

ARTICLE V.

THE LEADERSHIP OF THE CHURCH IN MODERN
LIFE.

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THE prevailing note in current discussions of the church is a doleful one. Anybody with his eyes half open can assume the rôle of a prophet of despair, and chant his little dirge over the decline of the ancient and venerated institution. It is a patent fact that people do not go to church as they themselves used to, or as their parents did. Recently in London a daily newspaper, intending to take a careful census of attendants upon all the churches on a certain Sunday, was dissuaded from doing so by certain Free Church leaders, who felt that the revelations could not but be disheartening from the point of view of the church. As I write, comes this private letter from an editor of the leading religious paper in Great Britain, in which he writes, "Again our membership and Sunday-school figures are down. Worse than all, the churches are listless and lifeless." Moreover, while, in this country, church membership shows fairly good increase from decade to decade, as compared with the growth of population, much of it is nominal; and to-day, outside even of that rather enigmatic relationship which classifies as adherents all the brothers-in-law of the church—the summer boarders and the men and women who attend on Easter Sunday only, there remain at least twenty million persons not connected with the church by even such slender ties as these. That means that the number of persons totally unreachd, and so far as we can

say unaffected, by the church in its organized life, is as large as the entire population of this country in 1845.

One might dwell, too, upon the dwindling and decadent prayer meetings, the decline in candidates for the ministry, the hesitancy of the church to discern and defy wrongs, the absence of a clear message and carefully thought out program, the chronic indifference of multitudes, the calm disdain with which they pass by on the other side, the fiery indignation with which certain associations of men and women denounce the church for its inconsistencies and weaknesses.

Now what about such an outburst of pessimism? Shall we of the churches dispute its substantial accuracy, or shall we present as persuasively as we can a number of counter considerations that offset to a considerable degree the savage indictment? I for one am tired of diagnosis. Let us proceed with a positive program. Whatever the merits or demerits of the church, its look must always be forward. If in three particulars the church can mount to a high level, it will gain in prestige and power.

First, the righteousness and efficiency with which a church administers its corporate affairs determines, to a considerable degree, its hold upon the consciences and intellects of the world. The church is a buyer of goods, an employer of labor, a business concern. It should set a high standard of fairness, thoroughness, and promptness. Before it can influence the vast and ceaseless operations of business on change, in stores, factories, foundries and mines, it must pay its minister and sexton a living wage and pay it punctually. Before it can help to improve the external appearance of the village, town, city, where it is, it must see that its own property is in good repair and that its immediate surroundings carry no suggestion of untidiness or neglect. Before it can

consistently demand that the municipality keep its accounts with exactness and raise and administer the common revenues through methods that can endure testing of the strictest efficiency expert, it must handle its own finances and apportion its gifts for benevolences with wisdom and energy.

But the church is not simply a business organization. It offers to the world a basis of association, the terms of which ought, from time to time, to be carefully studied, with a view to adjusting them to existing conditions. A creed which represented the consensus of Christian belief a century or even half a century ago may not be, in all its details, a creed to which the thinking man of to-day should be asked to subscribe. A thoroughgoing revision of their creeds would do much to reestablish some churches in the confidence of men and women who have some idea of the movement of thought in scientific and philosophical circles, who are aware of the flood of light which has fallen on the Old Testament and the New Testament records during the past fifty years, who have come to see that the least that Jesus requires in obedience and personal devotion in order to admit men to his companionship is the least which the church which calls itself by his name can require in those who would matriculate in his earthly school.

This is not reducing faith to a minimum. It is giving faith room enough in which to breathe and grow, and bear fruit. Simplify and Christianize our creeds. Let us pass them through the alembic of to-day's Christian experiences. They will come out shorter, shorn of their antiquated phraseology and their dogmatic elaborations; but when they emerge from the revising process they will have gained in reality, grip, and power. It is not the length of a creed that saves us, but its vitality. As Dr. Charles H. Parkhurst well says, "If a

man really believes in the first clause of the Apostles' Creed, it is charged with sufficient motive to tear him to pieces." We can do no one thing which will help more to maintain the intellectual and moral leadership of a group of churches which have historically stood for courage, honesty, and the forward look than to adjust our creedal basis to the Christian thinking and experiences of the twentieth century.

In still another field of the church's corporate life there is call for the display of those qualities which make for leadership. A local church is not a separate entity. It is one of a great sisterhood. It should be constantly studying its resources and its opportunities, to determine how its particular contribution to the kingdom may fit in with those of the other churches. When, after careful study of the situation, it is clear that through federation or coalition it may accomplish more than by pursuing its solitary way, then without delay the step toward a temporary or permanent merging of forces should be taken, even though it involve sacrifice of precious associations and an historical name. The plain call of duty should be looked upon as a challenge of Christ, and a chance to test his own promise, "He who loseth his life shall save it."

Another way to vindicate the leadership of the churches is through coöperation with the forces of the modern world that are affecting the life of multitudes. The church has to compete for the interest and attention of men with institutions that possess much inherent strength and many acquired resources. As the world grows more complex and the pace of life increases, these counter attractions become more alluring. The church ought to have a definite policy toward them; so that when any new force or movement emerges, the church should neither shut itself up in its shell and refuse to

have any relations to it, nor confine itself to a policy of denunciation and repression. It may properly cry "No quarter" to such entrenched evils as the liquor and gambling business; but to other activities, neither wholly good nor wholly bad, fraught with many possibilities of harm and perhaps as many possibilities of good, the attitude should be one of discrimination.

The church's instinct, for example, with reference to education has always been true and strong. It has provided schools and colleges where they were lacking. At times it has sought to control their administration. Always it has recognized that education was the handmaid to religion. In the field of literature the instinct of the church has not invariably been so unerring. Fiction has sometimes been tabooed; and young people, instead of being trained to appreciate the better and the best stories, have been advised to confine themselves to studying biographies, histories, and missionary textbooks. This attitude of the church no longer prevails, throughout the country; but in the field of amusement we see the old-time tendency to choose the easier path, that of total abstinence and denunciation, rather than the more difficult yet wiser course of discrimination.

But the church is coming to see that as man has a soul to be saved and a mind to be informed and trained, so also he is born with a desire to be amused, and that what man and youth in the ceaseless strain of modern life need is relaxation. The essential thing is that the diversions should be wholesome and really re-creating. It is probably not the business of one church in fifty to go into the picture-show business; but it is the business of all the churches to put its purifying touch upon the amusements of a city or a town, and now and then, in rare cases, as in Pawtucket, R. I., recently, in con-

nection with the Civic Theater, to institute the right kind of facilities for entertaining and at the same time instructing the mobile, volatile, impressionable men and women of many nations, and the boys and girls, that throng the streets of our great manufacturing cities.

This same thought applies to other forces that enlist the interest and energy of the world to-day,—to the newspaper press, daily and Sunday, to big and little business, to politics, international relationships, and to the rise of such movements within organized Christianity as the Immanuel Movement. The church should know about and care about all these and kindred forces that take powerful hold of contemporaneous life. It should demand that they be their best, and that they do their best for those who come under their influence.

One more way in which the church can maintain and extend its influence is by specializing on religion. Each of the great institutions of society has its particular work to do. If it fails in that, no matter how many other good things it may do, it has no reason for continued existence, and sooner or later will be supplanted by a more efficient agency. The one great objective of the church is to make men aware of God, to bring them into conscious, filial relationship with him and into the genuine discipleship and the effective service of Jesus Christ. It must be doing that all the time, and with more success as the years go by. This objective gives dignity and worth to the hours of morning and evening worship, the instruction of the Sunday school, the assemblies for conferences and prayer, the ministry of the Word, the passing of the message from lip to lip, the expression of the gospel in terms of practical helpfulness. Through this and kindred indispensable instrumentalities the world may be brought into the

presence of unseen realities, and its latent hunger for God aroused and satisfied.

A hard task this is in an age seemingly content with things seen and temporal; but unless the church gladly assumes and bravely discharges this its main task, it will forfeit the respect of thinking men and disappoint reformers and social workers at a time when the most discerning among them are realizing that ethical maxims and educational processes need the powerful assistance of religion. The reason why so much betterment work fails to produce the desired changes in individuals is that there is no background in the way of parental example and teaching on which settlement workers and public and private-school teachers can count. The children and young people for whom such noble and self-denying efforts are put forth go back to homes where there is no religious atmosphere and few of the sterling virtues induced by household religion of a genuine type.

The church, if it did but realize the fact, has the goods the world wants and needs. The church can convey what no settlement or hospital or associated charities can give,—the grace and mercy of God, the teaching, the companionship, the saviourship of Christ. To dabble in a thousand and one venturesome devices in the hope of catching the multitude and at the same time to neglect or disesteem the great salvation and the great commission is to invite disaster.

Recognizing the justice of the challenge to the church to save society, and fully sympathizing with many new methods and experiments, I would register my conviction that the church, whatever methods it adopts, must cling to its central message and its spiritual aims. It must mediate and distribute the pardon, the peace, the comfort, the hope, the warning,

the incentive, which go with the disclosure of the compassion of the infinite God.

Who are the men and women who make up the modern world whose respect we of the church desire? Walk with me in imagination up a little village street with which I am familiar. We pass first between two houses in one of which lives a lonely old man, his wife and children gone, fighting his battle with tuberculosis, in the other of which have lived for years those who, whenever the law relaxes its vigilance, would pander to the appetite for liquor. A few steps further on is a home in which the only son not long ago brought sorrow and shame upon his parents. We pass other houses which are abodes of pain where those long shut in from their fellow men wonder why God prostrates them with no prospect of relief, and homes out of which the father and breadwinner has gone leaving children far from self-support and needing not only education but wise parental influence, and homes out of which children have gone into the wide world leaving aged parents to long for the years of happy family life that are no more and only half hoping and believing that there may be another world in which lives sundered here may come together again. This is not an exceptional village street.

We can go up and down the lanes and highways of our country and find on every side suffering, sorrow, loneliness, sin, neighborhood animosities and bickerings, domestic discord, a limited mental horizon, low moral standard, and little faith in God or love for man. We can find, too, if we are looking for it, no small measure of fidelity, self-sacrifice, and brotherly love. As a rule, wherever these graces are found, they are due to some touch of the Christian church and the Christian gospel, either upon the present generation or its

forbears. At any rate, the world of men as we know it to-day is a world in which the sweetening and uplifting influences which the Christian religion alone supplies are needed, and are capable of effecting marvelous results in the way of transforming and beautifying character. Men want shorter hours, higher wages, and better dwellings—of course they do—but deep down in their hearts they want, still more, peace with God and an assurance of the life immortal. They not only appreciate the gospel when it is brought to them in its winsomeness and power, but the gospel is still powerful to effect mighty results. Quietly, patiently, persistently, to bring to bear upon this and that and the other man such redeeming influence is our bounden duty, and our unspeakable privilege.