

Project Canterbury

Popular Misconceptions of the Episcopal Church.

By William Reed Huntington.

New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1891.

Chapter III. That it is given over to Worldliness.

NOTHING is more necessary in discussing "worldliness" than to be careful in our choice of words, lest before we know it we do ourselves an injury by doing others an injustice. There is a way of loving the world which is not only innocent, but actually Godlike; again, there is another way of loving the world which drags the soul down to its ruin. We emulate the divine love of the world whenever we let the heart go out in honest pity and compassion toward the sinning, sorrowing, toiling people, God's creatures and our fellow-creatures, of whom the world is full. We fall, on the other hand, into the bad way of loving the world whenever we let things win the precedence of persons in our heart's affections, whenever we allow getting to absorb our thoughts to the forgetfulness of being; whenever, in short, we suffer the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life to enter like a murky cloud at the windows of the soul and fill with their bad presence every nook and corner of the room within. Always, and by all means, we are to shun "worldliness" as we would the plague; only let us know what we shun.

[32] Every one of us has a pretty definite notion of what is meant by the expression, "the things the world can give a man." Well then, does not the essence of worldliness lie just here, namely, in caring more for these "things" which the world can give a man, than for truth, for righteousness, for purity of heart, or for the peace of God?

"Worldliness" may take on various forms and fashions; the inordinate love may be a love of popularity, or it may be a love of money, or a love of dress, or a love of pleasure, or a love of power: the thing that makes it worldliness is the fact that it is a love which has overridden and usurped the place of the love of God. And here we touch a point of real moment. How many people there are who, in judging of this question of worldliness, carelessly confound symptom and disease, forgetting how very untrustworthy outward appearances often are. They see one neighbor well dressed; they see another a general favorite in society; they see a third rapidly accumulating a fortune; they see a fourth who, endowed with a keen sense of enjoyment, appears just now to be getting a great deal of happiness out of life, and though perhaps they know absolutely nothing of what is actually going on in the hearts and consciences of the persons observed, the charge which rises instinctively to the lips is this sweeping one of "worldliness." Because the man is well dressed, because popular, because prosperous, because light-hearted, therefore he must be "worldly." It is a quick and decisive sort of reasoning, but is it the logic of the Sermon on the Mount? Did Christ bid us judge the tree after any such fashion? Indeed, did He not indirectly warn us against this very thing? [32/33] A thousand accidental circumstances may affect the look of the leaves; the real questions are: What of the root? and, What of the fruit? No doubt the man you criticise may be worldly, he may be verily eaten up with worldliness; only do not assume such to be the fact, do not make his unproved

worldliness the basis of all your interpretations of his character and his doings, until you have some better evidence than is afforded by the mere looks. "Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment." The question is: Where are the affections really set, and on what? Worldly men in tatters on the curb-stone may sometimes fling the envious curse after the carriage wheels of holy and humble men of heart.

This blunder of confounding the symptom with the sickness has been common in all ages. Among the anchorites and ascetics of the early Church, for instance, it seems to have been generally considered that personal cleanliness was a form of worldliness. This, to our modern eyes, looks extraordinary, but it admits of an easy and natural explanation. The public baths were a prominent feature of the machinery of luxury in the polite society of those days. They corresponded in a measure to the casino of modern Europe. To frequent the baths was to be brought into continual contact with heathen usages, and out of this wise avoidance of what was bad, grew an unwise avoidance of what was good. Esteeming it a dictate of piety to differ from the heathen as widely as possible, these well-meaning but misguided enthusiasts came to the conclusion that to be ragged and uncleanly would be to establish sanctity.

Again, it is a mistake to suppose that we can avoid [33/34] falling into worldliness by running away from people, and from the places which people frequent.

"What exile from himself can flee?"

It is in the self that the real worldliness resides, and self we carry with us whether we tread city streets or country roads. "He hath set the world in their hearts;" that is where the real taint of worldliness lurks; would you kill it in yourself, trace it to that source. A Londoner or a Parisian, looking in upon the daily life of some quiet, well-ordered little provincial town, might ask with a smile: What can be the possible temptations to, or opportunities for worldliness here? Again, one of the people of this very town visiting some out-of-the-way village in a secluded corner of the country might in the same spirit ask the same question. And yet who that has given the matter any serious thought will doubt that the certainty of finding worldliness somewhere in the village is equal to the certainty of finding unworldliness somewhere in the city, or that both certainties are real certainties? No, it does not matter whether a community be made up of many families or few, whether the buildings in which it is housed be of stone or of brick or of wood, whether the people meet together frequently or rarely, whether they dress expensively or cheaply--given one single human heart and you have a soil in which the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life may thrive, blossom, and bear fruit.

Let us consider, then, what would be the symptoms, the outward and visible tokens of this sickness in case a Church were really infected with it. What sort of evidence, that is to say, would justify us in fastening [34/35] the charge of "worldliness" upon any large body of Christians as a whole? Well, let us begin with the ministry. The priests of a religion are supposed to be the exponents of it. If their standard of right living be low, we cannot reasonably expect that of their flocks to be much higher. It is fair, then, to make the ministry of any Church, to some extent, at least, a criterion by which to judge the Church itself. If the ministry of any Church can be shown to be idle, luxurious, given to trifling pursuits, greedy of gain, more bent on making a living than on making a life out of the work of shepherding the flock of Christ, why, then, it may fairly be inferred that into such a Church worldliness has crept. There have been times in the life of the Church of England, for example, to go no further afield,

especially in that dismal period of her history covered by the reigns of the four Georges, when such a charge might with justice have been brought. Had English bishops in the last half of the last century been caring more about the souls of their people and less about the revenues of their sees; had English rectors and vicars kept better in mind that fair ideal of what a priest should be which the first of English poets sketched in the Canterbury Tales, the followers of John Wesley would, in all likelihood, be to-day within the Anglican Communion instead of without it. Take the clergy of the Church of England now, and we may proudly challenge for it collectively, and as a body, comparison with any clergy in Christendom, whether as regards learning, faithfulness in the cure of souls, or general elevation of character; but the heritage of ill-repute handed down from the generation before the last has proved a sad burden this many a year. And [35/36] probably there are not a few worthy people who at the present moment are firmly persuaded that in the established Church of England there is not a bishop who is not arrogant and purse-proud, not a country parson who does not habitually drink with the squire and follow the hounds across the farmers' fields, not a curate who is not coveting by day and dreaming by night of possible preferment. Such force has the old tradition of bad times to mar the good report of present excellence! I have taken this illustration of a way in which the worldliness of a Church may betray itself through the lives of its clergy from the history of the Anglican Communion, not because I might not have found instances elsewhere, but because of a strong desire to avoid any, even the slightest, appearance of trying to make out a case.

Suppose, now, we go on to consider some of the ways in which the worldliness of a Church may find expression in the lives of the people who make up its congregations and are enrolled on its lists. One such indication would certainly be the general prevalence of a low standard of honor, of integrity, and of social purity. When we see people habitually giving themselves up to the gratification of their appetites, bending their whole energy, or such flabby semblance of energy as they have, to the attainment of comfort, incapable of any conversation above the level of gossip and scandal, showing no sign of lofty aspiration, of earnest purpose, of unselfish motive, we may fairly and without breach of charity set them down as worldly. And this sort of thing, if it could be proved to be characteristic of a Church as a whole, would certainly stamp such Church as worldly. But is it a [36/37] sort of thing which exclusively characterizes any one denomination of Christians in this republic of ours? I think not. Faithful inquiry would probably bring out the fact that whenever wealth abounds in any given community, and more especially newly-acquired wealth, the vices of luxury, indolence, selfishness, and the fondness for display will also abound, and that, too, quite, or almost quite, independently of the circumstance that this or that form of Christianity happens to be dominant there. That the Episcopal Church is wholly free from the low breeding and vulgarity which force themselves noisily and showily upon the ears and eyes of men, God forbid that I should assert. Only tins I say: "Let that Church which is without sin among you cast the first stone at her." Instead of mutual recriminations, what we want is that all good Christian people everywhere should join hearts and hands in the effort to frown down, to laugh down, and to make disreputable all violations of that standard of modesty, quietness, and self-restraint which ought to be reckoned the common law of Christendom.

Another way in which a Church may show itself involved in the sin of worldliness is by turning a cold shoulder upon the poor. Happily, we have in this country, as yet, no such thing as a peasant class. "The poor" as a fixed and recognized body do not exist among us, simply because under the working of our social system the poor of to-day may be the rich of to-morrow, and

the rich of this year the poor of the next. Still, it remains true that the poor in one sense we have always with us, and still it remains true that the Church of Christ owes to the poor precisely the same amount of care, watchfulness, and consideration [37/38] that it owes to the rich. But the great danger of society, Christian society I mean, in its relations to the poor, is not so much that it will deliberately trample on their feelings, wantonly insult them, or purposely injure them--not so much this, as that it will simply forget them. And this is what I meant by saying that a Church betrays worldliness when it turns a cold shoulder on the poor. It is so easy to forget those who are not conspicuous. The Psalmist in a moment of despondency seems to have felt as if even Jehovah Himself were in danger of this lapse: "Forget not," he cries, fervently, "the congregation of thy poor."

The ways in which a Church has it in its power to bless and help the poor are numerous. The most obvious one is that of making the House of God as accessible as possible. The Church is bound to see to it that the excuse, "I cannot worship God in public because I have no money," be taken out of the mouth of every man that breathes. Whether what is known as the "free-church system" be or be not the best method of bringing this end to pass is an open question. I merely note in passing that a bad sort of worldliness in a Church is that which forgets all about asking whether the poor have or have not the Gospel preached to them.

But not merely floor room for the poor on Sundays: the unworldly Church will be bound in conscience to furnish more than that. Hospitals, orphanages, homes, refuges--these are the things the Church ought to build and endow and look after, if it would do its whole duty to society. A Church which is a praying and preaching Church only, will with great difficulty save itself from becoming a worldly Church. "Lord, [38/39] Lord, did we not prophesy in thy name?" is a plea that sounds religious as well as plausible, but we have good authority for believing that alone and by itself it will not be accepted at that day. The "Come ye blessed of My Father" is reserved for those who have remembered the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the prisoner, and the sick. The Church which, in a quiet, unostentatious way, shall succeed here in America in doing the most of this sort of thing will best deserve the title of unworldly.

Another way in which the laity have it in their power to defile a Church with worldliness is in the management of its financial affairs. I speak, of course, of those Churches in which the control of the revenues is, as it should be, in the hands of the laity. Illegitimate methods of raising money for sacred purposes, criminal recklessness in the contraction of debts, and almost criminal tardiness in paying them--these also are among the tokens of worldliness of which, in making up our judgments, we shall do well to take note. The reason why these things indicate worldliness is because they show that the hearts of the people are not in the object for which the Church exists. Men who are in earnest about accomplishing a purpose seldom go to work circuitously to raise the needed means. If a mill is to be built, no elaborate scheme is first contrived for indirectly getting the necessary funds from other people without their knowing that they have contributed. And yet how much wheedling and coaxing and indirect taxation and mitigated gaming is carried on in the name and for the supposed advantage of the Church of Jesus Christ! It is all wrong. The treasury of God is not really replenished by any such [39/40] remittances as these. Only so much money as is given from the heart and at the dictate of the conscience is ever really given to God. Churches built to glorify the builder, and churches built to enhance the value of landed property in the neighborhood, remain private houses, though you consecrate them ten times over and plaster them from floor to ceiling with polychromatic

emblems of the Faith. And what applies to the building of church edifices applies to the use and maintenance of them when built. An unworldly management of the temporal affairs of a Church does not mean an unbusiness-like management of them. Far from it! On the contrary, an unworldly administration of church affairs means such an administration that the keenest man of business you can find, looking on with a critical, nay, even with an unfriendly eye, shall not be able to put his finger anywhere and say scornfully, There is a blot. No; give us stainless honor in the management of all that pertains to the temporal interests of the Church of God, and unworldliness is so far forth secured.

And now, does the reader expect me to maintain that the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States is wholly and entirely above reproach as respects all these points which have been touched? Even if I thought so, it would be most unseemly and ill-judged of me to make the boast. But honestly I do not think so, and, therefore, while fully appreciating the power which reckless and unlimited assertion gives to the champion of a Church, I cannot say so. Personally, I entertain no doubt that the Episcopal Church is open to serious censure on the score of worldliness. That many of her members are living selfish, luxurious, [40/41] aimless lives is true. That her clergy, all of them, fall far short of what the ministers of Jesus Christ ought to be in diligence, in devoutness, in sympathetic ministrations to the needs of men, is true. That she does far less than she ought, to encourage, bless, and care for the poor, the sick, and the prisoner, is true. That her temporal interests are in many instances administered from worldly motives and in worldly ways is true.

But when it comes to singling out the Episcopal Church for especial blame in these respects; when, for example, it is alleged of the Church that it is "notorious for worldliness;" then its friends are thrown into the attitude of defence, and words which might otherwise seem boastful become natural. Yet even from such natural boasting, if we may call it such, I would rather refrain, although the precedent of an apostle might be claimed for indulging in it. There was a pleasant mixture of satire and of compliment in the text with which a minister of another communion once prefaced a sermon eulogistic of the Episcopal Church: "Let another man praise thee and not thine own mouth; a stranger and not thine own lips." But some things which may not be said in boastfulness may rightly be said in thankfulness. Churchmen have reason to feel profoundly thankful that all over the land there seems to be a general waking up to the fact that the Church is nothing unless it be a working Church; that it cannot be in any real sense the "Body of Christ," unless, like Him, it be going about doing good. In the providence of God it has come to pass that this Church has within its fold a very large proportion of poor. With the exception of the Roman Catholics, there is, I [41/42] suppose, not one among the larger Christian denominations which, in proportion to its size, numbers so many of the very poor. In doing our duty by those whom God has given into our charge, we shall, as a people, find the best possible antidote to worldliness. In addition to our poverty, we have also, as a Church, more especially in the larger cities, a great deal of wealth. Behold, then, the opportunity! Wealth is often, not always, the indication of intelligence. That wealth is found in a church is, therefore, no reproach to it, provided the wealth represents intelligence. Poverty, on the other hand, is often an inherited misfortune; often, not always, the fruit of undeserved calamity. That poverty is found in a church is a call for sympathy. That the intelligence of the land should be taught to be sympathetic with the poverty of the land, is confessedly our greatest need. Alarm about the stability of social order would largely abate if only between classes there lived a better understanding, if only there were more sympathy in the air, Forgetting, then, and casting away

that love of the world which kills the soul, be it the Church's aim to catch that higher love of the world which moves to sacrifice, the love wherewith God loved it when He gave his Son.

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