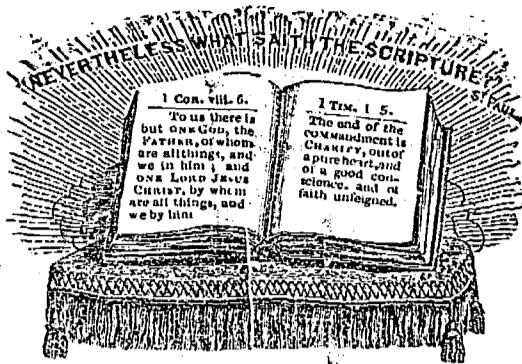


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TRUTH, HOLINESS,

LIBERTY, LOVE.

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THE RESOURCES OF THE CHURCH.

CHRISTIAN CHARACTER, TRUTH AND PIETY.

A fourth resource of the church, lies in her capacity to unfold more of character than the world without. We here speak of character, not in its most internal sense, or as related to God, but of character as a power over men, to influence their feelings and command their homage. Christian character, in this view of it, is that which by principle and worth and beauty of feeling in one man, approves itself to another, and becomes a controlling and assimilative power over him. It is no easy thing to beget, in minds not brought up in society, even a sense of character. The million live and die without once conceiving it. But no man, however dull or rude, can become a Christian without, at least, having some conception of character awakened. He must know himself and God, and himself as morally related to the moral goodness and excellence of God. He cannot smite upon his breast, like the publican, without a painful discovery of himself to prompt it; nor without so much as daring to lift his eyes to heaven, can he cry, with the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner," and not have felt, in some degree, the greatness and purity of God. Behold a vile, brutish person, bowed in tears, and trembling with inward horror, before the tremendous majesty and glory of God! Some elementary notion of character is there descending upon him, in that shuddering before Jehovah; it is the sense of character that makes him shudder. And how can a life be spent in holy communion with God, the infinitely perfect,—how modelled after Christ, the only perfect life ever displayed in humanity, without attaining to a nicer and more heavenly sense of character, and receiving its impress. The principles of religion, too, truth, justice, rectitude, benevolence, are all such as need to lie at the basis of a good and great character. The feelings and manners of Christian piety—courtesy, gentleness, condescension, pity, gratitude, forgiveness, charity—are all such as cannot be dispensed with, in the construction of a worthy and beautiful character. Then consider the whole discipline of a Christian life, as a perpetual exercise in character. No sooner does one become a disciple than he is put upon it as a study, how to honour his calling, to be charitable and yet judicious, when to resist enemies and when to suffer them, to be cheerful without being light, serious yet not morose, when to argue and when to be silent, when to forgive and when to bring to justice, when to feel and when to reason, to have high emotions and not be a framer, to be independent without obstinacy, to believe without credulity, to have high experiences without advertising closet transactions, to have a speech seasoned with salt yet clear of cant, to be united to God and not disunited from man. How can a disciple be drilled in such exercises, all his life long, without becoming more or less expert in discriminating character in himself and others?

The church, then, is to her disciples a perpetual school of character. We by no means affirm that all who take the Christian name become examples of moral excellence and beauty. Many seem never to have a thought about character, after they have once become satisfied of their conversion. We say of such, when they die, perhaps, that in the judgment of charity they were Christians, and truly our charity covers a multitude of sins. At the same time there are unfolded in the church innumerable examples of character from all the walks of life, such as can not be found elsewhere—examples which dignify eminence and power, cause obscurity to shine, and make adversity smile—the gentle, the pure, the good, the upright, the firm, the heroic, the holy.

And how great a power is character! Out of God's own person and his truth, there is no other so mighty and persuasive. It is that eloquence which man least knows how to resist. It provokes no resistance. Being itself only truth in life, it suffers no answer. If the beholder turns away to escape the homage he feels, its image still goes with him, to reprove his evil deeds and call him every hour to God.

Truth is another of the resources of the church, a power that God has deposited in her bosom to be developed there. Having the Christian Scriptures, she may therefore boldly say, what is denied to all schools of philosophy, that she has the truth of God. Hence it comes to pass that, while they are ever displacing each other, and after their short day of splendour is over, retiring into oblivion, the church still holds her place, gathers new strength from every assault, and stands erect as the pillar and ground of the truth. The great masters of philosophy and champions of infidelity die, by turns, into glimmer and darkness; but Christ the Messiah is the sun of righteousness rolling up into noon and the fullness of day. Already has it been proved, by an experience of eighteen hundred years, that the church's truth is invincible. It speaks to man, and its words have their own evidence in them. If reason reels away from its mysteries, reason yet returns dissatisfied without them. If human wisdom invents a better God, and a government more according to its mind, human wisdom is soon frozen by its own meagre truth, and returns to Christ for warmth. Such is the Christian truth, the virtues it teaches so excellent, the hopes it offers so definite and so consonant to human wants—it brings God so near and displays the divine feeling so attractively, it paints human character so truly and offers a remedy so adequate, that if spurned or rejected, it will yet be sought.

We do not say that all the points of Christian doctrine are settled, or that nothing remains to be done to unfold their relations, and set them forth in the harmony of their reasons. Neither do we say that there is no disagreement about the essential truths of the Christian scheme. That were to maintain that its victory is already complete. We only say that God's everlasting truth is now in the bosom of the church. There is a process going on, too, in the church, from age to age, whereby her views of the Christian plan are being filled up, rectified, and systematized in their reasons. She is instructing herself also by her own lapses and apostacies. Almost all the possible errors she has invented and tried out. Those bold extravagancies of human learning, now so prevalent, and by which so many are perhaps unduly frightened, are among the last, and, we trust, not least fruitful efforts of aberration. Taken in the larger view, she is, in all these, only making her experiments to settle the truth, unmasking her artillery, drawing it forth into ranks and orders, and preparing, by her lines of battle encircling the globe, to complete her warfare against unbelief by a universal and sweeping defeat.

But the greatest of all resources possessed by the church, to be developed by growth, is drawn from her internal union with, and participation of, the divine nature—greater than either wealth, talent, internal population, character, or truth—greater than all together, and that, because it includes them all. The church of God is a habitation of the Spirit, the body itself of Christ, and so the fullness of him that filleth all in all. Let it not be deemed an irreverence, if we speak of a progressive development of this divine element in the church.

The piety of the church is itself such.—The life of Christian piety is the life of God; its growth a development of that life. When the holy life begins, in a renewed mind, whether infant or adult, it is only a capacity or seed of future growth; that growth but a fuller participation of the divine nature, in its power, goodness, and beauty. The same is true of the church in its collective capacity. The amount of her existence is measured, not by the numbers or noise she makes, but by her participation of the life of God. According to her measure in this, is she clear in understanding, benevolent in emotion, self-denying in action, patient in suffering, powerful in example. Additions of grace are indispensable to all increments of power. A small root cannot support a large tree. An army of spiritual invalids cannot vanquish the world. Union to God is the soul and success of all good efforts. Without this, we only drag the church on painfully after us, as if it were an idol car, by the pull of many hands. But if we are

filled with holy piety, and earnest practical love to the cause of salvation, then the church has liberty and inspiration, becomes itself a creature of life, like the wheels of Ezekiel, because the spirit of the living creatures is in it.

There is also another aspect to this growth of piety. Not only does the internal life of the tree extend its reach, but the outward bulk manifests the fact. The church, in like manner, is to the world's eye a development of God. Being the body of Christ, she is, in some sense, though not in the sense of Mr. Brownson and the Papists, a perpetual Christ in the earth—in the sense, we mean, not of her political organization, but of her practical or internal spirit. By this she becomes the light of the world, as her Saviour was—a perpetual manifestation of the Spirit, or what is the same, of the Divine Nature. This, too, is the main source of her power over the world. It is not because she runs to and fro, because she strives and cries, but because she lives a life above nature,—herein lies her capacity of impression. Without saying 'this is God,' the world is moved as by the presence and power of God. Her Christ-like grace of love, purity, truth, and beneficence are a divine atmosphere about her, and her atmosphere enters the breath and the blood, while her arguments only play about the head. To approach her is to be convinced of sin, righteousness, and a judgment to come. To be thus, in her Christian growth, a demonstration of the Spirit, to have the divine nature flowing out thus impalpably but really on the world, gives her an assimilative power in the nature of vitality; so that if she gains a convert, whether at home or in the ends of the earth, (for place is nothing,) it is not by external conquest, but by virtue of her own internal life—the life of God.

Furthermore, there is, we apprehend, a certain fixed relation between those exertions of spiritual influence which are immediate, and those which flow immediately through the church; else why has not the Spirit left the church behind and poured itself, as a rushing mighty wind, into the bosom of the whole world in a day? There needed to be an objective influence, as well as one internal; else the subject of the Spirit would not know or guess to what his internal motions are attributable, and might deem them only nervous or hysterical effects, or possibly, if a heathen, the work of some enchanter or demon. But the objective influence of a holy life, coupled with holy teachings from the church, starts the contemplative powers, occupies the knowing principle, and explains the immediate influence and its object, offers to view in its own holy exercises the molds of exercises to be wrought in the observer, and by its own assimilative and persuasive sympathies gives to the new feeling in him its own heavenly type and form. If we are right in this view, if there is a fixed relation between the mediate and immediate influences of the Spirit, such that one measures the other, (and we could urge many additional reasons for the opinion,) then are we brought fairly out upon the sublime conclusion, that the growth or progress of Christian piety in the church, if it shall take place, offers the expectation of a correspondent progress in the development of those spiritual influences that are immediate. The mediate and immediate are both identical at the root. If, therefore the church, unfolds her piety as a divine life, which is one, the divine life will display its activity as much more potently and victoriously without, which is the other. And as the kingdom of heaven, which was first as a grain of mustard seed, advances in the last days towards the stature of a tree, the more it may advance; for the Holy Spirit will pour himself into the world, as much more intensely and profusely. Grant us, O God! that we may not disappoint ourselves of a hope so glorious by attempts to extend thy church without that holy growth of piety on which our success depends. Pour thyself in thy fullness, and as a gale of purity, into our bosom! Expel all schemes that are not begun in Thee! Let there be good desires in us, that our works may be truly good! And that Thou mayest do thy will in the earth, do it in us perfectly!—Dr. Bushnell.

THIS WORLD A STATE OF DISCIPLINE.

The peculiar condition of sublunary things, as imperfect and transitory, is forced on our notice by the circumstances of the external world during the period of winter. The beauty of the year is gone,—the cheerful notes of the lark, of the blackbird, of the thrush, and of the whole choir which poured the voice of love and enjoyment from earth and sky, have ceased in our land, and a brooding ominous melancholy reigns around. This is but one instance of a character impressed, as we have seen, on every thing under the sun. All are full of change and decay; and the state of the natural world is only an emblem of that which subsists in the moral world, where temptation, and sin, and sorrow, have shed their fatal blight over the once glorious prospects of rational and immortal beings.

This condition would be totally inexplicable, were it not for the light thrown on the subject by Revelation. When we are told that we are at present only in the infancy of our existence, placed here in a state of discipline, to prepare us for a higher and more perfect residence, the mystery is unravelled, and we are made to understand, in some degree at least, why it has pleased the All-wise disposer of events to place us in a world where He only displays the brightness of His perfection as it were by glimpses, and casts clouds and darkness over the rest of the scene.

It is true that evils exist; but the Christian knows that it is overruled for good. Our Divine Master does not indeed, remove calamity, but He changes its nature, and gives us power cheerfully to endure it. As His religion shows us the hand of a God of love in every thing, it causes us to regard distress, from whatever earthly source it arises, as 'the chastisement of a Father, who chastens us for our profit, that we may become partakers of his holiness.' Hence the Christian is in a condition to feel a constant and delightful dependence on Providence. Thus instructed, he may grieve, but he cannot repine; he may be humbled and afflicted, but he cannot despair. Shall a child, who knows that a Father corrects him in love, murmur under the rod? Shall he not rather bend with humble resignation, and look up with affectionate joy, to the hand which wounds that it may heal?

This would be the effect of faith in the promises of the Gospel, even although the operations of Providence were surrounded with such mysterious darkness, that our limited faculties could perceive in them no traces of Divine wisdom and goodness. But it is no trifling addition to the satisfaction with which we rest in these promises, that God frequently condescends to make bare His holy arm in our sight, that we may follow His hand, as it overrules earthly events, and controuls human passions and affections, so as to render both moral and physical evil an instrument of good.

In reference to our condition as moral agents, and with a view to the powers and faculties, which, as fallen but rational creatures, we possess, it is not difficult to perceive in what manner the afflictive vicissitudes of life operate in elevating and ameliorating our character. If life were free from evil, there would be little to employ the judgment, or call into action the latent faculties,—little to rouse, to affect, and to invigorate the human soul. The heroic virtues of fortitude and courage, for example, would be without an object, were there no perils to encounter, and no enemies to subdue. What self-abasement could there be where there was no infirmity? What meekness, what patience, what forbearance, if there were no injustice to sustain, no calamities to suffer, and no injuries to forgive? Where were the exercise of resignation in a paradise of bliss? Where the trial of faith in a land of righteousness?

The social virtues, too, as well as the personal, could, under such circumstances, only be called into partial action. How could there be any pity, where there was no distress?—any sympathetic joy, where there was no escape from danger?—any compassionate charity, where there were no sins to cover, and no wants to relieve?

Were there no evils, then, either in the circumstances of the external world, or in the moral and physical condition of the society in which we dwell, we should be placed in a state