

There are indeed some who think that their own denomination is nearer than any other to what they call the "Scriptural model." They examine the New Testament for the pattern of the primitive Church and think they find it in Independency, or Presbytery, or Episcopacy, as the case may be. They assume, I think without proof, that there is some one form which was intended to be the mould into which the Church should fall, the same for every age and every set of circumstances, and thus try to discover this in the midst of the scattered and fragmentary accounts of the primitive churches. That they do not succeed very well is proved by the fact that there are three or four competing forms, all equally convinced that they are the perfect New Testament ideal. For my part I am glad it is so. I do not much believe in models even though they be scriptural models. Forms may be divinely given and yet harden into fetters as the history of the Jewish law shews. A model, at best, is but a form. Christ, on the other hand, is an example, that is, a life embodied in facts, holding fast by reality, yet adapting itself to many forms. Your child of six and your father of eighty may equally follow the example of Christ; the form of their life must differ widely, but the spirit of Christ's words and deeds may express itself in both. It is, I think, true of the primitive Church, as it is of her Lord, that she is an example rather than a model. We are to study her methods and drink into her spirit, and then we are to modify these methods under the guidance of that spirit with reference to the needs of the special place and time in which our lot may be cast. We are doubly mistaken in groping amid the twilight for the scriptural model of a church, for first, we cannot find it, and secondly, we should not be bound to follow it even if we could. The notices of the New Testament as to the organization of the primitive Church are fragmentary to the extreme, you have to piece them out by inference, so that when you get the completed product it is about ninety-nine parts inference and one part Scripture. For my own part I do not much believe in structures like that; as Coleridge says, I distrust "the ever-widening spiral, *ergo*," that gets so much out of so little. Especially I do so when there is not a word in Scripture to indicate that the form of the Apostolic Church was intended to be perpetual. I see no such proof that we are bound to adopt exactly the church practices of the Apostles than that we are under obligation to imitate the cut of their clothes or the pattern of their beards. In all things they follow very much the fashions of their age. The worship and methods of the primitive Church are an adaptation to Christian rites of what they found ready to hand in the synagogue. And, as Hooker pertinently argues, if they did what convenience had rendered customary, we may do what custom has rendered convenient—assuming, of course, that no principle of truth or morality is violated.

But while no form of Church organization is universally binding there are some which are better adapted than others to the expression of certain great principles. I think we may believe, without being merely fanciful that each of the leading forms of Church government is permitted to endure amongst us because it embodies and illustrates a great truth or principle of the Christian life. Episcopacy, with its stately ceremonies, venerable creeds and elaborate ritual, seems the manifest outcome of the great principles of order, decency, and reverence for the past. Presbytery, with its accurate logical articulation, conserves for us the principles of doctrinal purity, Christian equality, and organization for a common end, and it will not be difficult to shew that our own churches stand as the witnesses of mighty principles too. Nay, I believe that we have this great advantage, that our principles are those of which the modern world has most emphatic need, and in which alone it can find the resolution of its doubts and the satisfaction of its longings. The future is more and more ours, not that other denominations will cease to live and work, but that the whole Church of Christ will become increasingly penetrated by our views and inspired with our spirit.

What then are some of the great principles for which we bear testimony? What are some of the rays of the bright light which we strive to hold up in the Church and the world? They are, I think, such as especially characterize a living and progressive Church.

I. One great need of a living Church in our day is simplicity of organization. Machinery is good when one thing only needs to be done and when it is sufficient to do it always in exactly the same way. A machine is excellent for stamping half-dollar pieces because we want them of one size and shape and as similar as possible in general appearance. Machinery means uniformity. But uniformity has its drawbacks. It greatly limits the sphere of work. The one thing done may be well done, but then there is only one thing that can be done. Do we not see this in ecclesiastical activities? They take the type of their sect or school. The dissent churches stamp the school on the whole attitude and manner of their members. You may know what sect a man belongs to by the cut of his coat, the tone of his voice, his favourite set of phrases, or even by the manner in which he wears his hair. First-rate drill no doubt, but it has the limitations of drill. It teaches men to do certain things and to think in certain grooves, but what becomes of the flexibility of thought and variety of adaptation needed in an impatient and mercenary age? Thought is not, perhaps, very profound among the masses of men, but it is in its way very active. The girls in our schools and the clerks in our stores are discussing questions that used to be reserved for the philosophical class-room or the theological school. The monthly magazines and even the daily papers are moving the fundamental problems of life and destiny. The last utterances of the philosopher whose writings are the fashion of the hour, or the scientist who is most successful

in adapting the speculations of the laboratory to the popular ear, are debated by our young men as they play a game at billiards or lounge in the park under the shadow of the trees. A generation is growing up among us that cares nothing for the questions that have divided the sects, that is profoundly indifferent to elder and bishop and deacon, and even to the controversy of Calvinist and Arminian. If we keep stamping our ministers and people with the regulation dies and turning them out small images of their ancestors haunted by the phos of extinct controversies, we shall do it at the cost of losing the ear of the living men and women around us. What does a man care about the great surplice question, or the great organ question, or some obscure point in the structure of a local association or a council of reference when he is agonized to determine whether the world is ruled by a blind force or by a just God, or when he stands on the grave of the sweet wife or sister whom he buried yesterday, doubtful whether she is living in a better world or has disappeared like the beautiful cloud of the morning and gone out into blank nonentity? Before issues like these, even such questions as the premillennial advent and the personal reign—if I may say so without offence—sink into a sort of sentimental trifling. It would be ungenerous to call them a tiddling while Rome is burning, but they are at least a nursing of pleasant fancies and a singing of melodious hymns while we ought to be rescuing living men from the bitterness of a devastating unbelief. But this is what we shall continue to do if we magnify the machinery of Church organization. The great danger of the Church now is that the world outside pass by it with indifference, and that because the Church is quarrelling or dreaming about trifles, while general society is grappling with the great problems of life, death and eternity. We are asking whether the congregation shall go out of church in silence or be played out with a voluntary on the organ, while other men are trying to determine whether a man is altered for the better by believing in God and trusting to Christ, or whether, as some say, the poorest, meanest, narrowest lives in the world are the lives of professing Christians. The case is exactly inverted since the days of our Puritan fathers. They wrestled with the root questions of human duty and destiny till they saw daylight through them, while the world around was perfuming its hair or dancing in aimless frivolity to the sound of voluptuous music. But the outside public is in earnest now and there are multitudes of Christians who care for nothing but the most insignificant trifles of Church life and work. We are suffering from misdirected energy. The needs of our day demand all the spiritual vigour we can command. We are in danger of wasting it upon matters which had interest for other days but which no one cares for now.

One of the remedies for this state of things is to be found I believe in a great simplification of church organization. Let us get rid of all superfluous church questions by setting aside the too elaborate machinery out of which they arise. Let us try to substitute the quickened energy of souls for the cumbersome monotony of systems. The two things are antagonistic. Where the mechanism is greater human vigilance and skill will be least. Have you heard of oleographs? They are pictures in oils—printed from a copy. They may be handsome but they are utterly dead! O, shades of Raphael, Rubens and Rembrandt, is it come to this? We used to look through the canvas into your living souls—now we shall look through the canvas and see a great printing machine warranted to do to-morrow exactly as it has done to-day without the slightest movement of thought or trouble of imagination. No, machinery is not life, it is often the enemy of life. It may be strong when life is weak or wanting.

Our simplicity of organization may be, therefore, an advantage to us. It leaves us free to deal, if we will, with the actual living problems, social and religious, of our day. We are not distracted by churchly red tape. But let us not be too self-concitant. It is only an advantage to those who know how to use it. It is not for its own sake that a simple church organization is a good thing, only as setting free a power of life which might otherwise move in fetters. The great practical question, therefore, is—Is the life there? Have we an eye to see and a heart to feel what men need to-day? Do not tell me that they need the Gospel—I know that. But they need the Gospel so presented that they may see in it the Divine answer to their inquiries and helper in their struggles. No one is more certain than I am that the Gospel alone is what we want. But it must be the Gospel, not dressed in the dried up parchments of a divinity school, but looking with a face of flesh and blood on the dreary unbelief and the hopeless indifference of our age—an age which is shunting the whole problem of religion to a siding in weary despair of a solution. That the love of God in Christ can create a soul beneath those ribs of death I am sure, but it is the love of Christ earnestly believed by the preacher and proclaimed with an intelligent sympathy for the mind and heart of those who hear. That the pure goodness, the goodness of the boundless infinitude of the righteous love of God, will save the modern world as it saved the ancient, it only it is disentangled from the controversies of the past so as to bear with full force upon the special needs of the life of to-day. Brethren, let us give ourselves to doing this. There can be no nobler work for any man than to bring the living Christ, if it be only a little nearer to the careless or bewildered souls of his fellow men.

II. Another of the special needs of the Church in our day is a total dependence on the power of truth and a ready will to court the freest investigation. It is of no use our disguising the fact that we have to do with a state of mind both within and without the Church which is impatient of closed questions. Men are very conscious that they are not infal-

lible, but they are apt to doubt whether former times were more so than these. What right had the early ages to close up questions so that we may not reconsider them? The old creeds are noble monuments of Christian thought and feeling, but are they certainly true merely because they are old? Did the Nicene Council really know more than we about the *Theos ek Theou, phos ek phos*? The language may be noble and sublime, the doctrine venerable and true, that is not the question. The question is—Is it certainly true because they said it? Is there any point in what we may call the precipitation or crystallization of doctrine at which it passes out of the region of inquiry and enters that of final and ascertained truth so as to become a part of universal orthodoxy or right belief? Not only are these questions asked with respect to the remote antiquity, but there are men so bold that they will not allow even our Puritan fathers to rest undisturbed in their rulership over our faith. They confess a wish to catechise the Catechisants, both longer and shorter, and to append notes, not of explanation but of interrogation, to the Confession of Faith. They say all these things may be true, but they are not true because our fathers thought them so. They are true, if at all, for the reasons which convinced these great men, and if so let the reasons be produced and shewn to us. It will not do to talk to us about antiquity. Long ago Lord Bacon shewed us that we are the true ancients, we who live in the mature age of the world, whereas our fathers lived in its infancy. We have access to all the light our fathers had as well as to all that has accumulated since their day. We will believe on reason shewn, but we ask the privilege, nay, we claim the right, of judging for ourselves.

Of course I quite well know that it is possible to use such language as this in a spirit of mere flippant irreverence for the conclusions of men immeasurably nobler than those who thus talk. There is plenty of questioning amongst us which is not a search for truth in the least. It is only a display of one of the cheapest and most childish qualities of mind—intellectual pertness. But there are many who question the decisions of former ages in a manner quite different. They do not wish to doubt, they wish to believe. They are afraid, however, to repeat the words of other men and call that belief. To them belief is the result of insight. They must get their feet right down upon the immovable rock of truth and feel its firm resistance. And to me the questions and even the doubts of these men are sacred. Those doubts are the vapours that gather round the rising sun, which, as Robert Hall eloquently says, seldom fail at the close of his course to form a magnificent theatre for his reception and to invest with variegated tints and with a softened effulgence the splendour which they cannot hide. The noblest teachers of the truth are those who have won their way to it through bitter conflict.

They fought their doubts and gathered strength,
They would not make their judgment blind,
They faced the spectres of the mind,
And laid them, till they came at length

To find a firmer faith their own,
And power was with them in the night,
Which makes the darkness and the light,
And dwells not in the light alone.

Now it seems to me that there is a palpable advantage in dealing with doctrinal difficulties when our appeal is to the Scriptures directly and not to subordinate standards. If, as I believe, we shall more and more have to prove every position we hold the more immediately we go to the sources of proof the better for us. And I am quite sure we need not fear. No criticism which is not stone blind can get out of the New Testament any other doctrine than the substance of our Evangelical faith. Nothing is more certain than that the Apostles were not Romanists, or Mormons, or Rationalists. It is true that they have not given us a scientific statement of their beliefs, and I for one am very glad they have not. We should only have tortured it into twenty conflicting forms, and turned it into food for our amazing skill in inventing points of difference. The more formal it was the more elaborate we should have been until we had stretched it on the grammar and lexicon like a martyr upon the rack. But Scripture is not meaningless because it is informal, and the final result of our debates must be to bring out its real drift more clearly. The time will come when there is no more doubt among instructed people as to the meaning of the New Testament than there is at present as to the revolution of the planets or the law of gravitation. I speak deliberately. The Bible has a meaning, and that meaning can be discovered by impartial inductive research just as well as can the laws of material nature. Already it is beginning to be seen. Biblical interpreters of all Churches are getting nearer and nearer together. The time is nearer than many suppose when the debate as to the meaning of Scripture will not be between Church and Church or even between school and school, but between the instructed of all schools on one side and on the other those who are unable or who refuse to apply the methods of inductive investigation. More and more, then, I hold that the absence of a formal creed will be an advantage and not otherwise to those who seek to guide the thoughts of inquiring men. It will leave them a large degree of liberty, while yet they have a doctrine to teach, and that the truth, which is the beating heart of all the creeds. O, dearly beloved brethren, let us trust the truth of God. "Though all the winds of doctrine were let loose upon the earth, so truth were in the field we do injuriously to misdoubt her strength. Let truth and falsehood grapple. Who ever knew truth worsted in a free and open encounter?"

III. Another of the demands at present made upon the