

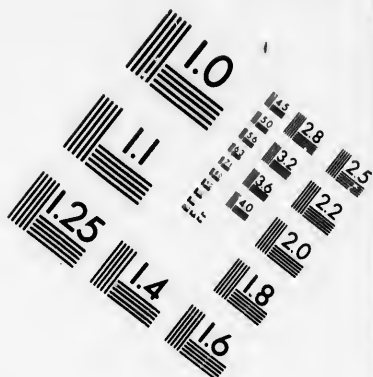
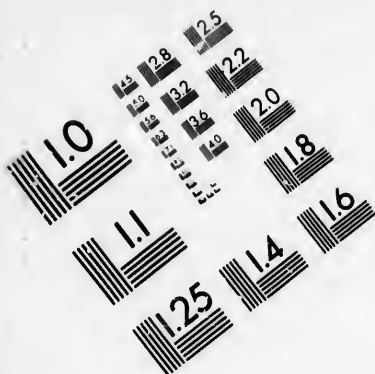
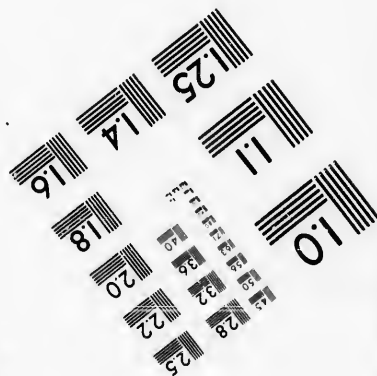
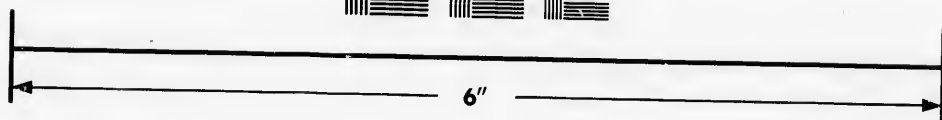
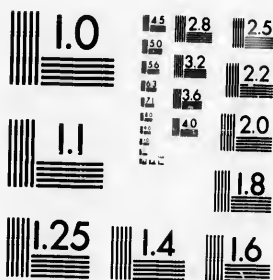


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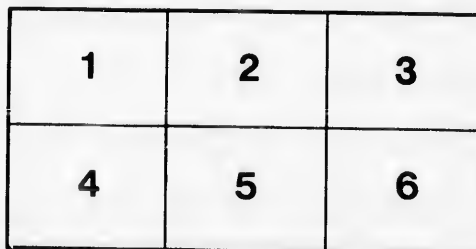
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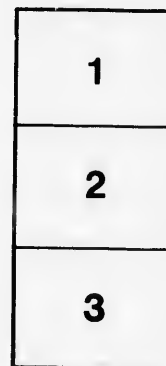
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THE SERVICE OF PRAISE,

A SERMON

Preached in Baguette Street Canada Presbyterian Church,

MONTREAL,

BY THE JUNIOR PASTOR,

J. MONRO GIBSON, B. A.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

Montreal :

JOHN C. BECKET, PRINTER, 51 GREAT ST. JAMES STREET.

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The request of the Session of Erskine Church for the publication of this discourse is complied with, not from any supposed merit in the production itself, but SOLELY in the hope that it may contribute in some measure to direct the attention of the Church to a much neglected subject.

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THE SERVICE OF PRAISE.

O come let us sing unto the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the Rock of our Salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise to Him with Psalms. Ps. xcv, 1, 2.

There are two great reasons why we ought to worship God first, because it is honouring to God Himself; and secondly, because it is useful to man. Of these two great reasons, the first is the greater, inasmuch as the honour of God is in itself more important and ought also to appear more important in our eyes than the advantage of man. But so great is our natural selfishness that we are apt to invert the order and to be more concerned about our own advantage than the Divine honour. Let us put it to ourselves. What is our principal object in coming to the house of God? Is it not that we may be edified, that we may be instructed, that we may be stirred up, that we may *receive* blessing from the Lord? Now that is a most worthy object indeed. Would to God that all professed worshippers had it in view. But it is not the main object. At all events it is not the first object. We go to the sanctuary *to worship the Lord*. It is true that the worship of God will be a service most profitable for ourselves; but then it is the honour of God and not our own profit that should stand out as the primary object in view. And it is important to bear in mind that it is by contemplating chiefly the honour of God that we shall most certainly and fully secure our own spiritual improvement. We may rest assured that the less we think of ourselves and the more we think of God in our religious services, the more profitable as well as delightful will they be. It is indeed the part of a good Christian to have due regard for his true interests, but it is not the part of a good Christian to regard even his highest, his eternal interests, to the exclusion, or even to the subordination of the glory of God.

The self-regardful spirit, of which we speak, may be seen in the comparative importance we attach to those parts of worship which bring into prominence the one object or the other—the honour of God or

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the profit of man. Compare for example the relative importance which is attached to the psalmody and to the preaching of the word. The singing of Psalms is of the highest advantage indeed to ourselves, but it aims more directly at the honour of God. The preaching of the word is honouring to God, but it aims more directly at the good of man. Now if there is to be any preference of the one over the other, it should surely be for that which aims more directly at the honour of God. Yet the reverse is the almost universal estimate. How many are there, who, if only they hear an instructive or improving or refreshing sermon, when they attend the house of God, are quite contented, and are comparatively indifferent whether the singing have been hearty or heartless,—good, bad, or indifferent. It is well, very well, that such should be anxious for their own spiritual improvement; but it is not well that they should be so indifferent about the honour of God. We have much need then to be reminded of our great duty to “worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness”; and we need not wonder that, while in this Psalm there is reference to the duties of prayer and of the hearing of the word, to both of which we are earnestly summoned, yet the first place should be given to the duty of singing the praise of God, and that we should be invited with peculiar earnestness to join with spirit in this delightful exercise: “O come let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise to the Rock of our Salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto Him with Psalms”.

In further considering this subject we would desire, first, to call attention to the fact that God has given us the faculty of consciously praising Him, or (as we may be permitted to call it) the faculty of conscious praise; that the possession of this faculty is in fact our highest dignity, and that its exercise is our highest joy.

God has given us the faculty of conscious praise. All things were made for the glory of God. All His works shew forth His praise. Many praise Him silently; yet with surpassing eloquence. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth His handiwork”—Sun, moon, and stars all utter His praise.

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In reason's ear they all rejoice,
 And utter forth a glorious voice,
 For ever singing, as they shine :
 'The hand that made us is Divine.'

But nature's praise is not all silent praise. There is the rushing of the river, and the roaring of the waterfall; the surging of the waves, and the beating of the surf; the sighing of the wind, the howling of the tempest, the rolling of the thunder. All these are lifeless nature's voices praising God. To these are added the voices of living things: the hum of the insect, the song of the bird, the roaring of the beast of prey. Such is the praise which arises to God continually from the works of His hands.

But between these lower creatures and man there is "a great gulf fixed." Man was made in the image of God, with power to know God and love Him, to speak to Him, and call Him Father. He was made with dominion over the creatures. The beauty of nature was made for him; her song of praise was made to fill his ear. The lower creatures were made to catch and reflect into the soul of man the rays of the glory of God, which should there be collected as in a focus, and thence burst forth in a flood of praise to Him who made these lower creatures, and gave to man the wondrous power of interpreting their language and setting to music their song. Their praise is all unconscious; that of man is conscious praise. They all do sing; but man alone can "sing unto the Lord."

And this faculty is the crown of man's dignity: it is his true glory. Man has a series of wondrous faculties rising one above another like steps from nature up to God. There is the faculty of sensation, confined within the material frame-work of the body; the wondrous faculty of perception, which brings outside things within the circle of our being, and, so to speak, incorporates them with our life; the still more wondrous faculty of imagination, which seems to overleap the boundaries of time and space; the power of remembering, of judging, of reasoning, of discerning our fellow-spirits and mingling with them in the interchange of thought and feeling. These are some of the noble faculties with which our Creator has endowed us; but nobler than them all, and better than them all, is the power of knowing, and loving, and addressing God.

Communion with God is our noblest prerogative, and of that com-

munion praise is the crown. There are three steps here, and praise is the highest. There is, first, meditation. It is much, very much, to be able to apprehend God, to think about Him, to dwell upon the attributes of His character and the manifestations of His glory. The next step is prayer. It springs from a recognition of His relation to us. We call Him Father, and send up to Him a cry for help. Then comes the answer to the prayer, and we know that God is near to us, that we are near to God; we feel that He has blessed us, and we no longer stand afar off and cry to Him as "from the end of the earth," but, borne upwards on the wings of faith and love and holy gratitude, we lift our souls to God in a song of praise,—we rise above the things of time and sense, and hold high communion with the Eternal, and "worship the Invisible alone." And the whole soul is thrilled with a heavenly joy. The joy is indescribable. Those only know it who have felt it. "Though now we see Him not, yet believing we rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." "In His presence is fulness of joy."

When we think of all this we will not wonder that the Psalmist should speak of this noble faculty of praise as *his glory*. That is his name for it: "*my glory*." "Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing. Thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness to the end that *my glory* may sing praise to Thee and not be silent." "Awake up, *my glory*" (the faculty of praise) "awake psaltery and harp," (the instruments of praise.) "O God, my heart is fixed, I will sing and give praise even with *my glory*." "My heart is glad, and *my glory* rejoiceth."

Seeing then that God has given us the faculty of conscious praise, and that the possession of this faculty is our crowning glory and its exercise our highest joy, it is appropriate that we proceed in the second place, to consider *the duty of cultivating it*.

In proceeding to consider the duty of cultivating the faculty of praise, we shall find it convenient first to give a brief analysis of the exercise. It is based on knowledge; it is educed by meditation, it consists of feeling and expression. To illustrate: conceive of praise as a plant. Knowledge is the soil in which it grows; meditation is the root from which it springs; feeling is the life with which it is animated, and sound the form in which it is invested. Or conceive

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of praise as an incense offering. Knowledge supplies the materials, meditation ignites them, feeling is the fire, and sound is the incense.

It is unnecessary to take up time in proving that *knowledge* is necessary as a basis. If we had no knowledge of the works of God, we could not admire them; if we had no knowledge of God Himself, of His character and attributes, we could not adore Him. Knowledge of God then is indispensable as a foundation on which to build the temple of praise.

But knowledge is not enough. There must also be *meditation*. There are many things which we know and yet do not think about; in which case our knowledge is of no practical use. Whenever we would make our knowledge available, the mind must turn to it, and accordingly, when by means of our knowledge of God we wish to draw near to Him, we must dwell on what we know of Him, and as we think, there will spring up in the heart, in that loftiest region of our nature which the Psalmist calls his glory, those varied emotions which form the life, the soul of praise.

This leads us to the third, the central requisite, viz: *feeling, emotion*. This is the essence, the kernel, the spirit, the life of praise. The feelings may be of varied kinds, according to the aspect of the character or the nature of the works of God which may be present at the time to the thoughts. The emotions which will mainly enter into the exercise will be those of reverence, gratitude, love and joy.

We come now to the last requisite, viz: *expression*. This is not the essence, but it is essential. It is not the life, but it is the form. It is not the spirit, but it is the body. And though the life of a plant is more than its form, yet its form is not to be despised; and though the spirit of a man is nobler than his body, yet the body is very necessary indeed to those who dwell on this terrestrial ball. Man's religion is suited to his nature. It is not a religion for the body only, as many would seem to wish. It is not a religion for the spirit only, as many wrongly imagine. It is for both. And as is the whole, so is the part. As is our religion, so is our worship. It is not mere bodily service. That would profit nothing. It is not mere spiritual service. That would be quite unsuited to our present state. It is a service which lays claim to both body and spirit. We are to

present our bodies a living sacrifice. Our bodies are to be "temples of the Holy Ghost," and our members yielded "as instruments of righteousness unto God." We are to glorify God with our bodies, and with our spirits which are His.

There are many who imagine that there is an antagonism between form and life, between body and spirit. They imagine further that the Mosaic and Christian dispensations are strictly opposed to each other: the former being an economy of form, the latter an economy of spirit. It is a great mistake. There was spirit as well as form in the old dispensation; there is form as well as spirit in the new. Did those who speak of the Mosaic economy as a dispensation of forms ever read the Psalms of David? Is there any lack of life, any want of spirit there? Did those who say that the Christian economy is an economy of spirit without form ever consider that it is utterly impossible for us in our present state to unite in a single act of worship without form? The only difference is that the Christian forms are mainly, though not exclusively, addressed to the ear, while the Jewish forms were mainly, though not exclusively, addressed to the eye.

So long as we have bodies as well as spirits, our acts of worship must have body as well as spirit. In the disembodied state, when these fleshly forms of ours are mouldering into dust, we may be able to present to God a purely spiritual worship, to offer purely spiritual praise. But think you that this would be the perfection of praise? Such praise would be imperfect, simply for want of form. It will only be after these bodies shall have been raised again in incorruption and glory and power, and these voices shall have been tuned to the anthems of the skies, that we shall be able fitly and fully to join the song of Moses and the Lamb. While then it is true that the more of spirit there is in our praise the better, it is not true that the less of body there is in it the better. Let us not then be content to offer unto God disembodied worship—the mere ghost of praise. Let our feelings have expression. Let our love burst forth in song. Let us offer the "the fruit of our lips", when we give thanks to His name. Even in our solitary acts of devotion it is far better that our feelings should find expression. But when we unite in worshipping God, it is absolutely necessary that our worship should have a form,

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We are now perhaps better prepared for definitely considering the duty of cultivating and exercising the noble faculty of praise with which our God and Father has endowed us. We have seen that its antecedents are *knowledge* and *meditation*, and its constituents *feeling* and *expression*.

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The first thing we have to do then is to "acquaint ourselves with God." It is utterly impossible for a man that is not acquainted with God to sing unto God. We are all in our natural state ignorant of God. True, we hear of him "by the hearing of the ear"; but that is not acquaintance. The eye, the eye of the soul, must see Him, else we cannot know Him. We must draw near to Him,—so near that we can look on Him. And this we can do only through Christ. "No man cometh unto the Father, but by me". "No man knoweth the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him." If then there be any here who have not come to the Saviour, who are not justified by His blood, and quickened by His Spirit, they know not what it is to sing unto the Lord. That noble part of their nature which is spoken of in the Book of Psalms as the glory of man is dead. They have no experience of that heavenly joy which fills the heart of the devout worshipper as he adores the Eternal God of Love. O that they knew what they missed in thus shutting themselves out from a glory and a joy which is far beyond any thing that eye has seen, or ear heard, or natural heart compassed, but which yet is revealed to those that are in Christ Jesus by the Spirit of Grace. If there be any such here, we would earnestly exhort them, if it were for nothing else than the dignity and delight of praising God, to harden their hearts no longer, but listen to His voice, and come to the Saviour, that they may acquaint themselves with God. "O taste and see that God is good."

Further, as without the knowledge of God we cannot praise Him at all, so the more we know of Him, the better and the more delightful will be our praise. We fear there may be not a few of those who have come to the Saviour, who do know their Father in heaven, and love

Him in a measure too, who yet have little experience of the joy of praise. It is because they are contented with small knowledge and small experience. If we would desire to have a rich, full experience of the joy of praise, we must not be continually "laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and faith toward God"—we must "leave the first principles of the doctrine of Christ, and go on unto perfection": perfection of knowledge, whence only can spring perfection of praise.

We pass now from knowledge to *feeling*. What we have to say of meditation will come most conveniently under this head, for meditation is the nurse of feeling. It is when we muse that the fire burns. We have seen that feeling is the life, the soul, the essence of praise. Without it the most melodious strains and harmonious symphonies are "as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal," while with it even discordant sounds have some soul music in them. Without it the sweetest music is "abomination to the Lord"; with it the rudest song of praise from the most untutored voices is a sacrifice which He will graciously accept, notwithstanding the imperfection of the form, even though that imperfection should not be, as it seldom is, quite inexcusable. We trust there are few, if any of us, who offer nothing to the Lord but hollow sounds. We trust that all of us do feel in some measure as we sing. But I am sure we must confess that we do not feel as we ought. If we did, our singing would not be so cold and dull and lifeless as it often is. We speak not now of its musical merits or defects, but simply of the spirit with which we sing. There may be indeed not a little of the spirit of penitence; but there is not so much evidence as there should be of the spirit of gratitude and love and joy. And yet these latter ought to be the prevailing emotions. Observe the form of the invitation; "O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a *joyful* noise to the Rock of our Salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving and make a *joyful* noise to Him with Psalms".

It is obviously then our duty to cultivate earnestly the spirit of praise, to foster those feelings which are its life. And how are these to be developed and called forth? Primarily certainly by the influence of the Holy Spirit. Let us look to Him for aid. Let us present the prayer—"O Lord, open Thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew

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forth Thy praise." Secondly however by meditation. Our thoughts are too little occupied with the subjects of our songs. We ought to endeavour before coming to the house of God to call to memory in our own retirement the great things the Lord hath done for us, in order that when we come into His courts we may be prepared with full hearts to "sing unto the Lord," to "make a joyful noise to the Rock of our Salvation." And then specially after we have entered the sanctuary, our thoughts should be fixed on God and His wondrous works. We ought to be able to say with David: "O God, my heart is fixed, my heart is fixed: I will sing and give praise. Awake up my glory!" Yet is it not the case that we often bestow no attention on this fixing of the thoughts on God? Is it not the case that we often continue listless until the psalm is given out, and then continue listless all through the reading of it (which by the way is generally looked on as a very unnecessary part of the service, instead of being hailed as a valuable opportunity of filling the mind with the subject of the song), and never attempt to fix our heart or to awake our glory until the first note of the melody has been struck. Brethren, this ought not so to be. Let us lay aside our languor; let us summon up our mental energies; let us lift up our *souls* to God. "*O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise to the Rock of our Salvation.*"

We come now to the last point, viz.: *expression*,—with deep regret that so little time is left for the consideration of so important a part of the subject: important not so much in itself (for it is far less important than that which we last considered), but accidentally important on account of its general and shameful neglect by the Christians of our age and country. We have seen that it is our duty to cultivate feeling by meditation. It is just as surely our duty to cultivate expression by practice. We are responsible for the use of all the powers which God has given us, and specially for those which are given us to be employed in his worship. Now God has given us the faculty of praise—not only the power to feel, but the power to express our feelings, the power to *sing* unto the Lord. This faculty we hold to be universal: universal, that is, in the sense in which the power of speech is universal. There are a few deaf mutes; and they are not responsible for the want of language. There are a few who are utterly destitute of musical power; and these are not responsible for their inability to

sing the praise of God. But they are very few. True, there are a great many that cannot sing, just as there would be a great many that could not speak, if the art of speaking (which is in its nature ten-fold more difficult) were as much neglected. We may rest assured that inability to sing in ninety nine cases out of every hundred is the consequence of sinful neglect—first on the part of parents, who ought to have taught their children or had them taught to sing unto the Lord, and then on the part of adults themselves, inasmuch as they have not availed themselves of the means within their reach of repairing the defect in their early training.

There is a great tendency to think too lightly of this matter. It is not a light matter. Think for a moment how inspiriting and inspiring, how refreshing and elevating, as well as how honouring to God would be the song of praise which would rise from this congregation to-day, if we had all been carefully educated from our early years for this important part of our religious duty. Or, to put the matter in a more practical shape, think what a noble song we should sing unto the Lord six months hence, if we would all meantime assiduously cultivate our long neglected faculty of praise. And, be assured, the good effect would not terminate here. If we had better psalmody, we should have more earnest prayers and better sermons too. There is too much of the responsibility of the tone of our worship thrown upon the minister. There are those in some of our congregations who complain of the want of fervour in the minister's prayers and of unction in his discourses, who yet never consider how much this may be owing to the heartlessness of their praise. This is peculiarly the people's part in the public service of the sanctuary; and it is not to the people's credit, as it certainly is not for their spiritual profit, that it is generally so poorly performed.

We must of course not lose sight of the fact that the musical part of the exercise is the less important; but then it is not unimportant. "A living dog is better than a dead lion"; but then a living lion is better still. The music of our service cannot be neglected with impunity. Its neglect will react most damagingly on the spiritual part. It will be very hard even for good Christians to make melody in their hearts when there is discord in their ears. It will be very hard for the most grateful soul to make a joyful noise unto the Lord

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when the voices all around are doleful rather than joyful. When we think of this we see another ground of obligation for the performance of the duty we are now considering. We are responsible for the effect of our singing on those around us, as well as on ourselves. How many are there who throw a damper over the devotions of the whole congregation every Sabbath by their miserable singing, or still more miserable silence. The duty then is one which we owe to our fellow-christians as well as to our God and to ourselves. And it is a duty which is binding on all. "Sing unto Lord, *all the earth*". "Let the people praise Thee, O God; let *all the people* praise Thee".

Let us now close with a word to various classes of professed worshippers in our Christian congregations.

1st. There are, it is to be feared, some who do not sing unto the Lord either with heart or with voice. Their voices are silent and their hearts are silent too. They have neither life nor form, neither soul nor body of praise. Such verily are "twice dead, plucked up by the roots".

2nd. There are those who sing with the voice, but not with the heart. Theirs is the form without the life, the body without the spirit. They may make the sweetest music, but it is only sound—nothing more—empty sound. It is the corpse of praise. It may be a good-looking corpse, a well dressed corpse; but there is no breath in it. Such service is emphatically *bodily service*, which profiteth nothing: nay more, which injureth much; for it is a grievous sin, a heartless mockery, an insult to the Majesty on High. May the Lord keep us innocent of this great transgression.

3rd. There *are* those who sing with the heart, and not with the voice. We emphasize the word *are*, because we think it a very rare case. If a man have really the spirit of praise, it will be a very serious obstacle indeed that will keep him from joining in the song of praise. It is true that if a man is conscious of very great defect in tune, he ought to sing in a subdued tone; but it is only absolute inability that can justify absolute silence. There are, however, those who sing with the heart, and not with the voice. These do their duty; but only partially. Part of their duty they are neglecting—unless indeed they belong to the very small class of musical mutes; and no man has a right to assert a claim to be classed with such, until he

has faithfully and perseveringly availed himself of all proper means to acquire a power so valuable in itself, and so delightful in its exercise. Let none of us then be content with a partial discharge of so important a duty; let there be no silent voices in our congregation when we offer the sacrifice of praise; let there be no listener to our songs of Zion but the God of Zion Himself.

These words are not spoken with the idea that as a congregation we are sinners above all others in this respect. Neither do we think that Presbyterians as a body are so far behind other sections of the Church in this matter as they are generally supposed to be; for, though many others can boast of finer music, there are not many where the praise is more generally diffused among the people. And though fine music (not certainly in the sense of difficult music, for the very simplest is generally the finest) is much to be desired, it is of far less importance than general singing.

But certain it is that the defect and neglect of which we have spoken, are general, almost universal, in our times. And however we may stand in comparison with others, there can be no doubt that we are shamefully short of what we ought to be. And let us see that we do not try to shift the blame from ourselves. Let us not imagine for example that it is the want of organs that makes our psalmody so poor. An organ may be a help, or it may be a hindrance; but it certainly cannot take the place of earnest conscientious effort on the part of the people. We should never miss the organ much, if we would only cultivate the organs God has given us for the special purpose—if we would only educate those voices with which we all are endowed, and which, we believe, are so distributed according to their different qualities as to bring out, if all were united in singing the different parts for which God has fitted them, full choral harmony.

May the Lord bless us in all our efforts to qualify ourselves for His service; and may He ever pour out upon us all, in copious effusion, those influences of His blessed Spirit without which all our efforts would go for nought, and all our services be vain oblations.

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