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ARTICLE IV.

CHRISTIAN CHARACTER A POWER IN THE REDEMPTION OF
THE WORLD.

By Austin Phelps, Professor at Andover.

THE last years in the life of Isaiah were chiefly engrossed by visions of the closing periods in the earthly career of the Church of Christ. This should seem to have resulted as much from the instinct of his religious feelings, as from the prompting of the prophetic impulse. The prophet is sometimes lost in the man, when he turns away from the disorders and idolatries and miseries of his own day, to contemplate, with the chastened enthusiasm of age, the happier times when Christ should reign over all lands. It is congenial with the feelings of all good men to anticipate thus the events of a better age than their own. It conduces often to the acquisition of just views of duty, to propose the inquiry: What would be the result, if certain changes predicted in the Word of God, should now or soon take place?

It is for the sake of such an inquiry, that attention is invited to a principle suggested by the twelfth and thirteenth verses of the fifty-first Psalm: "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee."¹ This is the language of hope in the depth of religious humiliation. It expresses the conviction of the Psalmist, that his own restoration to the favor of God, involving, as it would, the improvement of his own character, would be followed by the increased success of religion throughout his dominions. The principle implied in this conviction, is one which probably all enlightened Christians will recognize, as entering largely into God's plan for this world's recovery. In its broad application, the principle is, that the rapidity of progress in the salvation of this world is, by God's plan of procedure, proportioned to the

¹ This Article was originally prepared as a Discourse, and, in substance, delivered before the General Association of Massachusetts at Yarmouth, on the evening of the 29th of June, 1853; and it was repeated on the 4th of the September following, in the Chapel of the Theological Seminary at Andover, as a Valedictory Address to the Senior Class.

degree of piety existing among those who have already been made subjects of Divine grace. In other words it may be stated thus: That the success of sanctifying power does, in God's plan, enlarge the *range* of regenerating power.

This principle, it may be assumed, does not need a defence here. It lies at the foundation of all that is peculiar to *Christian* benevolence. It is implied in every consistent theory of *Christian* missions. It underlies all intelligent effort to extend, in any manner, the knowledge and the power of *Christian* truth. It is, indeed, so well understood and so unquestionably conceded, in the convictions of probably the large majority of *Christians*, that its significance often escapes appreciation. It falls back into the rank of those truths whose lot often is, to be unfelt *because* of their importance. The very magnitude of such truths burdens a finite mind in the conception of them. Imagination grows weary in the effort to follow them to their consequences. The sensibilities shrink back in impotence, from receiving them as efficient realities. We recoil from the mental pains of the discipline which would be requisite to render them the nuclei of an earnest religious experience. The result often is, that we talk of such truths, like dreamers. They are the theme of much glib but unmeaning exhortation. Between our dialect and our experience with regard to them, there is apt to be a strange incoherency. We *know* not that of which we affirm. It often becomes a duty, therefore, to sit down to a reëxamination of them, worn out though they be, as themes of intellectual conception. We need to admonish ourselves yet again, of the significance of that which we believe. We need to enter into a homely calculation, of the height and the depth and the length and the breadth of the faith we hold. It will do us no harm, if such a calculation should chance to diminish somewhat an imaginative fervor. We shall be the gainers by it, in point of truthfulness, of calm earnestness, of fixedness in principle, — in short, of everything that enters into the structure of a manly *Christian* character. Especially is this true, in respect of those doctrines of our faith which concern the closing ages of this world, and the position of the Church of Christ in God's plan for the world's redemption. We make a hopeful advance in *Christian* experience, when a living faith on these subjects — no more and no less than is plainly warranted by God's word and providence — takes the place of dreams and romance.

Let the truthfulness, then, of the principle which has been evolved from the inspired language before us, be assumed, and upon it let the simple inquiry be instituted: *What would be the result to the enterprise of the world's redemption, if any great increase should take place in the present energy of Christian character within the Church?*

To place the inquiry, and the hypothesis upon which it is founded, in the most distinct light, let it be supposed, that the vast numbers whose names are enrolled as spiritual Christians, should develop a perceptible and rapid growth of personal character. Let a movement be visible, from the present level of Christian experience to one more elevated and more uniform. Let the mass of Christian mind now thinking, praying, acting, on the earth, be raised to a higher eminence in moral discipline. Let the common faith of Christians take to itself a new depth of conviction. Let Christian love grow into the possession of a more keen and more steady sensibility than it now exhibits. Let Christian purpose assume a new dignity of aim and strength of will. Let Christian character as commonly exhibited to the world in real life, settle into the compactness of more consistent principle. Let it part with many of its present excrescences, and exhibit that "beauty of holiness" which springs from symmetry of proportion. Let the *common* Christian mind rise towards that point of almost finished culture which is now reached only by a few, whose names will go down to remote generations, preserved by the reverence which the world cannot but choose to pay to superior virtue. Suppose such a change in the character of the church of Christ to have taken place, or to be distinctly perceptible in rapid progress. The supposition, surely, is not visionary. It has nothing of the aspect of romance to the eye of a Scriptural faith. It is a supposition which the sober history of the church is destined yet to realize. Let us, then, suppose it to have already taken place, far on, if we please, in those remote ages which are the subject of yet obscure prophecy, yet, let it assume for the hour, the distinctness and the glow and the magnitude of an existing reality; and then let the inquiry be: How must the progress of God's plans for the conversion of this world be affected, in consequence? In reply to this inquiry, it is proposed to consider the subject in illustration of three positions.

In the first place, such a change as is here supposed, would

result in a development within the church, of now latent resources of moral power.

Scarcely any conviction will impress itself more distinctly on the mind of a thoughtful Christian, in contemplating the church as the instrument of the world's conversion, than that of the existence, in the church, of *latent* energy. In one point of view, no better description can be given, in few words, of the church as a Power in human society, than this, — that it is an immense assemblage of undeveloped resources. It is a power, the strength of which has never yet been fully awakened. It has never been fairly represented in the conflict of destiny which, from the beginning, has convulsed this world. With all that has been done and all that is now doing, to bring the moral influence of the church to bear, at its height, on the progress of the race, it still has, in the main, the aspect of a *reserved force*, whose "hour has not yet come."

It would be interesting to observe, more at length than it can be done here, some details in illustration of this fact. The estimate has been made by some who have had extensive means of information, and whose minds have been much directed to the philosophical view of the relations existing between the church and the world, that not more than one fifth of all who bear the name of Protestant Christians, add anything of *perceptible* importance to the efficiency of the church, in the work of the world's conversion. This opinion is quoted here, not for the purpose of defending it, but as an illustration of the view which some conscientious minds have felt obliged to take on this subject. With whatever limitations the opinion might be adopted, no doubt can exist that a large proportion of the power which the church might exert, instrumentally, for the dissemination of the Gospel, is yet undeveloped. It exists in a dormant state.

Among other things in proof of this, the following positions will readily occur, as capable of being established beyond a reasonable doubt. One is, that the actual results of Christian influence now exerted on the world, bear no comparison to the representations which the Scriptures give of the efficiency of the church in its best state. This will be self-evident to any attentive reader of the prophecies. Another is, that, assuming the early history of the church as a standard, a disproportion is obvious, between the numbers and wealth and intelligence and social rank of the church now, and the actual results of her influ-

ence on the world. This assertion is not made, to support all the impressions sometimes entertained of the exalted character of the church in apostolic times, nor the inference hastily drawn, that the church of modern times has, all things considered, retrograded from the apostolic experience. But, so much as this is undeniable, that the extension of the Gospel in the world then, considered relatively to the apparent resources of the church, was more rapid, than the further extension of the same Gospel now is, as compared with the apparent resources which the church now has at her disposal. It is not a fair inference from this, that, *all* things considered, the church has retrograded, but it is a fair inference, that resources now exist in it which are not developed. We look back to the successes of the first preachers of Christ with a feeling of awe. Those successes appear to us almost like a series of miracles. They remind us of the lost arts. It would sometimes appear, as if certain elements of power had, in a dark age, disappeared from the system of the truth we preach, and that no skill nor happy accident of modern civilization had led to their re-discovery. Another fact which might easily be established on this subject, is, that the same resources which are now in possession of the church, if brought into action for *other* objects than those of Christian benevolence, would exhibit a greater efficiency than they now seem to possess. That is to say, that, if any other body of men possessed the numbers, and the wealth, and the intelligence, and the social position, and the facilities for organization, which are now found in the church, and should throw such resources into a work for any other object than the progress of the Gospel, they would exhibit an efficiency in operation, that is unknown in any of the enterprises which Christian zeal has set on foot for the world's conversion.

Making all necessary allowances in the comparison, for difference in the grandeur and in the difficulty of objects, and, therefore, for difference in the legitimate tests of success, it still cannot be doubted, that human energy in this world reaches its mightiest achievements, when put forth in the service of evil. Force of human character finds its most athletic illustrations in the bad passions. The human soul has developed more power in cultivating and strengthening and organizing and concentrating sin, than in destroying it. We know well the energies of the human mind in its unsanctified exertions. It finds no barriers in mountains and oceans. It acknowledges no restraint from institutions

which are the growth of a thousand years. It luxuriates in the destruction of empires. It laughs in the van of armies. Some of the most terrible displays of its energy, too, have been under the domination and in the service of false religions. The world will not soon forget the false prophet of Arabia, nor Peter the Hermit. Yet no revolution the world ever witnessed, in the arts, or in science, or in government, or in human forms of religion, had such resources to support it as those which, by the institution of *The Church*, God has given to the work of the world's conversion.

These positions might easily be illustrated, if the present object required it, but they may properly be assumed. And they tend to impress on our minds this conviction, that there is within the church of Christ a greatness of moral strength, which has never yet appeared in any results that have been achieved, in giving to the Gospel ascendancy in the world.

Now, upon the supposition which has been advanced, of an extensive elevation of Christian character, above its present average, we cannot but admit that, simultaneously with such a change, and in proportion to its rate of progress, a development of this latent energy in the work of this world's conversion, would take place. The result would follow with all the certainty of a decree of God. We are apt to lose the force of our most truthful convictions on this subject, through a failure to appreciate all that is involved in such a change as is here supposed. To one mind, the change most readily suggests itself in the form of a mere increase of religious fervor; possibly, of an increased frequency of periodic excitements. To another, it suggests the idea of a mere consolidation of religious opinion; possibly, of a more severe dogmatism of belief. To a third, it suggests the mere multiplication of personal labors in Christian action; possibly, of novel modes of action and schemes of organization. To a fourth, it portrays itself as a mere expansion of pecuniary resource, which should pour the wealth of the church into the coffers of religious enterprise. But the truth is, that neither one nor all of these aspects of the change supposed, do really represent it, either in its intrinsic magnitude or in its results. Back of all these, we discern the true nature of such a change, in the simple fact that it is a *growth of character*. It is not merely speculative, nor merely emotive, nor merely executive, in its nature. It is all these, but more than all and beneath all, it is a

growth of personal character. This is plainly what we mean, when we speak of an increase of piety. Translated from the dialect of the pulpit, it stands side by side with certain other changes of human character. As realized in the individual, it is a growth of character, just as manhood is a growth upon juvenile mind. As realized in large masses of society, it is a growth of character, just as civilization is a growth upon barbarism. When we speak of the development of latent energy as resulting from the change which has been supposed, we must conceive of it as that unfolding of moral power which, under God's plan, always and inevitably springs from wide-spread *growth of character*. It is the power of *mind*, enlarged and invigorated by a sanctified discipline. It is multiform in its manifestations, but one in its nature. The church thus invigorated, becomes, in the plans of Divine grace, what a dominant people like the Romans, or a dominant race like the Anglo-Saxon, is, in the plans of Divine providence. Dominion is given to it, from sea to sea.

With such a view of the nature of the change contemplated in the supposition before us, it is not difficult to conceive of some of the modes in which the augmented resources of the church would manifest themselves, in the work of disseminating the Gospel. Among the *least* of the fruits of such a change would be, that hoarded treasures should be poured forth, and buried talents should be exhumed, in tribute to the acknowledged purposes of God in the world's conversion. A new life would be breathed into *all* the modes in which Christian character exhibits itself as a power in the world. The common Christian mind would come under the more intense influence of its Christian faith, as if that faith were a new revelation. All present moulds of uninspired Christian thought would be recast. Forms of belief which in many minds are now lifeless, would glow again with more than their youthful vitality. Words which, as now used on the lips of many, have slipped their sense, would recover the burden of significance which they once bore as God's message to the world. The pulpit, and with it all other media of Christian speech, would breathe the spirit of an apostolic presence. Christian views of life and its objects, would be expressed to the world more vividly than now, in Christian practice. Christian example would be less extensively, than now, dwarfed by petty scrupulosity, and deformed by corresponding inconsistency in weightier matters. It would be enlarged in its range of graces.

It would be extended in its reach of influence; and this, because it would be ennobled and intensified in its hidden spirit. Piety would, more generally than now, partake of the element of magnanimity in character. Its zeal, welling up from a deeper heart, would be of more generous and chrystalline quality. Its fidelity would have less of mercantile and diplomatic shrewdness, and more of the simplicity of love unconscious of its own greatness. Its defence of the faith, would not be weakened, as now, by contracted aims, and oblique tactics, and treachery to the cause of honor. It would appeal to the great, the noble, the highminded, the heroic. It would draw to itself, by a more imperative attraction, that spirit of *obeisance*, with which the world in its infancy regarded physical greatness; and afterwards military prowess; and later still, royal birth; and which it now, with singular inconsistency, divides in tribute to wealth, on the one hand, and to literary genius, on the other. The moral dominion of this world, so far as it is in any sense wielded by any human power, must change hands, just as soon and as rapidly as the church of Christ shall become prepared, through Divine grace, to receive it. All forms of material power must give it up. Even intellectual greatness must become subaltern. The dominion must pass over to Christian virtue. Thus, He whose right it is, shall reign.

The view here advanced, of the development of latent energies through an increase of character, is not a singular one. It is not peculiar to the experience of religious minds. It is often illustrated in the achievements of those who attain to eminence in secular history. We read of changes of character in certain individuals whose names the world of the past has handed down to us reverently; changes occurring in the meridian or the decline of life, which forcibly remind us of what would be the nature and results of similar change in Christian character. It is recorded of the Spanish Conqueror of Mexico, that, when he was fairly embarked upon the schemes of conquest over which he had long dreamed, and when the romance of adventure began to deepen in his mind into the grandeur of achievement, a change came over his whole spirit and deportment. From that hour he became like a man of whom one great thought had taken possession. That one thought, he regarded it as the single object of his life, to work out in action. That one thought expressed the problem of his existence. To solve it, was the object for which

he had been created. It affected his whole being. It recast the very features of his countenance. It changed the look of his eye. It infused itself into the carriage of his body when he walked. It breathed itself forth in incoherent hints when he lay down to his brief slumbers. His thoughts, the historian tells us, ceased to evaporate as they had formerly done, "in empty levities and idle flashes of merriment." "His elastic spirits were shown in cheering and stimulating the companions of his toilsome duties, and he was roused to a generous enthusiasm, of which even those who knew him best had not conceived him capable." "With his gayest humor, there mingled a settled air of resolution, which made those who approached him feel they must obey; and which infused something like awe into the attachment of his most devoted followers."¹ From that hour of change in *the man*, began the development of that almost superhuman energy in action, which has made him, in sober history, the prince of the heroes of romance. Such is the awakening of latent forces, when any human mind comes under the dominion of new conceptions of great objects. Those conceptions engender a new volume of motive power.

Awakenings not unlike this, have taken place in Christian experience. Such an awakening occurred in the early ministerial life of Philip Doddridge, and also in that of Robert Hall. It does not appear certain, indeed, that the change in the character of Dr. Chalmers, which revolutionized his ministry, and which is commonly regarded as his conversion, was not rather a development of previously existing religious principle. It gave him distinct premonition of its approach. "I feel myself," he said, not long before that remarkable change, "I feel myself to be on the eve of some decisive transformation in point of religious sentiment." And he received the premonition with a reverence of spirit, which *may have been* the instinct of piety, already disturbed in its slumbers, and springing at the footfall of that Power which was approaching to awaken it, and gird it with strength. Such awakenings must take place throughout the vast mass of Christian mind, whenever the dayspring of a holier age shall dawn on the world.

Passing, now, to another topic embraced in the inquiry before us, we observe a second result which would follow from any general elevation of religious character in the church, in the fact

¹ Prescott's Conquest of Mexico, Vol. I. pp. 246, 259.

that the resources of the church for the work of the world's conversion, would be *relieved from many existing hindrances to their operation.*

It is the remark of Isaac Taylor, respecting the modern movements of Christian enterprise, that "in the preparation and arrangement and government of our evangelic institutions, we have too slenderly admitted the principles of human prudence." This may be true; but it is equally true that many things which at the first view appear to indicate imprudence in the prosecution of our work, are in fact the necessary evils attendant upon an imperfect development of Christian energy. It is the misfortune of all human benevolence, that, to just that degree in which it is imperfectly developed, it infuses into its plans the means of its own counteraction. This often becomes the more obvious as its plans become enlarged. Those whose minds have been long conversant with the interior of our modern system of evangelical enterprise, cannot but be sensible of the existence of hindrances to success, arising from this cause. We do seem, often, to labor at a disadvantage which is not the necessary consequence of anything inseparable from the nature of our work. It results from the imperfection of the instrumentality employed. On the broad scale of observation, it does sometimes appear as if the scheme of Christian benevolence must contain within itself the elements of its own defeat. The looseness of its structure appears at so many points; the feebleness of its operation is so frequently disclosed; devices from which much has been hoped, so often fail in the very juncture in which their success has seemed indispensable; and our trust in our plans is so often proved to have rested upon an inflated credit; that it becomes, at length, an illustration of God's power, that He *can* employ such instrumentalities without hazard to his own decrees. Even an uninterested looker-on must discern, in the practical working of our institutions, evidences of greater friction than is needful for steadiness of movement, and of a great expenditure of force often, for scarcely visible results.

To set this point in distinct relief, let several things be specified, as illustrations of hindrances to the free working of even the best plans, that have yet been devised, for the maintenance and dissemination of the Gospel.

And here, lest the manner in which these hindrances are named should seem to indicate a censorious criticism, it may be

proper to express the conviction which we doubtless have reason to entertain, that, probably, the church of Christ, as compared with the church of any past age, is now in its palmy days. It cannot be proved that the time has ever yet been, when, *all* things considered, there was more in the character or plans or exertions of the church, that betokened the presence of God, than exists at this moment. They inquire not wisely who say, "the former times were better than these." It is right that we should humbly believe this, and, praising God for it, take courage. Yet, for this very reason, we should be the better able to bear the disclosure of defects which embarrass our work, and mar the symmetry of its results.

Let it be observed, then, that a hindrance to the success of our religious organizations is found in the fact, that pecuniary contributions to the cause of Christ flow, to so great an extent, from — something else than religious principle. The conviction cannot easily be resisted, that, to a considerable extent, a very intricate complication of motives does overlay, if it does not displace, Christian simplicity, in the contributions of the treasures of the church to the support of the Gospel. To say nothing of the prevalence of a merely impulsive benevolence, we have too much reason to suspect the play of secondary, even of frivolous, and often of positively sinful motives, in the outlay of pecuniary resources for this object. The pecuniary sacrifices of the church, are probably the least valuable index of its Christian character. Could all the secrets of religious charity be known, we should have some sad pages to acknowledge, in this chapter of Christian experience. Even the regenerated human heart has many hidden chords of which it would scarcely confess the ownership. They must be played upon long, and by skilful fingers, before that heart will give forth a full response to the claims of Christ's cause upon its treasure. Pecuniary liberality is too often a weakling among the graces. It needs to be nursed with feminine adroitness. Its caprices must be watched, and foreseen, and humored delicately, like the nerves of a sick man. It has, therefore, become a complicated art, to obtain the requisite funds for the support of religious institutions. It involves the invention, and the management, and the frequent change, of an intricate machinery of appliances. It requires a rare order of diplomatic talents, in those to whose office it falls. They constitute a distinct profession. Men of great power in other

departments of the service, might be by no means equal to mediocrity in this. Many a man can, in the pulpit, hold breathless audiences in suspense upon his lips, or can rule synods in stormy debate, or can write a book which shall instruct and fascinate another generation, and yet, if we should place that man at the head of the financial department of a missionary society, or send him on the circuit of an obscure agency in its behalf, he might not be able to save the treasury for which he should be responsible, from bankruptcy. Now, it cannot but be regarded as a hindrance to the working of our present system of beneficence, that money for its support *must* be raised with so much of external pressure, that it must come to its objects as the fruit of so much inferior motive, and that it is not safe to trust to the spontaneous and steady offerings of Christian principle, that cause which belongs to Him, whose is the silver and the gold and the cattle on a thousand hills. That will be a glad day for the church and for the world, when we can afford, in this respect, to simplify our policy.

Another illustration of the hindrances to which our system of Christian effort is exposed, is the fact that its working is complicated with disputed questions of social reform. It is a phenomenon, in the providence of God, well worthy of our study, that, just at the time when Christian benevolence is expanding itself to meet the demands of all nations for the word of God, the social philanthropy of nominally Christian lands should be permitted to assume some forms of hostility to the church; and that, even *within* the church itself, evidences of this hostility should appear; and specially, that our churches and our missionary organizations should be made the rallying points where different theories of social reform come together in conflict, and clamor for adjustment. The wisdom of man would scarcely have ordered things just so. If it must needs be that contentions arise, among good men equally earnest and equally honest in their convictions on matters of reform, we certainly should not have chosen just such a field for their battle-ground. As respects the common work of the world's conversion, we must regard such a complication with the local questions of the age, as in itself an evil. It is an incumbrance upon our evangelical policy. Admitting it to be a necessity, yet that very *necessity* is the evil. It does create a side issue in almost all our plans of Christian action. It does practically divert into lateral channels a vast amount of emotive

and executive energy, which might otherwise flow on in the central work. Grave thoughts are suggested, when we see some of the most important ecclesiastical Conventions and Associations and Conferences and Assemblies of the land, year after year suspending somewhat of their internal harmony, and somewhat, also, of their fellowship with each other, upon the single point of their ability to agree on questions which, in a broad view, are at the best but the provincial, not the world-wide, not the *imperial*, questions in the problem of this world's destiny. Grave fears are excited, when we see the *missions* of the age thus held in abeyance to the *reforms* of the age; the *conversion* of the world thus subordinated to the *reorganization* of the world. We have reason to tremble, when Christian coöperation in even the preaching of the Gospel, and in the maintenance of Christian worship, is made to hang in perilous and "dancing balance" upon the pivot of a compromise. It may be, that this is a necessity created by the pressure of existing differences of opinion — and we may have reason to praise God for the Christian wisdom which does hold together so many independent minds — yet, let it be repeated, that very *necessity* is an evil; it is a drawback upon the efficiency of our religious institutions, and upon all broadcast plans of Christian effort. The tendency of it is to separation, to isolation, to alienation. That it does not produce these results in greater degree, is owing to the fact, that so much of Christian energy is rallied to ward them off; and *just so much* of Christian energy is, by this necessity, abstracted from the common cause. That will be a happy day for the church, when questions of social reform shall be so adjusted in the structure of Christian opinion, that they shall no more embarrass the distinctive enterprises of Christian benevolence.

A third illustration of the hindrances to which the modern system of Christian effort is exposed, is the fact that the popular taste within the church is sometimes perverted, as respects the importance and the true methods of preaching. It is of comparatively little moment, how much or how little is done for the maintenance and extension of the church in other modes, if erroneous tastes pervade it respecting the pulpit. Perversion at this point deranges our whole system of beneficence. We have reason, therefore, to look with apprehension upon even partial and temporary errors on this subject. Just so far and so long as they exist, they constitute a drain upon our moral energy,

which nothing but their correction can arrest. Yet it is no censorious charge to say that such errors do exist.

Sometimes they exist in forms of direct degradation of the pulpit. One theory of the ministerial office — a theory deliberately and conscientiously held — represents it as chiefly an office of vicarious duty. Its great work is not so much instruction as mediation. The preacher is merged in the priest, and the pulpit is hidden by the altar. This theory is to a certain extent recognized by the popular taste. It is recognized in fact, sometimes, when in form it is rejected. We too often encounter in our churches, a disposition to exalt the devotional parts of public religious services, at the expense of preaching. This error is sometimes unconsciously confessed in the very structure of our church edifices, in which a diminutive and bashful pulpit seems to sink down in maidenly affright beneath a huge brazen organ, located, in defiance of all taste, directly in its rear. The tendency sometimes becomes regnant in a community, to permit the pulpit, if it will, to drop silently out of sight, amidst the multitude of other instrumentalities more imposing to the senses. Some would have us appeal to the religious sensibilities of the world, chiefly, not by the dulness of sermons, but by the stateliness of forms, by the associations of sacred places, by the significance of sacerdotal or of classic costume, by the beauty of a liturgy, by the solemn fascinations of music, by the "pageantries which chant their way through cloistered aisles," and by the vaulted roofs and massive columns and dimly gorgeous windows of an architecture which never could have been *originated*, in an age of faithful and successful preaching. A learned Poet-laureate of Great Britain, speaking of the pulpit of that country, not more than twenty-five years ago, used the following language: "There are hardly more than half a dozen pulpits in the kingdom, in which an eloquent preacher would not be out of his place. It is not in the pulpit that a minister can do the most good. Sunday is the day of his least labor and least important duty. The pulpit is a clergyman's parade." "The time employed in making a sermon, would be better occupied in adapting to a congregation a dozen of them, written by your predecessors." Now, this to our ears is simply ludicrous; yet, it is a legitimate result of much which a popular taste often asks for in the regulation of the services of the sanctuary, and which, it must be confessed, a too pliant ministry sometimes grants.

Another form of perverted taste respecting the preaching of the Gospel, may be regarded as a rank offshoot of *poetic* sentiment. It does not degrade the pulpit as considered relatively to other objects of the sanctuary, but it claims from the pulpit, the preaching chiefly of the poetry of religion. To such a taste, the voice of a charmer in God's house, is the pleasant voice of one whose chief aim in preaching is to set forth the elegances of religious sentiment, rather than the foundations and the pillars and the bulwarks of religious conviction. He is one who addresses himself chiefly to the sense of the beautiful. He throws around the forms of all truth, the drapery of an exuberant imagination. If he does not silently drop out of his treasury the sterner doctrines of grace, he casts them into the alembic of a deceitful fancy, till their rigid and ungainly forms dissolve themselves into images of beauty. Forms flinty and jagged, and which God *meant* to be flinty and jagged, are metamorphosed into tropic birds whose plumage dazzles but for the moment, as they take their flight. The reigning taste of a people will sometimes demand, that the more severe of the doctrines of grace, be virtually suppressed in the pulpit, so far at least as concerns the honest and *thorough* discussion of them. An effeminate taste sometimes creeps in by stealth, especially into cities and populous towns and their environs; a taste which is nauseated by so many a diet. "Preach unto us smooth things," is the demand; "prophesy deceits; sing unto us a lovely song; play well upon thy many-stringed instrument; ring pleasant changes upon thy blithe harp; then shall the rich and the refined and the noble gather in admiring crowds at the bidding of thy minstrelsy, and thy name shall be enrolled among the magnates of the land."

Still another variety of perverted taste respecting the true methods of preaching, is one which would virtually suppress in the pulpit all discussion of difficult combinations of truth, upon the plea, that they are not suited to impress the sensibilities of the popular mind. "I think," said one of the dignitaries of the church of England, in a famous "Letter to a Young Clergyman," "I think the clergy have well-nigh given over perplexing themselves and their hearers with abstruse points of predestination, election and *the like*—at least, it is time they should." This opinion is a fair representative of a popular taste, which is not always so ingenuously expressed. They who come under its

dominion, turn their backs upon the preacher, who has the hardihood to make argumentative vigor the distinguishing characteristic of his pulpit. They hasten away trippingly from him whose letters are weighty, containing some things hard to be understood. Their nimble feet have borne them beyond hearing, before he, in his simplicity, deems it necessary to remind them of One who had the temerity to reason in the synagogue, even *every Sabbath*. They mutter against such a preacher insinuations of the antiquity of his theme, and the arid quality of his logic. The more intelligent of them are fond of associating systematic divinity with the dialect of trigonometry; and a few deem it their good fortune, to be able to quote from the *Paradise Lost*, and render Milton responsible for their conviction that

“Reasonings high of providence, foreknowledge, will and fate,”

are unfit themes for a Christian pulpit, since they once stirred the debates of Pandemonium.

Let us not be understood as confounding this error with a certain healthful antipathy, which the best of religious minds cherish against what is designated, vaguely, we think, as “intellectual preaching,” and more discriminately as “scholastic preaching.” Those who are familiar with the variations of popular feeling in reference to the pulpit, will not find it difficult to distinguish this antipathy from the one which is here condemned as a perverted taste. Yet, in the popular experience, they lie side by side, and an unconscious transition from one to the other is not uncommon. Unguarded censure of scholasticism in the ministrations of the pulpit, often generates hostility to *all* vigorous developments of *mind* in preaching. The instinct of piety, which justly starts up against the pomp and the lordliness of *intellect* triumphing over *sensibility* in the aims of the pulpit, often lends itself, unconsciously, to a noxious *inertness* of mind, in both preaching and hearing. The form of perverted taste thus created speaks, therefore, in a strain of mingled conscientiousness and — mental indolence. “Preach unto us,” is its language, as a wise preacher will interpret it, “preach unto us a more practical religion. Come unto us in the simplicity of thy vocation. Be not ambitious of lofty themes. Lay aside the models of our stalwart fathers, and condescend to the lowliness of our diminutive stature. Help us to lay again and again, and still again, and yet once more, the foundations of repentance. Creep with us yet

among the first principles of the oracles of God. Teach us, as one would amuse children, with a story. Exhort us with long suffering. Play, by novel measures, upon our exhausted sensibilities. Tempt our heavy eyelids by the conceits of thy ingenuity, and the noise of thy shoutings. Thus shall the blessing of the foolish and the indolent be upon thee, and they shall be an exceeding great multitude who shall hail thee as an apostle and a prophet."

The existence, to a certain extent, of these and other similar perversions of taste respecting the true power of the pulpit, is scarcely questionable. The tendency to them is specially rife in commercial countries, and in periods of great commercial prosperity, when the accumulation of wealth, with its temptations to luxury, gives to cities an unhealthful sway in the social economy, and gathers around the church in such countries the perils of a mental and moral effeminacy. Now, just so far as such effeminate tastes infect the common Christian sentiment with regard to the pulpit, so far the moral energy of the church, in any and every enterprise for its own extension, is sapped at its foundation. Wealth may be poured out like water. The architecture of our churches may display the munificence of princes. Our clergy may dwell in king's palaces. Missionary treasuries may be filled as with the profusion of old chivalry. Benevolent societies may be as the stars in number, and popular enthusiasm may mount to ecstasy at the appeals from our platforms. Denominations may marshal their strength in vying with each other for the endowment of church extension. And to the wealth, and the enterprise, and the social respectability, and the gorgeous refinement of the Christian fraternity, may be added the dignity of swelling numbers, and the force of a splendid organization; so that it shall seem, to a worldly criticism, to be no vain boast in the humblest of the brotherhood to say, in the language of a living scholar, "I thank God that I am the child of a *magnificent* Church." Yet, let vitiated tastes corrupt the simplicity, and degrade the authority, and emasculate the manliness of the pulpit, and all this show of Christian energy soon becomes but a tawdry parade. Real life is taken out of it. It ceases to be respectable. In God's sight, it becomes detestable. An old Roman Triumph had a far more manly significance.

To just that extent to which this process goes on, *in part*, the moral power of the church over the world evaporates. Let such

a process approach its consummation, and the result would be seen in the general corruption of the church, from which nothing could save us but the signal interposition of God, which should be to the church in such a condition, what the advent of Christ was to Judaism; what the Reformation was to Romanism; what Puritanism was to the English hierarchy; and what Methodism was to a later death-sleep in the English church. We may confidently say to the churches of our land: 'Your dangers and safeguards, as respects theological *heresy*, are not chiefly in the hands of your theological schoolmen. They are in the hands of your preachers, and back of them, in your own tastes and the demands you make upon the pulpit. Demand for your pulpits manly and Godly preachers; ask them of God, and demand them of man, and then *sustain* them by your own tastes respecting the quality of preaching, and be assured, you shall *never* have an unsound ministry — NEVER.'

The views just presented would lead us naturally to consider, if the limits of this discussion would permit, a fourth illustration of the hindrances against which our system of Christian effort sometimes labors. It is the fact of an apparent inability, on the part of the church, to mingle, in any high degree, the spirit of trust in God, with that of a just self-reliance, in the work of extending the institutions of the Gospel. The point of chief interest in the development of this fact is, that Christian activity, historically considered, exhibits a vibration between successes and reverses; reverse being often necessary, apparently, to check an inflated spirit which had been engendered by success. Our human weakness has seemed to need just such discipline. The height of success in the dissemination of the Gospel is commonly of short duration, and often our great work has almost appeared as if suspended for the better training of those to whom its execution has been entrusted. Like the Hebrews in the wilderness, we wander through decades of years, in apparent uselessness, before energy of character reaches the magnitude requisite for effective conquest.

Passing this particular with this brief allusion, and returning now to the object for which these specifications of hindrances to our system of Christian effort have been named, let us observe that the thing which is needed to relieve the work of this world's conversion from such hindrances to its progress, is a general advance in Christian character. Could such a change as we

have supposed, take place, these obstructions would be, in great part, removed. They would be, doubtless, removed to just that extent, which should correspond with the degree of improved discipline in the state of the common Christian mind. From their very nature, they could not exist in a perfectly developed Christian society; and any approach to such a state of society, is an approach to their destruction. The point of special moment, however, is, that, under God's plan of procedure, nothing else than the change here supposed will result in their removal. They will not be removed by miracle. They cannot be removed by the mere increase of the numbers of the church, nor by merely an improved policy in the management of our Christian organizations, nor by the mere accumulation of wealth in Christian hands, nor by the mere increase of active Christian zeal. They cannot be reached effectually by any one avenue of approach. They are not the proper objects of any single class of expedients. Indeed, they are not subject to the power of any expedients. The power needed to accomplish their removal is, like the power of vegetation in Spring, the resultant of hidden forces. It is the power of enlarged character. It is the spontaneous and irresistible force of Christian mind, energized by the grace of God. The conviction forces itself upon one who contemplates intelligently the most serious of these incumbrances upon the mission of God's people to the world, that they are not superficial incumbrances. They cannot be shaken off at will. They have roots running deep in human nature. The changes that shall destroy them must be elemental. They throw back our hopes from all human expedients upon that almighty and undying grace, which shall make God's people willing, in the day of His power.

We have still to notice, briefly, a third result which might be expected to follow a general elevation of Christian character in the church. It is, that *concentration would be given to the moral power of the church by improved modes of Christian union.* It is scarcely necessary to speak of the waste of energy, which has resulted from divisions among those who bear in common the Christian name. It is the great argument, which never can be answered to the satisfaction of an infidel, that the church, from the time when its numbers first attracted the attention of the world, has always been, to human view, a distracted body. It is a phenomenon which the great majority of the world cannot be made to understand, in any way that shall be creditable to

Christian character, that the lives of so many able men should have been expended, the force of so much Christian feeling should have been absorbed, and the edge of zeal for the common cause should have been so frequently turned, in conflicts, often violent and in the result tyrannical, between those whose real differences, if there be any truth in their common faith, have long since been lost sight of in heaven. It is impossible to explain, by any philosophy that shall save us from reproach, why religious discussion, if sustained by large combinations of Christians, should almost always degenerate into contention, and differences of opinion ensure mutual hostility. Yet, by common consent, the fact seems to be confessed, that the evil is not accessible by any policy that has yet been devised. The wisdom of expedients does not reach it. All experiments in the way of visible Christian union, on an extensive scale, appear to be doomed to failure. All our lamentations over our dissensions, are so fruitless that it is not singular if our enemies pronounce them heartless. It requires a charitable ear to detect in them the deep voice of Christian love. They too often sound like the wailing at an Oriental funeral. At no single point in the whole range of our present economy, does the necessity of an enlarged growth of Christian character come to view more palpably than in this. The lapse of time only deepens the conviction that the consummation which all desire, none should desire to hope for, but as the result of a new baptism from on high.

Our own day bears witness on this subject, no less significantly than other times. Is not one of the chief embarrassments we experience in sustaining our religious institutions, the difficulty we encounter in regulating the denominational spirit? Do we not find this spirit to be a perilous virtue? Is it not true, that the more vigorous we become in numbers and in wealth and in social position, the more tensely are the lines of denominational distinction drawn? Do not the influences that stimulate growth seem to be wholly *astrigent*? Perhaps the most remarkable phenomenon of all, to a looker on, is the fact that, the confessedly common work of sending the Gospel to the destitute, is made itself the occasion of separations. Our missionary organizations become the very centres of divergence. We exhibit the paradox in action, of "abrogating plans of union," for the sake of increased efficiency.

It becomes any individual to speak, on this subject, with great

deference to the general voice of two intelligent denominations, which has been unequivocally expressed. But to the fathers and brethren, whose wisdom it is an honor to their juniors to trust, the utterance of an honest doubt as to such a policy may be safely ventured. It surely cannot be charged to the account of indifference or of ignorance, if it appears to many, an unintelligible policy. It cannot be ascribed to their timidity, if, in view of such a policy, they look upon the growth of the denominations most dear to them, with a trembling rather than an exulting sympathy. It is not an uncharitable distrust of their brethren; which leads them to fear the *remote* results of such modes of increase. Is it not true, that denominational growth may, after all, be delusive? May not church extension become but a noble name for ecclesiastical pillage? Is it not possible, that we may be found to have been of those who preach Christ of envy and of strife? Is there not danger that we may advance, by steps which we, or those who come after us, *must* retrace, before the millennium shall dawn on the world? If it prove not so, and if the policy in question prove to have been a necessary evil, which it was wise to choose rather than a greater, it still illustrates the need of an elevation of Christian character by which we should rise above such an *civil* necessity. We need, surely, to be able to prosecute the work of Christian missions, with united forces. The inquiry is a fair one, and the world will press it to the injury of the truth: if the work of this world's conversion cannot unite the body of Christ, what can do this? If Christians have not common ground here, where can they have it? The inquiry deserves notice, also, whether there is not more of the semblance than of the reality of truth, in the view, with which scruples on this subject are so often silenced, that fellowship of spirit may exist without union in action? We confess that we do not see in this principle the force which many ascribe to it. We have never been able to feel its sufficiency, as an answer to the taunts of infidelity. We are very sure that it cannot bear up the present structure of Christian denominations, with the superincumbent weight of their present policy in their treatment of each other. Can that be *Christian* fellowship which breaks, the moment it is tested by Christian action? Can that be Christian union, which vanishes the moment there is something to *do*? Does not such a union exhibit more of the courtesy of well-bred strangers, than of the sympathy of true-hearted brethren? Does it not spring

from the virtues of the gentleman, rather than of the Christian? On one of the roads leading to the summits of the Andes, there stands midway between the summit and the valley, a house of entertainment, where travellers meet and exchange congratulations; and it often happens that, while one party who have come up from the valley are shivering with cold, the other party who have come down from the mountain are fainting with heat. Though breathing for the time a common atmosphere, they have come from regions so diverse in their temperature, that it is as if the tropics and the poles had been compressed together. Is not such too often the character of the "fellowship" of Christian denominations which strive to sympathize with each other in feeling, while they part asunder in action? Is it not the fellowship of mere juxtaposition, rather than of union?

From whatever point of view, we regard the existing modes of Christian union, the conviction returns upon us, that any perceptible improvement of this union, must spring from some widely diffused influence that shall raise the tone of Christian character, and endue it with the graces of a more perfect discipline. Such an influence would of necessity enlarge the common Christian intellect, while it should deepen the flow of Christian love. Differences of opinion would, many of them, be smiled away, as men dismiss the prejudices of their youth. Others would be waived, as too unimportant to be debated on the field of action. Growth of character would accomplish, in this respect, that which mere argument can never do. Obstacles to fellowship would thus disappear, which never can be reasoned away, and the wonder would arise, not that they had ceased to be, but that they ever were. The church would find itself, in glad surprise, on heights of Zion, from which obstructions to Christian union should glide off to the right, and to the left, and before, and behind, as if melted by the breath of God.

Of the further suggestions of which this discussion is prolific, one can scarcely be unnoticed. It is that of the dignity of the Pastoral Office. The distinguished honor of that office is, to train churches of Christ, which are to be the pillars in the support of truth the world over. We are apt sometimes to overrate the relative importance of that which may be termed, in an unusual sense of the word, the *pioneer* work of the ministry. This is that work which has for its object, only the conversion of men

from a state of hostility to God; the work, it may be, of an evangelist, or an itinerant preacher, as distinct from a pastor. This work, intrinsically considered, cannot be overrated; but as related to the subsequent work of Christian training, it may be. He was not in the highest sense a wise pastor, though a singularly successful one, who sought a change in his field of labor, because nearly the whole body of his congregation had been hopefully regenerated by God's blessing upon his ministry. That pastor's work was then but begun, nobly begun indeed, still, only begun. The glory of the Christian ministry consists in that which distinguishes the Pastoral Office. It is the successful *culture* of regenerate souls. It is the accumulation in the church of Christian energy not merely, not chiefly, by the growth of numbers, but by the growth of character, by the enlargement of Christian mind, by its advanced intelligence, by its enlightened conscience, by its consolidated strength, by its expanded heart, by its wise and steady habits of action, by its perfected and confirmed possession of all that is lovely and of good report.

This view is supported by a remarkable feature in the policy (if so feeble a word may be thus used), which God has thus far adopted in the history of redemption. It is, that the work of this world's recovery has not been carried on by an equal diffusion of the light of truth through the earth. It has been by concentration, rather, of Divine favor upon choice localities. God has acted through the agency of a peculiar people. He has employed favorite nations. He has sought out countries, and discovered new lands, which He has chosen as His special resting places. There His honor has dwelt. There His presence has disclosed itself in His most stately goings. There have the riches of His grace been expended in Divine profusion. There have the altars burned with the most prompt and often repeated evidences of His blessing. And from these favored localities has gone forth the light in scattered rays, shooting obliquely here and there into the night that has shrouded the surrounding world. The principle of God's wisdom in all this, is that which we have been considering, and which indicates the illustrious office of the Christian pastor. It is, that in the choice of instruments in this world's redemption, God honors chiefly, not numbers, — else, Babylon should have been chosen rather than Judea; not wealth, — else, Tyre with its merchant princes had been preferred to Galilee and its fishermen; not noble birth, — else, patrician Rome had

taken precedence of Nazareth; not genius and learning, — else, Greece or Egypt had been the birthplace of Christ, rather than Palestine; and the apostles should have commenced their labors in Athens or Alexandria, instead of going first to the lost *sheep* of Israel, and beginning at Jerusalem. It is, that God honors in the choice of his instruments, those whom in His sovereign pleasure He has made the recipients of His own grace. Them He trains for His work. He disciplines them by long and varied culture. He pours out the full treasure of His love upon them. He purifies them unto Himself “a peculiar people, zealous of good works.”

In close alliance with this feature in the Divine plan, is the institution of the Pastoral Office. The tenor of its commission is: ‘Labor for the training of Christian churches. Study the state of Christian minds. Learn the idiosyncracies of Christian experience. Strive to enlarge the growth of Christian hearts by a wise culture. Feed the lambs of the fold. Make your name dear in Christian families. Magnify your office by vindicating, in your example, its permanence. Labor, by your life’s work, to build up monuments that shall live when you shall have entered into rest. Such labors shall bring your work into alliance with the costly, the stable, the far-reaching plans of Jehovah. Such a purpose spans the globe in its wise forecast. It has a prophetic eye, and looks into the remotest future. In the successes of the Gospel, in all lands and through all times, it discerns the consummation of its own honor, and the proof that it is ordained of God.’