

CHAPTER XV.

EFFECTUAL CHURCH MINISTRY.

IMPERFECT as the review of social issues has been, it has shown that, in the circumstances and conditions of modern life, there is an imperative call to Christian Churches to consider their ways. We have seen that many of the most energetic and influential developments of that life are not inspired by Christian motives, that sometimes a positive hostility to organised religious societies is expressed in them. The action of the Church can be traced only on parts of the surface; and the tendency undoubtedly is to withdraw wide areas of interest from any spiritual reference and, apart from this reference, to work out the problem of social salvation. In view of this and also of the ever-increasing importance of the social question, it seems fitting that, before the task undertaken in this volume closes, we should ask, What in

the existing state of Christian institutions—in their action, in their methods, in all that is visible and evidential—is detrimental to their usefulness? What is hindering the success of their mission? What is imperilling the calamity to which Christ alluded when He spoke of the salt losing its savour?

The Church may be held to represent three things—a faith, a society, a social propaganda. Each of these constituents implies the others; but, for the purpose now contemplated, they may be regarded separately though in harmony. In respect of each, the inquiry proposed is, How can the ministry of the Church be made more fully effectual in the varied conditions of the world which it is called to serve?

I.

Christianity is the embodiment of a faith “once for all delivered to the saints.” The communion of saints—the Church in its entirety—holds this faith in trust for the good of mankind. If it has not a message that claims to be received on account of its transcendent importance, and of its ability to interpret and fulfil the human life, it has, and can have, no right to be heard amidst the many voices of the age:

If it cannot proclaim its message with a force that the soul must recognise—"in the demonstration of the Spirit"—it will not be heard. "The spread of socialism," it has been affirmed, "is the token of the decline of religion." We may not admit the decline of religion. Men need, and more than ever in the present time are hungering for, a word which they can feel to be a gospel, the revelation to them of the kingdom in which their highest aspirations are satisfied, and in the possession of which they have the righteousness that binds man to man. Of what Matthew Arnold calls religiosity they are impatient, of controversies over creeds they make little account; but they crave something more than political economies; there are wants which an abundance of material happiness cannot satisfy. The spread of socialism may indicate a decline of Church authority, and a growing dissatisfaction with conventional symbols of religion, but it does not show that religion itself is less necessary or is less desired. Nevertheless, if the fellowship that the Church offers and the ministry of this fellowship are thus set aside; if there is a widespread scepticism as to the ability of this fellowship and ministry to express the deepest thought, and to purify the most active life of the day; the situation is one

of gravity for the household of faith. The power of its Gospel is challenged; even the claims of the Christ it declares are questioned. How can this scepticism be disarmed? It is, as yet, rather a tone of mind than a body of articulated opinion: how can a new confidence banish the distrust?

The answer to this inquiry takes us over the entire field of spiritual, intellectual, and practical activity; but the part of the answer which is relevant to the matter specially in view is, that the victory over all sorts of doubt and misgiving will be found in the might with which the faith is proclaimed, and in the signs which follow its proclamation. The confidence of the Christian is that the Spirit of God who dwells with the Church is the witness to the Christ of God, and that, according to His power working in minds, He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that can be asked or thought. But this confidence implies a human condition. The signs "follow them that believe." There must be a subjective faith in the witnessing Church which receives and assimilates the objective faith committed to it. The message is quick and powerful when the appeal is straight to the conscience, when it rightly apprehends the human nature appealed to, when it is directed

by the wisdom and the sympathy which unlock the fastenings of the soul; and if the power of God unto salvation is not manifest in the dispensation of the Gospel of the kingdom, we are bound to inquire where the failure lies? what are the reasons for this limitation of the Spirit of God?

One of such reasons may be an uncertainty in the Church itself. For, the confused groping towards new landing-places which we have observed in social movements has its counterpart in the Church. The more progressive intellects in several Churches are uneasy in the habitudes of thought to which, by their most venerated traditions and by their confessions, they are related, and are searching for ampler spaces into which they can bear the sums and substances of their old beliefs, incorporating them with larger apprehensions of God and of His world. Now, a time in which earnest men are voyaging through troubled waters in quest of new havens, in which ancient orders of belief are giving place to new, but these new not clearly defined, is almost sure to be a time of weakened enthusiasm, of utterance lacking in the concentrated energy which lays effectual siege to the heart. Inevitably, dubieties in thought are reflected in hesitations of voice. And three results follow. Sympathy

with the most advanced positions partakes more or less of the character of a revolt against Church authority. Or again, to those whose Christian life cannot be dissociated from their Church life and from the things which have been most surely believed, it seems as if the foundations of the house of God on the earth were shaken, as if even the sun, moon, and stars in the firmament of faith were darkened. Or yet once more, to many, unsettlements in the sphere of belief represent ineptitudes at which they mock, or discords which they have neither the time nor the will to regard. They turn away from the Church, and transfer their worship to what is positive and material.

Thus, an arrest is put alike on zeal and on force by intellectual incertitudes in the Church. But, if its teaching wants in strength, it may also want in the wisdom by which the ear of the generation it serves is secured. The Church is not to give the truth intrusted to it away, from the desire to be on good terms with critic or secularist. Nor must it fight with armour that has not been proved. Nevertheless, without yielding aught of that word of the Lord which is "for ever settled in heaven," it must learn, through its understanding of the time, how best to speak to men. It has to read out of two books of

God, each of which sheds light on the other: the book of the life which lies around it, and the book of the laws of the eternal life of which it is the custodian. If it would rightly dispense the fulness of the latter book, and indicate the applications of its principles to the constituents and facts of society, it must diligently study the contents of the former. It must be always a hearer and asker of questions, surveying life in all its phases, in order that it may discern and enforce the bearings of Christian truth on the complex conditions of society. The region of its special influence is one which the political economist does not enter—man's highest universe, without the realisation of which his being is incomplete. There is no charge more frequently pressed against the authorised ministry of the Church than that it does not hit the nail on the very head; does not speak to the world in the manner that commands its attention. This charge is not to be lightly regarded. Churches may well consider whether in their pulpits there is not frequently a failure in relevance; whether the character of the instruction is not such as misses the mark in the case of many with whom the world is present early and late; whether the language in which it is conveyed is not that of books rather than of life, and the

mind is busied over matters that do not bring men into touch with what they feel to be vital, and do not give them really "a lamp to their feet and a light to their path." Having regard to all the social stir and ferment of which they are conscious, Christian people are bound, by the obligations of loyalty to their Lord, to inquire into all that mars the effect of the presentation of the faith, to eliminate the elements which living thought can no longer assimilate from the statement of Christian verity, and thus to bring the statement into fuller harmony with the larger perspectives of the present day.

But of all hindrances to the "free course" of the faith, none is more real, none more constantly quoted, than the separation between the faith as professed and the life as lived of those "who profess and call themselves Christians." Evidences of Christianity cannot always be sifted; but there is an evidence which men can and do sift. They test the worth of a religion by the fruits in conduct which appear. They are sometimes unfair both to those who adhere to the religion and to the religion itself. The best of men are only men at the best: there will be flaws in the marble; there will be inconsistencies at one point or at another. And, instead of condemning the religion because of the faults of those who

acknowledge it to be theirs, the faults may prove only how high the ideal is; how, as measured by its purity and holiness, imperfections and errors are made only the more apparent. But it is on the glaring inconsistency that multitudes lay hold. They sneer at the capitalist, with his long and solemn face on Sunday, and his keen, rasping, grasping way on Monday; praying for the heathen abroad, but ignorant of the condition of those whom he employs. They sneer at the clergy, doing their statutory work, and keeping apart from the sins and miseries of their fellows. They point to stock exchanges and trust companies, and many sorts of business, with their tricks and deceits, their grinding of poor toilers, their gospels of cheapness. They dwell on the gaps between what is believed and what is actually done, and protest that a religion that dwells on another world and does not reform this, that has tides of praise to God and feels not the tides of discontent that are surging around, that passes by the poor and defers to the rich, is not for them; that it is a clog on the wheels of progress, and is a gigantic untruth. In all this, of course, there is extravagance. But, allowing for the extravagance, we may take note of the currents of feeling which are indicated, currents that can only be stemmed by a revived and heightened ethical life in the

Church. The Church is more than an ethical institute: but, though it is more, it must be that; and it must show that its holiness is a robust and an all-pervading power. The question has been put, "Are there any Christians still?" and it has been argued that there is nothing in the practical Christianity of the day that cannot be accounted for without the demand for a faith in supernatural interventions and aids. Now, whilst we all know those in whom the faith in Christ is a spiritual and moral force, who can say, "I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me," still it must be owned that the tones and standards of what may be called the average Christianity give some justification for the argument. If the Church would realise its social mission, there must be an uplifting of the conception of the true Christian righteousness, and an insistence on a more strenuous endeavour to fulfil this conception. The power of Christian motive must be brought to bear on business and on politics. The formation of Christian Social Unions, whose object is "to claim for the Christian law the ultimate authority to rule social practice," is a movement in the right direction. Those who enter into such unions are called to prove that the law for which they claim an ultimate authority is sovereign and

supreme over their practice. We need noble "public souls"; men and women who are themselves gospels. To develop, discipline, and educate such souls is the office of the Church. It represents a "co-operation in the endeavour to bring the faith of the Gospel into the council-chamber and the market-place."¹

No prayer more befits the company of faithful people in the present day than that which the apostles addressed to their Lord, "Increase our faith." The strongest in the grace that is in Christ Jesus will feel most, in the face of all the perplexities and difficulties by which he is beset, the need of additions—of "a more and ever more." Christendom, and not least reformed Christendom, needs a new day of Pentecost, with "the sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind filling all the house." From every part of the house, the appeal to the unseen Lord and Head is, "Wilt Thou not quicken us again, that Thy people may rejoice in Thee?" The Church may be assured that, where there is apparent failure, the cause is in itself, not in the Gospel of Christ. A veteran in the service of God, to whom the truth of the incarnation was as an anchor of the soul, has stated the confidence that an experience of fifty years had

¹ Westcott, *Lessons from Work*, p. 264.

compact— it is a confidence that the Church can take to its heart: "I have learnt more and more certainly that the Gospel of Christ is able to meet the danger, and that it confirms the social application of the faith which I have ventured to call a revelation for our time. It lays open the source of the danger in our forgetfulness of our divine kinship; it justifies our aspirations by showing that the Son of God took our nature upon Him, not to make us brethren, but because we were brethren; it brings to all men one divine aim, and with that a unity of life."¹

II.

But the Church, whilst called to teach and to preach the faith, is a *society*. Its social character is not the consequence of a concourse of minds holding "the like precious faith"—it is in and of the essential and everlasting nature of things. For, the Church is a fellowship, a brotherhood, an election by God out of mankind, for the good of mankind, united to the elect Son in whom the Father's soul delights. It is an organism in vital relation to Jesus Christ.

The tendency of this day, as we have seen, is

¹ Lessons from Work, p. 262.

collectivist, not individualistic. It is towards large social actions. Society is regarded as an organism, comprehending an indefinite variety of members, none of which are to be exploited, all of which are to receive of the commonwealth, on the one condition that all contribute by personal service to the commonwealth. In this, do we not perceive the ideal which should be manifested in the actual Church? We have traced, towards the beginning of this volume, the working out of the ideal in the first ages of Christianity. We have noted that this Christianity combined many of the elements of Roman imperialism with the higher imperialism of a spiritual kingdom, whose nobility is that of ministry, whose glory is that of sacrifice. It was by the capacity of sacrifice, by the brotherhood signed with the sign of the cross, that the Church conquered the Roman world. It remains to the Church in these latter days to hark back to that glory, to recall that nobility. Its vocation is to represent more fully to mankind the social life which is proper to it—the life whose fundamental principle is, that the good of the whole is to be distributed amongst the members, and that each of the members is to contribute, personally and efficiently, to the good of the whole. The Church ought to be

the mirror of the true spiritual order -- not mingling itself with the politics of party, but influencing politics by the force of the example that it sets, of the truth that it manifests, and of the influences that proceed from this example and this truth. It ought to train and to give direction to the spirit of citizenship. It is the witness for a citizenship which links all that is active to the loftiest aspirations of humanity, which connects the hopes of the loyal and true with a kingdom of God; and, nourishing a genuine enthusiasm for whatsoever things are just and pure and lovely and of good report, it is, or should be, the evidence that the love of God is poured out into our world by the Holy Ghost whom He has given us.

But this evidence is obscured by the divisions of the Church. There are unities, indeed, which in some measure moderate the chills caused by external separations, and, in spite of these separations, maintain an inward moral fellowship. In the Scriptures, to which Reformed Churches appeal as the supreme rule of faith and practice, there is "a unity of ethical purpose which never fails through age after age"; and this, amidst all varieties of constitution, is reflected in Christendom. In the Babel-like confusion of voices, we can yet distinguish one historic and con-

tinuous belief. There is a unity of devotion in the worship of Christians, however diversified its forms may be. And, in the administration of gifts by "the self-same Spirit," God is always "lending minds out." When He speaks to any soul, He speaks through it to the world-wide parliament of souls. The vision of the one body is never altogether lost. It can be discerned by all who have the eyes to see. But it is the Church in that which is most visible that attracts or repels the vast majority of men; and the existing condition of the Christian society, broken into sections between which there are wide cleavages, seems to be a denial of the one flock with the one Shepherd, of the one body with the one Head. Surely, not the least urgent of the lessons to be read, marked, and learned from the features of social life on which, in this volume, we have dwelt, is the need—for the truth's sake, for the sake of human wellbeing—of reducing to a minimum the occasions of strife in the Church of God, of concentrating the scattered religious forces, of promoting such a unity in action as shall make more effectual the motive-power of Christianity. How is this to be realised? How is the desire of Christ, that all who believe in Him shall be one, to have more distinct and abundant fruition?

The subject of Church union is beset by difficulties, on which, and on the removal of which, it is not within the scope of this chapter to enlarge. But four points, essential to any real endeavour towards this union, may be indicated.

The first is an honest determination, spreading in the circles of Church membership and becoming a pressure on Church leaders, that there must be, and shall be, a fuller and more explicit concord. Hitherto, unity has been too much a pious sentiment. It has not marked a supreme and distinct purpose. The practical strength has been given to the interests of the denomination: in plans, or projects, or schemes of wider fellowship, men have put the denomination before, instead of behind, them. Now, there is a loyalty to the special Church flag which is entitled to the respect that is due to earnest conviction. But there will be no real advance in the direction of union until the feeling becomes intense, that the circumstances of the time loudly call for the predominance of a higher loyalty still—loyalty to Christ Himself and to the world which the Church serves in His name; and that this loyalty demands a disengagement from the trammels of denominationalism, a readiness, with perfect candour, and with the reverence befitting those who are wait-

ing on God for direction, to inquire how the Christian consciousness shall best be interpreted, and the Christian concert, in the work given to the one body of the Lord, shall most effectively be fulfilled.

Assuming that the desire for a completer unity becomes an operative force in Churches, a further necessity is that persons of different communions shall know each other, not in a mere general way, but through those intimacies of conference and prayer by means of which souls pierce through the outer court of the ecclesiastic into the sanctuary of the Christian and the man. Such knowledge thaws the ice of exclusiveness, rounds the corners of sectarianism, lets men see how like they are to each other, and how much there is in each to be liked by the other, makes those who have hitherto dwelt apart feel at home together. In every Church, there are minds so narrow in their range and so stubborn in their prejudices, that any platform except that which entirely represents them will seem too broad. But, in the large and charitable air of a true, frank communion of spirit and thought, the smallness of the sectary and the bitterness of the fanatic vanish. In the measure in which mutual regard and intelligent perception of the whole

ecclesiastical situation are promoted, the ideal of the Christian society as being truly one body will assume its right proportions. We must be content with slow travelling in the promotion of this knowledge. Prepossessions are obstinate. Feelings which mark the scars that are inherited from the past cannot at once be eradicated. Love suffers long, and it has often a long time in which to suffer. But it never fails. Hasten slowly, it says, in getting all things ready. When they are ready, the railway speed will come.

Probably, a development of the future that will aid unity is one to which Mr A. J. Balfour pointed in a thoughtful speech delivered some time ago. It is that of giving ampler space in Church courts and on Church arenas for open questions. There are many issues, belonging to government, or ritual, or national policy, which might be held as open, not as articles of faith or conditions of unity. Within constitutional and confessional limits, and sometimes outwith these limits when rigidly interpreted, all Churches make room for latitudes of view. Schools of thought, differing almost to the point of opposition, are comprehended. May not this comprehensiveness be extended with a view to a broader fellowship of Churches? May not wider ranges be

allowed for varieties in the apprehension of truth, so long as there is unity in fundamental beliefs and principles? There are topics, moreover, that have formed burning questions on the floor of Assembly and Synod, which, to the great gain of Christian charity, might be removed from their purview, and left to be dealt with as questions for the individual citizen. Some remarks of Dr Robertson Nicoll, in a late number of the 'Liberal Review,' illustrative of this, may fairly be held to represent a prevalent sentiment. "It is probable," he writes, "that the advocacy of Disestablishment will become less and less pronounced in ecclesiastical courts. What is done will be done by men acting in their capacity as citizens. The problems of the great cities have been weighing more and more on the minds of Christian Scotsmen. The state of the vast masses who never attend any place of worship, and live in conditions practically fatal to decency and morality, must be improved." There is the ring at once of a true earnestness and of a sweet reasonableness in these words, and in the spread of this earnestness and this reasonableness lie the hopes of a reconstructed Church in Scotland.

They remind us, also, of a mode of union which does not involve long and anxious negotiation.

It is the way of practical social action. A leading Scottish newspaper, commenting on Dr Robertson Nicoll's article, observed, "Certainly the Churches cannot do better than unite their forces in an assault on social questions."¹ In such a united assault there need be no interference with the autonomy or the legitimate development of each Church. There need not even be formal federation. What is wanted is merely the agreement, allowing testimonies to remain where they are, to make a concerted and strenuous effort towards social salvation, on the basis of the common Christian hope and life. Ministers and members might assemble to study social needs, methods, applications of the law of Christ to the complexities of society, to the phases of the humanity which forms their prospect, and so order their forces that there shall be no waste and overlapping, but disciplined and sympathetic movement. There are many points at which the Church can come into line with the best effort of the day. An example may be given. Towards the close of the 'Sixties in the century which has closed, under the dread of cholera, congregations of all denominations in Glasgow co-operated in the rectification of insanitary conditions, and the cleansing and better fitting of homes. The authorities of the city

¹ The Glasgow Herald.

acknowledged the great service which was thus rendered. Nor did the Churches themselves fail to receive a benefit. What opportunities for similar co-operation are presented! "The Churches," added the newspaper referred to, "might even obtain a fresh lease of power and popularity." Power and popularity are not ends to be sought. But the ends which the Christian brotherhood is bound to seek would be attained by this mutuality of moral and spiritual force. The good of men would be furthered. The beneficent character of Christianity would be vindicated. The essential unity of the Church would be manifested. The Son of man would see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied. Social union would help to a more visible realisation of the one body—the society which Christ founded.

⋮ Ecclesiastical unions cannot be rushed. Those that are called incorporating may represent a loss as well as a gain—a loss in so far as they repress some characteristic expression of the Christian mind, or chill some special warmth of Christian interest. In any case, they are genuine and beneficial only when they mark the growth of an inner spirit of unity which had so permeated the relations of the uniting bodies as to make the external union, not only fitting, but inevitable. Therefore, before union comes unity. And, keep-

ing in view the many and the difficult problems which have been previously referred to, the call to social unity may well assume the form of the address which Milton has put into the lips of Adam when, after the fiat of expulsion from their Paradise, he says to the partner in his sorrow—

“ But rise ; let us no more contend, nor blame
Each other, blamed enough elsewhere, but strive
In offices of love how we may lighten
Each other's burden in our share of woe.”

III.

The union of Churches in practical service would give a new momentum to the social propaganda which the commission of Christ implies. He sent His Church into the world. He bade it go into all the world and make disciples out of all nations ; its special instrument, the Gospel of His Kingdom ; its special office, to build up human life in the truth of His Kingdom by the diffusion of the Gospel, with all the influences that are proper to it, and in all the ways by which effect can be given to it. The Church, as has been pointed out, is necessarily aggressive and necessarily social. It is itself a social state, and it is called to realise the laws and blessings of its sociality in the civic society which forms its en-

vironment. How, in more adequate manner, to accomplish its vocation, how to regenerate and enrich mankind, is the issue on which a more truly united Church would bestow the force of its most enlightened zeal, and its most competent intellectual and practical force.

It is the issue that is pressing on the Churches of Great Britain. The men of greatest influence in the Church of England are keenly alive to the need of more freedom in its constitution, of more variety in its services, of more flexibility in its agencies, of a more distinct place and work for its laity. A refreshing illustration of the liberality of view that may distinguish a High Churchman is supplied in the earnestness with which the new Bishop of Worcester (Canon Gore) has called the attention of English Churchmen to some of the distinctive features of the constitution and ministry of the Scottish Church. The Free Churches in England also recognise that the social conditions and wants of the day impose on them the obligation to recast many of their agencies. In Scotland, there is a marked advance in the same direction. The reports of the Church of Scotland's Commission on the Religious Condition of the People may be quoted in evidence.

In the first of these reports (1891), the Com-

mission, after saying that "no better system for the planting of practical Christianity in every part of the land could be devised than the parochial or territorial system, if it is sufficiently and efficiently applied," proceeds: "But the increase of the population, and the ever-growing intensity and manifoldness of life, make it imperative to readjust the machinery and to supply additional motive-power, if the work aimed at is to be really done. The one minister for one parish is in many cases inadequate. The ministry must be multiplied. It is not stone and lime that is needed,—here and there, of course, it is needed; it is not further division and subdivision of territory,—here and there that too is needed; but, speaking generally, it seems to the Commission that the most urgent want is more labourers, and more variety in the form of the labour." And four types of ministry are indicated—parish missionaries; lay evangelists, "who might come to the people with more of the vernacular and the plain homespun than the stated pastorate with the assistance of licentiates, living in the midst of the people, and doing the work of a soldier of the cross in square and slum;" women as deaconesses, sisters, nurses; and special mission preachers, helping "to deepen and quicken the life of congregations, and thus

also to strengthen the aggressive work of the Church."

In the reports of successive years, rural and city populations—the miner, the fisherman, the farm-labourer and his bothy, the female worker in fields, as well as the different elements in the town, are included in the view; elasticities of operation are suggested, and the changes are ever rung on the note, "The Church cannot confine its labours to any one phase or side, even the loftiest, of the complex life which it is called to influence. It must comprehend that life in its breadth, and length, and depth, and height."¹

The statements of the Commission are exhibitive of the trend of all Church life in Scotland.

Three points in this trend may be noticed. The first, an increasing desire to make the house of God more attractive and hospitable; to express more heartily a welcome to all, the poorest equally with the richest; to wipe out the reproach which an earnest Glasgow philanthropist expressed, "Great masses of the population of Glasgow look upon the Church as something for ministers, or something to be made out of them, and not as something to be given them."² The second, to develop, not mere agency, but the contact of person with person, in all effort

¹ Report, 1892.

² *Ibid.*

for the uplifting and amelioration of social conditions. And the third, to call forth all the best energy and vitality of the Church; to utilise these in their resourcefulness, not for the purpose of administering mere temporary aids, but for the permanent improvement of estate, and the permanent blessing of the life. More and more the words spoken by Norman Macleod, nearly fifty years ago, are accepted as a rule of action: "Let congregations take cognisance of the whole man and his various earthly relationships; let them seek to enrich him with all Christ gave him; let them endeavour to meet all his wants as an active, social, intellectual, sentient, as well as spiritual being, so that men shall know through the ministrations of the body, the Church, how its living Head gives them all things richly to enjoy."¹

Great and high and holy is the work thus given to the Church. The harvest is plenteous; may the labourers, drawing nearer to each other, and toiling in harmony with all who aim at the betterment of life, be inspired by the love which "abounds in knowledge and in all judgment!" A recent encyclical of the Pope concludes with the sentence, "We have heard enough of the rights of man, let us hear more of the rights

¹ Memoir of Norman Macleod, D.D., vol. ii. p. 8.

of God." But between the rights of man and the rights of God there is no opposition; they are misconceived and misstated on the one side or on the other, when there seems to be conflict. The good of man is the glory of God. The right of man is his portion in God. Amidst all the agitations and the apparent dissonances of the society whose phases, whose problems, whose sorrows, and whose aspirations we have regarded, those who listen for the voice of wisdom, "watching daily at its gates and waiting at the posts of its doors," can hear the inextinguishable cry of the soul for God, the Everlasting Righteousness; and to reveal God to man and reconcile man to God, in righteousness, is the fulfilment of the social mission of the Church.