

ART. V.—POPULAR USE OF THE BIBLE.<sup>1</sup>

ALLOW me to make two preliminary remarks. I was A reluctant, as you know, to undertake the duty confided to me at our last meeting, but the reluctance arose not from caprice or any desire to avoid an irksome task, but from infirm health, as well as, indeed, from a sincere feeling of incompetency to do justice to such an important theme as the one proposed. In what I purpose to say I may not deal with the subject in the light, and with the same object, as might have been taken at first sight to be implied by the particular title, "The Popular Use of the Bible." It seemed to me an ungracious, if not an objectionable, task for a minister of the Church to try to find out and direct attention to what might be considered by some as a general abuse of such an invaluable treasure as we all acknowledge the Bible to be. I must say at the outset I have no sympathy with the spirit that would dictate such a course. To find fault can never be pleasant; but the attempt to do so in this case would be, moreover, derogatory to the dignity and the unsullied purity of the Word of God, as well as an unwarranted distrust of our lay brethren, who are our joint-heirs and fellow-partakers of all the immunities and promises of the Gospel. We should avoid, it appears to me, giving any colour to the suspicion that we wish to restrict it to certain classes of men whom we are pleased to consider as more properly qualified by reason of their official position, mental training, or an attitude of deference, and the possession of a submissive temper, to read it worthily and with profit, and so deprecate its common use by the common people. Unhappily, every good gift and every perfect gift is liable to be abused. But that is no sufficient reason why the gift itself, adapted and intended as it is for all, should be withdrawn from any and practically set aside, or should be jealously guarded from what we in our short-sighted wisdom may deem to be intrusion, and certainly no reason at all why it should be confined to an eclectic, if not to an ecclesiastical circle, when we know that the same liability is incurred by the priest as well as by the layman, by those who are found in the highest offices of the Church as well as in the lowest walks of secular life. We are not called

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<sup>1</sup> A paper read at a clerical meeting by the late John Morgan, Rector of Llanilid, Glamorganshire. He was at one time a frequent writer in this Magazine, and the present paper, which came into the Editor's hands some time after his death last year, was his final contribution. He was described in the Llandaff Diocesan Magazine as "one of those rare spirits which sum up in themselves both the gifts and the powers of many types of ordinary men."

on either to regulate at our own will, and to our wish, the free bounties of Providence, or to supervise and adjust the distribution of the common treasures of the kingdom of grace. And especially are we not so called when the gift is of supreme importance, and when all men without distinction stand in need of it. And such is the case with the Book with which we have now to do.

The Book is sometimes called, as in our Rubrics and Articles, Holy Writ, or the Scriptures. It is so called because it is all written, inscribed, its contents communicated to us by means of pen and ink, in a visible and portable form. It is a Record. It was at first written on leaves of trees, on bark of trees, on papyrus or the finer portions of bulrushes, on linen, on parchment, and even on wood and ivory. Among us it is printed and published on paper. We must needs be thankful for this Providential arrangement. Had the revelation of God's will been simply oral, and entrusted to the precarious custody of tradition, it would be liable to be lost or mutilated, and become so corrupt that no dependence whatever could be placed on what it presented as genuine and authentic. And, indeed, the variety and multiplicity of the facts, events, narratives, doctrines, and lessons of the Bible could not, humanly speaking, be accurately and fully transmitted to us except they were carefully compiled, written down, and secured in a fixed and permanent form such as that of our sacred Record. Sometimes the Record is called, as in the title-page of the Authorized Version, the Two Testaments, the Old and the New, the New not superseding the Old so as to be a detached and independent portion, but being its necessary complement and expansion. "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets," said our Divine Master, the Author and Mediator of the New Testament; "I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil" (Matt. vi. 17). We should not, then, draw an invidious distinction between the two parts; we should not cast aside the more ancient as obsolete and useless, and suppose that the newer, which is confessedly the consummation of the other, can remain equally valid and cogent by its own unsupported weight and authority. Though the Record was given by divers portions and in divers manners, we should nevertheless accept it as a whole, in its undivided integrity, as forming one Book. And this, too, is indicated by its more common name, the Bible. But though this name, the most familiar and the most venerable, perhaps, in our language, indicates the harmony that prevails through the volume, the continuity of the essential story which begins with Genesis and closes with the Revelation, so constituting but one Book, yet

primarily it denotes its pre-eminence. For life and godliness, for the formation of a good character, for yielding patience in trouble and comfort in sorrow, for individual and national guidance, for this world and the world to come, it stands utterly unrivalled. There is no book in existence that can be named with it. It is unique of its kind and unapproachable. To talk of comparing it with the Zendavesta, the Vedas, the Shasters, the Koran, or the Book of Mormon, is absurd. It is emphatically the Bible, *the* Book, the Book of books.

As given by inspiration of God, it is utterly unlike all other writings, and as being the sole infallible depository of revealed truth its superiority stands unimpeached. In connection with this side of the subject it may be permissible, perhaps, to quote a statement of one of whom we are all justly proud as an illustrious Welsh Bishop, Dr. Connop Thirlwall. He states: "The authority of Scripture is superior to every other in *kind* as well as in degree. The authority of Scripture is unique, because it is not merely a record of revelations, but the *one* original record of all the revelation that mankind has ever received, or has any reason to expect, concerning the objects of Christian faith and hope. I hold it to be entitled to be called in the most emphatic sense the Word of God."<sup>1</sup>

Like every other good gift that is from above, coming down to us from the Father of lights, this also is unquestionably conferred for the purpose of being used. It is evidently not intended to lie idle and so abide alone, without bearing fruit to the glory of the Giver and the benefit of the recipient. It is not to be regarded as a hidden treasure to be left in the custody of the Church, just as a reserve fund is hoarded in a secret place in a bank, and which is of no advantage at all except to foster a feeling of security in the bank or add to its credit with the community. It is not to be made an object of ostentatious display and only regarded as a piece of fashionable furniture, neither is it to be buried in a sumptuous library or put up in a private drawer, or on a dusty and obscure shelf in the house, with the notion that like an amulet or a charm its mere possession will bring a blessing to man or woman, to mansion or cottage. But it is a talent to be traded with, and not wrapped up in a napkin. It is a candle, "the candle of the Lord," and is not to be put under a bushel, but on a candlestick, that it may give light to all that are in the house. It is precious seed, which, if sown, bringeth forth fruit unto everlasting life; and it is to be sown broadcast through the whole field, and the field is the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Dr. Rowland Williams.

It is all along and everywhere meant for common, constant, and universal use.

It may be affirmed, indeed—and the statement may be accepted as a legitimate inference drawn from the practice of a sister Church, but of a notoriously erring and degenerate sister—that the Holy Scriptures are too sacred to be exposed to the public gaze, to be handled by the rude and illiterate multitude, or made the subject of unrestrained and unauthorized scrutiny. And not only too sacred, but they are too abstruse. To the untrained and uninstructed they would be as pearls cast before swine. They would be a waste, as well as a source of untold disaster—a danger to the individual, a menace to Church and State. There should be, therefore, a certain discretion employed as to whom we should invite to partake of the blessing. If any knowledge of the Bible be demanded, and the demand cannot be resisted, it must be doled out in certain selections, carefully prepared and imparted *cum permissu*, and with the imprimatur of some superior, if not infallible, guardian of faith and morals. But whatever may be the case with others on this point, we, on the contrary, who are of the Reformed Church of England, present to every Christian man, as his inalienable birthright, the whole Bible, an open Bible, and one accessible to all. And the experience gathered from the last three centuries amply vindicates the wisdom of our Church in this her aim and procedure. We venture to say—in no boastful spirit, but in grateful recognition of Heaven's own finger pointing out to us, and establishing beyond cavil our positive duty in this matter of the popular use of the Bible—that the countries where it is most valued are the most enlightened and the most moral, whilst those countries where it is practically, if not actually, prohibited and but little read are the lowest in the scale of Christian civilization. We wish, then, to give no uncertain sound when we proclaim it to be the laymen's duty, as well as their privilege, to possess a copy of the Bible in the vulgar tongue, to read it, to meditate on it, to make it the rule of life and the standard of all saving truth, to take it as a lamp to their feet and a light to their paths.

But if this be obligatory on lay members of the Church, how much more so on us who are ministers of the Word and stewards of the mysteries of God! Is it probable that, if we ourselves slight or neglect the duty, we should be careful and earnest in urging its discharge on others? If we have not ourselves tasted the good Word of God, and known its sweetness and power by a personal conscious experience, is it likely we should do our best to commend the privilege to all around us? Judgment must, then, begin at the house of God. "Go

through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem; search for the mark on the foreheads of the men, beginning at My sanctuary" (Ezek. ix. 6). "Thou, therefore, that teachest another, teachest thou not thyself?" At the most solemn time in our lives, as I may safely assume the time of our ordination to have been, we were commanded by the Church "to learn the Scriptures, to wax riper and stronger daily by feeding on them, and to be diligent in reading them, and in such studies as help to the knowledge of the same." The vows of God are on us—vows voluntarily undertaken by us in our holiest and tenderest moments, in the ardour and strength of first love, in the day of our espousals to our chosen and allotted work, and when the dew of heaven was yet fresh on our prayers and aspirations. Whatever other studies we may permit ourselves to pursue, let us by all means give attendance to reading the inspired Scriptures, "which are profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." By being thus students and lovers of the Bible we may best help our people to a right understanding and due appreciation of it. We may—and, if necessary, we should—explain difficult passages, correct erroneous views, show how best to reconcile what seems in it inconsistent with the definite conclusions of science and modern criticism, and bring before them whatever has been brought to light, and what rich and ample stores of historical and archæological knowledge have been furnished in recent years in confirmation of its truth or in illustration of its statements. But, I would respectfully repeat, we should be careful not to suggest, much more not to expatiate on, the inutility or inexpediency of its popular use. If we wished to confine it to some special part of the community, who by education and refinement, or by exceptionally strong intellectual powers, we may deem as the only fit claimants for initiation into "the great things of God," or if we wished to institute an exclusive system of esoteric teaching, the wish would be vain and utterly futile. The keys of knowledge are in the people's hands, and cannot be wrested from them. The set time of their enfranchisement is come, and they will never again enter the house of bondage. The common people are in actual possession and grateful enjoyment of the green pastures, fruitful fields, the sweet and refreshing resting-places, and the whole rich and spacious domain of the Holy Scriptures, and they cannot be disinherited. It is a striking and blessed fact that there is no book among us so popular, so much in demand, so saleable, as well as so widely revered, and made the subject of so much patient research and learned disquisi-

tion, as the Bible. We should be deeply thankful that such is the case. For—

1. It is the manifest purpose of its Divine Author that it should be the common heritage of us all. This is so plain that he who runs may read his title clear to a full and free participation of the heavenly gift. The boon is commensurate with the need and correspondent with the varying capacities of men. It bears its own credentials of the universality of its claims, and every man possesses the witness in himself that these claims deserve and require his most serious attention. That it is a Book intended for all, of every kindred and tongue and people and nation, is surely implied in the fact of its holding in its grasp, as it were, the very heart of humanity, and of its being ever ready and able to meet us for guidance and support at every point of human interest and at every call of duty, as well as in the wonderfully simple and familiar modes and forms of speech it employs for conveying the most solemn and profound truths. This, the universal nature of its claims, is also abundantly proved by its own repeated declarations, by the superlative importance of its message, by its recognition of the essential equality of all men (and the necessary consequence of every man, therefore, bearing the burden of his own responsibility), by its free and impartial promises, by its appeals to all sorts and conditions of men, by its annunciation of the blessedness of the meek and reverential recipient, and by its condemnation of those who presume to despise or neglect it. It is written: "And they shall all be taught of God," "Who will have all men to come to the knowledge of the truth." "For the promise is unto you and to your children, and to all that are afar off." "I have written to you, fathers; I have written to you, young men; I have written to you, children." "For there is no respect of persons with God." "The Spirit and the Bride say, Come. And whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely." "Blessed is he that readeth and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein." "But if ye shall despise My statutes, I also will do this unto you: I will set My face against you, saith the Lord." "Whoso despiseth the Word shall perish."

2. The diffusion of the Bible lies within the purview of the Church's work, and by encouraging and facilitating its popular use she is very effectually fulfilling her duty and consulting her best interests. Without suffering ourselves to fail in the due recognition of her character as the "pillar and ground of the truth," or to disregard her office as *Ecclesia docens*, we cannot forget that she points out as the source of her own instruction the canonical books of Holy Scripture, and sends

us "to the law and to the testimony," that we may search and know whether her message is in accordance with them. Placing herself thus in the light as one that loveth and doeth the truth, it is a main object with her to spread the knowledge of the pure Word of God, that all men might "come to the light" and "walk in the light." I do not mean to say that she has always and in every country been loyal to this part of her duty, but if she has failed she has invariably had to suffer for it, as well as all who were dependent on her for their spiritual nourishment; the people around her have sunk into gross superstition, or fallen away into utter unbelief; her own light has grown dim, and sometimes her candlestick has been removed. Whenever the Church has been awake to her responsibilities, this particular duty has not been neglected, and in the discharge of it she has found an increase of prosperity, strength, and security that she could not otherwise have attained. To feed and guard the lamp of truth, to free it from misleading glosses and vain traditions, which, like noxious vapours, might sully its purity and diminish its efficacy, to spread its illuminating and guiding power, and never rest until the whole human race has seen and embraced that true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world—this has been her function, this her exalted privilege. With many a delinquent interval, indeed, occasioned by a spirit of slothfulness, or a want of faith in the completeness of her spiritual armour, tempting her to lean on an arm of flesh, or by the seductions of pride, alluring her to stand in the wisdom of men, she has set herself to this special work in every period of her existence. We know what care was taken under the Mosaic dispensation to familiarize the people with the revealed will of God. It was commanded to be by constant repetition instilled into their minds, to be made the subject of conversation at home and abroad, to be written on the post of houses and on the gates, to be engraved, as it were, on the palms of the hands, and every word of it solemnly and publicly rehearsed in the audience of all the people at certain appointed seasons. In the towns and large villages of Palestine there were synagogues, which answered in many respects to our parish churches, where the Scriptures were read every Sabbath day, as they are among us. There were also men who were employed in providing copies of the law and the prophets. From this part of their occupation they were called scribes—that is, copyists or transcribers. In the same way, under the Evangelical dispensation, in many a cell and in most of the monasteries of the earlier and mediæval ages, the Bible was copied with scrupulous fidelity and much artistic skill, not only for preservation, but also for public and private reading.

But inasmuch as few could read, and fewer still could buy a copy in those days, the sacred writings were represented by pictures, ceremonial symbols, and sculptured devices, which the historian Milman and the poet Wordsworth tell us were virtually the Bible of the common people. Since the Reformation and the discovery of printing our Church has taken care to supply her children with printed copies of the sacred Volume, which she describes as "that inestimable treasure which excelleth all the riches of the earth, because the fruit thereof extendeth not only to the time spent in this transitory world, but directeth and disposeth men unto that eternal happiness which is above in heaven." She has not been wanting in any effort to render the Bible a book common to all, any more than she has been wanting in the express desire to make her incomparable liturgy, as evinced by its very title, the "Common Prayer-Book" of all. She translated it into the common tongue, and showed the greatest solicitude to make the translation as accurate as possible. She trained and fostered in her bosom scholars of transcendent ability and unwearied diligence, who by their labours might not only render it plain to the commonest understanding, but also invest it with a fresh interest and an abiding attraction so as to commend it to men of learning and cultivated taste. She founded schools where children might be taught to read it, and where its salutary truths might be impressed on the tender mind. And by the liberality and enterprise of her members she instituted societies for the purpose of providing the poor with it at the cheapest possible price, and, where the need was proved, of making free grants. The motto of our mother Church has been: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty." "Ho! every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters." As not unconnected with this part of the subject, may I be pardoned if I direct attention to the Oxford Bible for teachers, the Cambridge Bible for schools and colleges, and the late Bishop of Wakefield's Holy Gospels for common use, books unrivalled for their respective purposes, and all publications, as I need not add, by the Church's faithful sons.

3. The popular use of the Bible is of exceptional service in the promotion of popular education. I do not wish to lay an undue stress on this, but it is nevertheless a side of the question that needs not be overlooked. The sacred Volume has been said to be a library in itself, comprising, as we are all aware that it does comprise, almost all kinds of literature, history, biography, epistles, idyll, allegory, poetry, rhetoric, dramatic representation as in the Book of Job, and compilations of apothegms as in the Book of Proverbs. It



is fitted not only thus to inform, but also to nurture and strengthen the mind, to enlarge its faculties, to awaken and stimulate its energies, and to open out forms and views of beauty and excellence which the most exalted imagination uninspired by it could never create, whilst, at the same time, it can sway and purify the affections in a way that is utterly unknown to any other book, and in a measure that is beyond all human computation. In whatever country it has been free from priestly ban and civil prohibition, and has been disseminated without fear or favour, but placed in the hands of the mechanic, the agriculturist, and the tradesman, as well as in the hands of the leisured and wealthy classes, it has never failed to evince its presence by the superior intelligence of the inhabitants and the more earnest and successful prosecution of the arts which dignify and embellish life. It has elevated the whole intellectual tone and standard of society, and whilst accustoming multitudes possessed perhaps of but an average mental capacity to the habit of reflection and to ennobling pursuits, it has formed and conducted to greatness some who would otherwise have plodded through life's low vale, then "sunk into the grave unnoticed and unknown." And in no country, perhaps, has its power been more felt as an agent in mental training, and as an aid in the acquisition of knowledge, than in Wales. Until very recently our Welsh fellow-countrymen possessed no literature of any moment but such as was connected with the Bible. And yet in the soundness of their information of elementary truths, such as lie at the basis of all secular knowledge, and in their acquaintance with the subtler phases and processes of thought, and the practical application of metaphysics and dialectics, though they were strangers to technical terms and scholastic methods, our peasantry and the toilers in our towns would favourably compare with the same classes of any country.<sup>1</sup> This might be abundantly proved by the remarkable talent and literary excellence displayed by our Welsh magazines of a former day, the staple of which was contributed by men who were placed in a humble, and for mental advancement in every way disadvantageous, situation in life. It was but the other day that an eminent Nonconformist minister publicly stated that until his twenty-first year the only book he possessed was his copy of the Word of God, with comments on it. And he attributed all his usefulness in life, and his distinguished position among his brethren, to his Welsh Bible. And he was but one instance out of many.

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Burnet makes the same kind of remark with regard to the effects of Scriptural knowledge on the "commonalty" of Scotland.

In advocacy of the view I take, I might also refer to the fact that, broadly speaking, we all in this country appeal to the Bible for the origin of our religious doctrines, and claim its sanction for our religious teaching. All sects and denominations among us, with all their varieties of views and differences of attitude and position in the one great and marvellous world of Christendom, have accepted the ruling of the Church of England that "Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation, so that whatsoever is not found therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man as an article of the Faith." So deeply is this persuasion engrained in the national mind, and so widely professed, that any other religious teaching save what is Scriptural, be it ever so plausibly recommended and offered us as the undoubted lesson of tradition, the latest development of the innate moral sentiment, as a service of humanity, or as the mature fruit of modern science, has no chance of acceptance in this country, certainly no chance of surviving and exercising any wide and permanent influence. If there is to be a national religion here, it must be the Christian, and that we know is the religion of the Bible.

Popular acquaintance with the Bible is, moreover, needful for the well-being of society and for the salvation of souls. That society may be stable, strong, prosperous, and progressive, it must be founded on morality. Morality is indigenous in no clime or country; it springs up spontaneously or necessarily in no human soul; neither is it a product of easy cultivation and growth. We cannot expect to attain moral purity and faithfulness without self-denial and constant effort in this probationary world, which is the world of us all. From the least to the greatest, through the whole course and in every condition of life, we all must learn to be obedient to law, to restrain the impulses of passion, to honour industry, to be lovers of peace and lovers of purity, to prefer duty to interest, to be just and true in all our dealings, to hurt nobody by word or deed, to bear one another's burdens, and so to fulfil the law of Christ and insure and vindicate the brotherhood of man. And for these things who can be sufficient except the man who has learnt to sit at the Master's feet, and in a spirit of humility and obedience to say, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth"? In the struggle of passion and selfish greed, with our natural love of ease and pleasure, in the midst of innumerable seductions, and with our inherited weakness and inconstancy, morality assuredly will fare but ill except it be based on incontrovertible authority, and come to us with the clear and articulate voice of the Word of God and supported by its sanctions.

For the spiritual and eternal welfare of souls, the use of the Bible again is absolutely needful. For this supreme end, which should be the aim of all our efforts and the crown of every pious aspiration, it is instrumentally fully adequate. "It is able to make us wise unto salvation, to build us up, and give us an inheritance among all them that are sanctified." This testimony to its own inherent efficacy has been verified in every age, and under circumstances that differed almost in every particular. From the memorable account of his own conversion by S. Augustine, when he heard the voice bidding him "*Tolle, lege, Tolle, lege,*" and he read, "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof," to the well-authenticated story of the African chief—how he picked up a soiled leaf of the Bible and read on it, "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life," and how that text was the means of eventually opening his eyes and turning him from darkness unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God, numerous instances might be adduced of the saving power attending the simple reading of the Word of God.

Manuals, digests, harmonies, expositions, commentaries, and notes may be useful, and no doubt in many cases necessary, but "what is the chaff unto the wheat, saith the Lord? Is not My Word like as a fire, saith the Lord? And like a hammer that breaketh the rocks in pieces?" "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple."

It would be extreme and inexcusable folly, a dishonour to Divine Truth, an infringement of Christian liberty, a serious check to Christian progress, and a reversal of the principles on which our Church has always acted, to attempt to limit the circulation of the Bible, to discourage its free and unfettered use, or by means of partial and sectarian glosses, or of hard and narrow systems of theology, to stand between the people and their best spiritual provision for time and eternity. Reverend and beloved brethren, "Let the Word of the Lord have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you" (2 Thess. iii. 1).

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