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A Reading and a Working Church

THE DEMAND OF CHRISTIANITY.

BY

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NEW YORK:
PHILLIPS & HUNT.
CINCINNATI:
CRANSTON & STOWE.
[Note.—This tract is a condensation of the sermon delivered by its author on the occasion of the Tract Anniversary at Akron, Ohio, December 8, 1874.]
HE Apostle Paul exhorted Timothy to "give attendance to reading, exhortation, and doctrine." In these words his address was not only personal to his son in the Gospel, but also official and authoritative to a minister of the Lord Jesus Christ, and through him to other ministers, and other Christians, and Christian Churches in the ages to come.

This apostolic precept is in harmony with many other passages of the New Testament, including the great commission of our Lord himself, which appointed the religious instruction of the world through human instrumentality. Hence we may learn that Christianity, in its essential idea, is nothing less than an agency for the moral
teaching and elevation of mankind. It was not designed to be like Judaism, an embodiment of ceremonial ordinances and prophetic types, nor was it to imitate that preliminary system in the perpetuation of ritualistic forms and shadowy representations of truth already clearly revealed. On the other hand it was to be a living, learning, teaching, and witnessing Church.

In anticipation of this design, God from the beginning appointed language as the medium of communication between himself and man, as well as between man and man. He spoke to our race, not only through the hearing of the ear, but also through the perceptions of the eye, thus consecrating both spoken and written language to the office of religious instruction. In giving a written law, he not only provided for the moral guidance of the generation to whom it was first addressed, but for all subsequent ages; while he also continued to teach and admonish men by the voice and the pen of prophets and holy men in successive periods.
On the advent of the Saviour spoken language was appointed to its highest office in the command, "Go, preach the Gospel to every creature." As a counterpart of the spoken language to be used in preaching, the chosen disciples of our Lord were inspired to write narratives of the life, miracles, and death of Him who was the Eternal Word, together with the acts and letters of the apostles embodying the instructions which they had personally received from the Lord himself, and which were thus handed down to those who should come after them.

From these two forms of apostolic labor, the co-operative uses of spoken and written language may be clearly perceived. The first has the advantage of instant readiness, wherever there is a tongue to speak and an ear to hear. It can also be varied with circumstances, and adapted to the special wants and changing perceptions of those to whom it is addressed. The second is available in private, where the living speaker cannot go. It can be cheaply multiplied
and scattered on the wings of the wind. It also endures from age to age, while living speakers die.

By means of preaching the Gospel was speedily diffused, not only throughout Pal­estine, but to the extreme limits of the Ro­man empire. Yet great as was the personal influence of the apostles through the agency of spoken language, the influence of their writings has been infinitely greater. Their voices expired with their natural life, but their written speech was immortal. It sur­vived all persecutions. It became embodied in many languages, and was diffused in every direction. It has come down through the centuries. It has been taken up by the modern printing-press, and having been translated into hundreds of tongues and dialects, is now being multiplied more rap­idly than ever before for the benefit of the present and succeeding generations. By this adjustment of Providence the apostles, though dead, yet speak, and will continue to speak to increasing millions while the world endures; and those who read their writings
may not only receive their teachings, but become partakers and propagators of like precious faith. It is not possible to conceive of a truly apostolic Church that is not attentive to the written word of God, and anxious to receive instruction from it. Such instruction is necessary to a true enlightenment, a correct faith, and a vital experience. Hence it may be safely affirmed, that a Church designed to be the light of the world should be a reading Church.

Prominent among the characteristics of a reading Church will be the following:—

1. It will be studious of God's word. Not only in the public congregation and in the Sunday-school will its members, whether parents or children, study the sacred volume, and treasure up its teachings in their hearts, but also in their families and in their closets. These Scripture readings will not be fitful and occasional, but daily and constant.

2. A reading Church and all its members, so far as practicable, will be attentive to a wholesome Christian literature. An impor-
tant result of the spread of Christianity has been the increase and diffusion of knowledge, of which books are both the agency and the repository. Countless are the volumes of good books now accessible to those who desire to improve their minds and their heads by aid of the thoughts and experiences of others. Among these are comments on the Scriptures in various forms, biographies, doctrinal treatises, sermons, and histories, together with books of poetry and science.

There are many reasons why every Christian family should provide itself, to the extent of its ability, with a choice library, in which these various classes of good books shall be represented and increased from time to time. The influence of good books upon family, not less than individual, life is very important. Even occasional reading in them tends to redeem precious moments of time. It furnishes subjects for instructive conversation, refines taste, elevates purposes, and becomes a protection against the bad and worthless books that, in the absence of better ones, are likely to be read. It pro-
motes a healthy mental growth, and contributes to such an increase of knowledge, and such acquisitions of wisdom, as are required by Scripture precepts. It associates the living, even though in humble circumstances and remote localities, with the wisest and noblest of all who have lived upon the earth, and thus purifies the thoughts, stimulates the aspirations, and exalts the character of those who cherish aims and purposes worthy of immortal beings.

But in modern times the reading of intelligent persons cannot be limited to books as such. With the growth of Christian intelligence, and the progress of Christian civilization, periodical literature has become a necessity. Without pausing even to describe its various forms or its numerous specific objects, it may be assumed that in some form, for example, that of the weekly family newspaper, every Christian will feel the necessity of a good and reliable medium of information respecting the current events of the times in which he lives. Through such an agency he should not only become fa-
miliar with events which concern him as a citizen of his own country, but also as a citizen of the world, and a member of the great family of man. Specially interesting and profitable is it for every member and worker in the Church of Christ to have frequent and full information of what others are doing, in different ways and in various places, for the same great object. Thus holy sympathies are aroused and cherished, and the Christian periodical press becomes a bond of intercommunication between the scattered members of Christ’s visible body throughout the world.

But, whether we read periodicals or books, it is highly important that we give attention to the character and influence of what we read. We must not be unaware that the great enemy of human souls has entered the domain of literature, as he once did the Garden of Eden, to tempt, to corrupt, and to ruin. If good reading is greatly to be commended, bad reading is, of all things bad, to be avoided. Not more dangerous is the infection of disease to the body, or
poison in food, than the diffusion of mental poison into the thoughts, the opinions, and the desires of human beings. Once absorbed into the mental processes, error and falsehood remain to fester, to contaminate, and to destroy that which is good, unless, like evil spirits, they are cast out by the power of Christ. Numberless are the forms of insinuation and suggestion, as well as of attack, in which even the most sacred truths are disparaged in written no less than in spoken language. Hence a sleepless vigilance must be maintained, not only against bad books, but against even paragraphs of bad and doubtful influence, whether found in books or periodicals. Specially must Christian people set the standard of excellence high in reference to what they read or allow to be read in their families. Whatever will waste time, deprave taste, pollute the imagination, or tamper with the conscience, must be sternly rejected, no matter from what source it comes. With such an abundance of strictly good reading as may now be easily had, there is neither motive nor
apology for purchasing or reading any thing of even a doubtful character; while the deluge of trash and of corrupting matter that is issued from the press in this reading age is so great, and often of such fascinating qualities, as to make it the duty of all good and thoughtful people not only to be on the alert, but to lift up a standard against it.

Tracts furnish a third, and, in some respects, a distinct class of reading. Brevity and condensation are, or should be, their distinguishing characteristics. Not necessarily fragmentary in character, but cheap in form, and convenient for use in every variety of circumstances, they are adapted to an age of haste and bustle, and also to free distribution among those who do not seek good reading for themselves. As an agency of Christian enterprise during the present century, an extensive and valuable tract literature has been prepared and published, consisting not merely of tracts proper, but of cheap volumes, having for their object the dissemination of evangelical truth. To some extent the tract idea has been em
ployed by propagandists of error, but in the main it has continued in the service of the Christian Church, and, perhaps as closely as any known agency of good, has been held to its prime purpose. It must be confessed, however, that one important use of Christian tracts has been too much overlooked. Even many good people, who have been diligent in distributing tracts to others, have been remiss in reading tracts themselves; and many Christians, and Christian families, have altogether failed to appreciate the great advantage of frequently, if not habitually, reading brief summaries of truth and doctrine, and especially of putting their own hearts into sympathetic union with such statements and presentations of truth as they would endeavor to communicate to others. It would be well for every family to have a tract library, in which a large variety of tract publications might be first read, for the purpose of self-improvement, and then distributed among those who need them as much or more.

3. A reading Church will be disposed to
provide religious reading for those who have it not. It is characteristic of all truly benevolent persons to wish to impart to others influences from which they have received benefits themselves. By acting upon this impulse they fulfill the golden rule, and become co-workers with God, from whom their own blessings have been received.

The more strongly persons conceive of their obligations and privileges in this regard, the more actively and effectively they work for God and humanity. This fact explains the example of the great evangelist, John Wesley. So strong was his desire to save the souls of men, that he was not content with preaching the Gospel to all who came within the sound of his voice, but he sought to enlist the co-operative agency of the press to aid him in evangelizing the masses of England. In this view he wrote, printed, and distributed tracts, sermons, and books in great numbers, and many of these publications are still circulating, and accomplishing their mission of good to mankind. Since his day great has been
the work accomplished, by the evangelical Churches of England and America, by the same instrumentality, and always greatest when those who have distributed tracts have themselves been readers of tracts, and thus prepared to introduce, to explain, and to follow up with kindly exhortation the truth they disseminated by means of the printed page.

This brings us to consider the characteristics and duties of a working Church. While Christianity demands intelligence, and the highest degree of personal improvement on the part of all who profess to be the followers of Christ, it also demands that those attainments be used for the glory of God. Hence they who read and become instructed in Christian truth should also, in the language of the apostle, "give attention to exhortation and doctrine." That is, they should employ the talents they have received and acquired in teaching this truth to others, and in entreat ing men to receive and practice it.

That it is the duty of all Christians to do
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this may be inferred from numerous precepts of the sacred word, of which the following are samples:—

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." Matt. v, 16.

"To do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased." Heb. xiii, 16.

"Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." 1 Pet. ii, 9.

"God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love, which ye have showed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that every one of you do show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end." Heb. vi, 10, 11.

The obligations thus indicated should be regarded as personal, and demanded in every sphere of influence in which any in-
individual may live or act. They are specially obligatory in the circle of friendship, where the most favorable access may be secured to those in whose welfare we ought to feel the deepest concern. It is greatly to be lamented, that in this very sphere many persons, under the spell of a strange and, it may be feared, a sinful delicacy, neglect to act at all. It is of the highest importance for every Christian to work earnestly and perseveringly in behalf of all over whom, by virtue of relationship or attachment, he can wield an influence for good; and how often may the well-chosen tract or volume serve as a happy agency, at least, of introducing the subject of religion, and pointing out the way to heaven. Yet no one should so far rely on such agencies as to forego personal exhortation and doctrine, even to the extent of line upon line and precept upon precept.

Outside of personal and family friendship, many have large circles of business acquaintance and influence in which to act for God and truth. Some persons have
effectively availed themselves of their business facilities as a means of doing good, not only to their employees, but also to communities and regions far remote. Many others might do so, in an ever-increasing degree, as God prospers them, and to those thus disposed religious tracts and volumes are exceedingly helpful.

Besides circles of friendship and business are those of pure benevolence. Numerous are the spheres of benevolent action in which Christians may make special and systematic efforts to do good. To the sphere of friendship and business there are limits, to that of benevolence there is none, unless it be the extent of the earth itself. Like the Apostle Paul, every true Christian should consider himself "debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians, both to the wise and the unwise."

In Christian benevolence, while individual effort may accomplish much, united effort will accomplish more. "Union is power." Hence public and co-operative effort is demanded in behalf of those various
organizations which contemplate the relief of human misery, the diffusion of truth, and the evangelization of the world. And there is not a sphere of action, aiming at any of these great results, in which religious reading may not be made a powerful and hopeful agency of Christian work. Is it in an orphan asylum or in a widow's home? Is it in a prison or a hospital, among soldiers or seamen, among the intemperate or the licentious, among the sick or the destitute, among nominal Christians or pagan idolaters? Everywhere there is use for tracts and books. In every one of these fields the good seed of the kingdom, having been sown in the form of printed truth, has taken root, and brought forth fruit for the glory of God.

Co-operative Christian work should be undertaken and sustained by every Christian Church in its aggregate capacity. This principle is now so generally recognized, that no distinctive branch of the Church at this day, is regarded as worthy of the name which does not seek to act in its united
capacity upon the world by means, at least, of missions, Sunday-schools, and tracts. The following remarks have special reference to the last named enterprise:—

1. It is the duty of the Church, in its aggregate capacity, to provide a Christian and a Tract literature. This duty the Methodist Episcopal Church has performed, by the agency of its official press, to a greater or less extent, from the period of its origin. Specially since the year 1844 has it addressed itself to this work by the appointment of successive editors of tracts, by the reorganization of its Tract Society, and by the great multiplication and improvement of its tract publications, so that now it is in a position to fairly respond to the claims made upon it both from home and foreign fields.

In order to appreciate the advantages thus provided, it is highly desirable that every minister and member of the Church should be made aware of the variety, the richness, and the cheapness of the literature now furnished by our Tract Society, and of its great availability for important service.
in every form of evangelical work. Being specially adapted to cheap transmission through the mails, tracts, in their various forms, may on order be sent in large or small quantities to any part of our country with great promptness. Every Church, therefore, should provide itself with catalogues and samples, if not with full outfits of our tract literature, so as to be ready both for regular and extraordinary work, as occasion may require.

2. It is the duty of each individual Church to provide funds and agencies for the circulation of tracts and tract literature. For this object the Methodist Episcopal Church has ordered the taking of tract collections in all its congregations, and the appointment of tract committees to co-operate with all its pastors. Were the spirit of these regulations fully exemplified in all our Churches there would be an ample supply of funds to provide tracts both for home work and for foreign fields. There would, moreover, be established in every congregation an active organization for the sys-
tematic distribution of religious reading matter among the poor, the sick, and the strangers who, in greater or less numbers, are to be found in every community. In cities, and wherever necessary, measures would also be taken for the distribution of tracts, accompanied by Christian conversation among the inmates of prisons and hospitals; while passengers in public conveyances, and throngs in thoroughfares, would not be overlooked. Sea-going ships would be furnished with tracts and libraries; soldiers in armies and barracks would be supplied; and, in short, the seeds of vital truth, in the form of printed pages, would be sown in all fields, and by the side of all waters.

3. It is the duty of Church members, and of all who love the Lord Jesus Christ, to cooperate in the work of tract publication and circulation. Aggregate duties arise from personal responsibilities. Those to which allusion has been made, primarily and even ultimately, rest on individuals in their various capacities. In order that a religious
tract may be produced and started on a career of usefulness, there must first be a writer imbued with the spirit of truth and love, and willing to labor with his pen, in order to express his thoughts in language at once attractive and impressive. Then there must be a pecuniary investment for the publication of the document written. The task of publication, although possible to individuals, is best performed by a public institution, like the Tract Society, which not only has facilities for printing, but serves as a radiating center for distribution. After the period of publication the work of distribution is comparatively easy. It certainly is possible to Christians of all ages and circumstances, and is most effectively accomplished, in proportion to the personal zeal and laborious diligence of those who desire to imitate their divine Master, "who went about doing good."

When the machinery of moral influence is once organized for action, the humblest follower of Christ can start it and keep it in motion. Thenceforward there is a grand
partnership of results, in which those who write, who print, who circulate, and who read, may rejoice together.

As an illustration of the endless stream of influences which may flow onward from a single good deed, the following facts are condensed from authentic documents.

In the latter part of the sixteenth century a good man, known as Dr. Sibbs, wrote a little book entitled "The Bruised Reed." A copy of that book, sold by a poor peddler at the door of a lowly cottage in England, was the agency of the Christian awakening of Richard Baxter, who was born in 1615. The additional reading of a little piece of Mr. Perkins's work "On Repentance," borrowed from a servant, says Baxter in a sketch of his own life, "did further inform me and confirm me; and thus, without any means but books, was God pleased to resolve me for himself." Thus brought to the knowledge and experience of the truth, Baxter became one of the most earnest preachers and prolific writers of any age. He died in 1691, having published
matter enough to fill twenty-three large volumes. Two of his smaller works—"The Saints' Everlasting Rest," and "The Call to the Unconverted"—have passed through countless editions both in England and America, and doubtless will continue to be widely read in English-speaking countries while time endures.

Of the full extent of their influence it is impossible to form an adequate estimate. But here and there links in the glorious chain of sequences can be discovered. Philip Doddridge when young borrowed the works of Baxter, and in due time became the author of the "Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul," a work which led William Wilberforce to seek for pardon through the Redeemer. Wilberforce's "Practical View of Christianity" was the instrument employed by the Holy Spirit to lead to repentance, and a true faith in Christ, Legh Richmond, the writer of "The Young Cottager," "The Dairyman's Daughter," and various other tracts.

Mr. Richmond was a laborious clergyman,
and for many years a Secretary of the Religious Tract Society of London. His tracts above named have been translated into many languages, and have been instrumental, under the blessing of God, in the conversion of many precious souls. Only two days before his summons to a better world he received a letter mentioning the conversion of two persons, one of them a clergyman, by the perusal of his tract, "The Dairyman's Daughter." Nearly half a century has since passed away, but the tract has lived on, and by the help of printers, donors, and distributors has continued to do its work, while many of those converted through its influence have themselves become successful actors in starting agencies of influence, destined to work on with ever increasing and multiplying power.

Opportunities for similar influences and agencies of good exist on every hand, and great are the advantages of those who, at this day, desire to devote their time and talents to the work of extending the knowledge of God, and the experience of his great
salvation, by means of evangelical literature. They have not to wait for the production of matter adapted to the object. Already thousands of pages, whose excellence and adaptation have been tested, await their use, while souls are perishing for lack of the knowledge they contain, and the kind Christian words and warnings with which their distribution should be accompanied.

Imagine the whole Christian Church, in the persons of its individual members, thus actively engaged in working for the Lord, superadding to personal effort the powerful agency of a sanctified Christian literature, and how great would be the promise of success! How soon and how widely might fruit, more glorious than has often been gathered, be expected to appear? How soon would the wilderness of sin be made to bloom like Eden, and the moral deserts of the world like the garden of the Lord?

Reader, you have at once a privilege and a responsibility in this matter. First, be a diligent student of Christian truth,
that your own mind and heart may be permeated with its influence. Then go and work in the vineyard of the Lord, that God may be honored, and that souls may be saved through your instrumentality.

Moreover, be not unmindful of God's encouraging promises: "He which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death." James v, 20. "And they that turn many to righteousness (shall shine) as the stars for ever and ever." Dan. xii, 3.

THE END.