever played, because it was so closely contested: no one could guess who would win until some of the balls were actually in the last hole. It is the closeness of the contest which makes certain things interesting. A first-class base-ball nine is not eager for a match with a third-class team. The prospect of an easy victory is no inducement compared with that of a balanced struggle.

The attractive game is that which derives its interest from the difficulty in winning. No depreciated form of Christian character and life has the zest and fire of the genuine form. Christianity cannot be made popular by allowing its ideals to depreciate. If you try to make it cheaper you bring it into contempt as a cheap article.

Paul shows insight when he so often compares the Christian life to an athletic game. The idea did not originate with Paul; Jesus before him had said, "Make a contest to enter in at the narrow gate." Jesus does not let down the standard. He says, "Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect." He says, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself." He attracts by challenge, not by concession. What God sees that we need is not a relaxation of the rules of the contest, but ambition and power — ambition to put up the best game we can, and power from on high to make the ambition effective.

II. Again, there are those who seem to have the idea that we can render religion more attractive by letting down the standard in the matter of religious observances.

We keep the Sabbath less strictly than we used to. We are less punctilious in attending religious services. We stay at home from church for slighter reasons than formerly. We are restless if the sermon exceeds twenty minutes in length. We cut the prayer-meeting down to forty minutes. We consent to church services without preaching and to prayer-meetings without prayers. We let the church and the Sunday-school take vacations. We neglect secret prayer, and count family prayers an obsolete institution. And somehow or other the idea is afloat that changes of this kind have the effect of rendering religion less burdensome and more popular. Is this the case?

I do not now discuss the question whether there are good reasons for any of these changes. If there are, then by all means let us do the sensible thing, whatever it may be. But if any one thinks that laxity in these matters renders religion more attractive he is mistaken. It is a case of plowing on the rock, a case of effort which defeats its own purpose.

Religious practices are burdens, if you please to think so; but the reason why devout persons carry them is that they are valuable burdens. We carry them joyfully because we regard them as treasures. To reduce these burdens for the purpose of attracting people may have the effect of an admission that the treasures are less valuable than we have claimed, may bring our claims into suspicion. A particularly shrewd advertising sheet says that a man, on a wager, sat for two hours near London Bridge with a tray of guineas, offering a guinea for a penny to any one who would take it; of all the thousands who passed only one stopped to test and buy a guinea. In religious matters if you offer your guinea for a penny you make people suspicious. They will think that your guineas are bogus, and will not stop to test them.

When you buy suburban real estate the question is not how low the assessments are, but whether the value of the property justifies the assessments. You do not want the lots that are not worth improving.

In the case of religious observances, as in that of Christian morals, attractiveness is largely a matter of challenge. The attractive church is the one that gets most from its people, not the one that asks least. If religious observances are a burden, then our Roman Catholic acquaintances carry immensely heavier loads than we. They abstain from eating flesh on Fridays because the church requires it. They practise fasts, they go to confessional, they attend church Sunday mornings when

most of us are in bed, they subject themselves to privations in order to receive what they regard as the sacraments, they bend under all sorts of financial burdens. They meet these demands with an alacrity and a conscientiousness that put us to shame. Just because their church demands so much it counts for something with them. You are not going to win people to religious observances by making the observances easier.

Persons in delicate health sit three hours at a play or an opera; it will not hurt them to sit half that time at a church service, provided they feel an interest. The attractive church service is not the one in which more important things are sacrificed in the interest of brevity; it is rather the one in which the worldling, being present, cannot see the cushions because of the people on them, and in which he feels the contagion of the interest taken by those around him. The attractive prayer-meeting is not the one that closes when it has just begun, but the one in which those present take part so eagerly that it is difficult to stop when the prescribed minute arrives.

Deliver yourselves from the bondage of the idea that you can attract people by shortening religious services almost to the vanishing point, and by making preaching and prayer and testimony subordinate to the best music you happen to be able to procure. Not thus will you attain your object, but by appealing to the loyalty of Christ's people, and by filling the services full of that which meets human need. Appeal to loyalty; if it came to the worst a disciple ought even to be willing to be bored for the Master's sake. But one is not bored in a gathering where divine-human comradeship and helpfulness are dominant. The remedy for thinly attended services is to make them not briefer, but more vital.

III. Yet again, some appear to have the idea that we might popularize religion by letting down the standard of religious

belief, by dropping the distinctive creeds of the churches, by reducing our theology to a minimum, by insisting less upon the Scriptures as a revelation from God.

Men say that our predecessors have overestimated doctrine as compared with other factors in religion; and, further, that they have appealed too much to authority as compared with appealing to free human thinking. If they have really been guilty under these charges, if they have neglected Christian life and conduct in the interest of doctrinal correctness, if there are men who defend orthodoxy by denying our right to think, then so far forth as they do these things they are plowing on a rock; they are going in the opposite direction from that in which they are trying to go. If the truth really demands that we modify any of the old doctrines, or that we modify the emphasis we put upon them, then of course we ought to do the modifying. But it is a different proposition when we are advised to surrender what seems to us the truth, for the sake of giving our religion a stronger hold upon men.

To make such a surrender is dangerous, because character and conduct cannot be severed from belief. Let it be true, if you please, that the heart and the life are more important than the opinions we hold; none the less it is also true that our opinions are a part of our character, a force in our life. A good many silly outcries have at times become popular; there never was one more silly than the outcry "Not creeds, but deeds." As if one's deeds could be anything else than the expression of his creed! As if our acts could be independent of our convictions! High-class, worthy deeds are nothing else than the utterance of what the doer believes. To imagine that one can build noble character and life on the basis of indifference to truth or falsehood is the worst of delusions.

To make the surrender is dangerous, because even investi-

gation has its rightful limits. Of course, proper investigation is necessary, and is good; but if there is one fact which we all know, and know for certain, it is the fact that there may be such a thing as foolish and dangerous investigation. There are many utterances on religion by persons who claim to have a consuming thirst for reality, and who practise a freedom of thought that is regardless of consequences. Some of these persons are bright and interesting; would it not be well for the church to conciliate them — to do this even at the cost of being less insistent on the evangelical truth? Let me answer by quoting a newspaper item. It is headed "A consuming thirst for knowledge." It tells how a boy fifteen years old placed an obstruction on the track of the Michigan Central Railway. Being asked why he did it, he replied that "he wanted to see how a telescoped train would look." Perhaps we may reasonably be expected to sympathize with that bright lad in his eager search for knowledge, but you would not want to become responsible for him.

To make the surrender is dangerous, especially in the matter of the claim that the Scriptures are a revelation from God. Heretofore Christianity has counted the Bible as a boat supplied by our heavenly Guide. It has not been regarded as unmanly to cross the water in the boat, rather than swim across trusting to our unaided powers. Now some tell us that they suspect the boat of being leaky; and others have so misused the Bible and the evangelical truth that practically these have become to them a snagged and capsized boat. For the sake of these fearful and these wrecked ones, would it not be kindly for us all to let the boat go, and try to swim ashore with them? Isn't it uncharitable and mossbacky still to insist on "The Bible! the Bible! the religion of Protestants"?

Around our campfire on the Seventh lake we discussed

the fact that those who are drowned in the lakes are oftenest the expert swimmers. In case of accident the men who swim off independently may be taken with cramps, or their strength may fail, while those who cannot swim so well stay by the capsized boat; it will still bear some weight, and they may be discovered and rescued by somebody. Then our portly guide arose, and knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and we knew that a piece of wisdom was coming. "Men," said he, "if you are ever snagged or capsized, stick to your boat; don't take to your fins till you have to." Stick to your boat; don't take to your fins till you have to. That is good advice on an Adirondack lake, and it is equally good advice in an evangelical church.

But even if the letting down of the standard were less dangerous, it would be futile as a means of rendering religion more acceptable. Would a religion that is intellectually cheaper be more popular? Perhaps it would, with some people. But the whole effect of such concessions is to defeat the purpose for which they are made. It is a form of plowing on rock. It is common, perhaps because it is easy. To sneer at creeds as outgrown costs but little effort, and no intelligence at all. It is a case in which the plow slips easily over the surface just because it does not penetrate. But make a common-sense question of it. Suppose we consent to surrender much of the evangelical truth, or to leave it in the background, whom shall we win by the surrender? I think that we should not attract even those who talk most contemptuously concerning this old gospel boat of ours. In spite of their talk, most of them do not want to lose the boat. They dare not swim off without it. They sneer at the evangelical theology, but you will not win them by minimizing that theology.

In the matter of religious truth, as in the matters of worship

and of morals, the challenge made by Christianity is one of its chief attractions. It holds on high the obligation to know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent — not merely to trust and love, but to know. Its demands for love and trust and obedience are, thank God, such that very unintelligent persons may meet them; but in proportion as God has given us minds his challenge is that we use our minds in considering our relations to him. Above all the religions, Christianity demands that we take the trouble to be intelligent in religious matters. And the minds which we most covet for the service of the church are those which are most responsive to this challenge.

In our Old Testament reading-lesson we heard how Nahash the Ammonite king attacked Jabesh-gilead, and how they were willing to make conditions with him.

> **"The men of Jabesh said unto Nahash, Make a covenant with us, and we will serve thee. And Nahash . . . . said unto them, On this condition will I make it with you, that all your right eyes be put out; and I will lay it for a reproach upon all Israel" (1 Sam. xi. 1–2, Am. Rev.).**

Poor, weak, foolish, cowardly men of Jabesh-gilead! They were willing to go about with mutilated faces, rather than trust in Israel's God and die fighting. I hope that we are not ready to follow this example. Let no pressure induce us to consent to get along with a mutilated Bible, a mutilated doctrine of salvation, a mutilated ideal of Christian character and service.

How shall the Church hold the young people? Not by smiling at them and saying: "Dear girls and boys, here is a cinch, a place where you can lie down like a pussy-cat among cushions"; not by representing that discipleship is a soft snap, and that you can get through easy; but by pointing to the high standard, and challenging the best there is in them.

Offer them from the Master something to do that will tax their energies to the utmost, and make them feel that there is a sufficient reason for doing it, and you will win those who are leaders, and through them those who follow.

How shall the Church gain influence among the wage-workers? Not by conceding that its great truths concerning morals and worship and touch with God are more or less uncertain and unimportant, but by emphasizing what we know concerning the Wage-worker of Nazareth, and concerning his Father and our Father, and insisting on the strength and comfort and freedom which all who toil may find in these truths.

How shall the Church fill her depleted ministry with strong men? Not by assuring them that in their private lives and their preaching and their conduct of religious services and the influence they exert, we would be glad to have them do and teach any old thing they please, but by so upholding the ethical and liturgical and doctrinal ideals of the gospel as to make a young man feel that it is a great thing to devote himself to those ideals.

How shall the Church fulfill her mission to disciple the nations? Not by sending men to tell them that the Scriptures used to be regarded as an especial revelation from God, and that Jesus was probably a greater moralist than Confucius; but by still proclaiming that "God so loved the world that he gave" his Son, that men might not perish: by proclaiming that there is no "other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved"; by proclaiming that it is the living Son of God, and not the mere remembrance of the dead Jesus, that is with us "always, even unto the end of the world."

How shall you and I, Christian friends, really honor our Lord? Not by asking him for discounts; not by clamoring for

reduced rates; not by devising forms of loyalty that will be less expensive in point of morals and of effort; not by using worship as if it were chiefly entertainment rather than service; not by being ignorant or uncertain or indifferent concerning the evangelical truth; not by accepting a scale of popular prices in matters of duty and worship and knowledge; but by wholehearted love and obedience.