

**HOUSEHOLD COMMUNION: ITS  
RESTORATION, THE ONLY EFFECTUAL  
PROTEST AGAINST ROMANIZING ERROR  
AND SECTARIAN EXCLUSIVENESS: WITH  
AN APOLOGY FOR THE ISOLATED**

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Household communion: its restoration, the only effectual protest against Romanizing error and sectarian exclusiveness: with an apology for the isolated by Various

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**VARIOUS**

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION.

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SOME years ago, in a small publication now almost forgotten, the writer of the following pages had occasion to observe that churches, properly so called, ought to be neither more nor less than extended Christian households; places of instruction for the inexperienced, and harbours of refuge for feeble and storm-tossed voyagers seeking the better land. For if, it was said, they tend not to the ennobling of the Christian character; if they can offer no effectual check to worldliness; if they can present no counteracting force to the lowering influences that are ever at work in ordinary society; if they can form and sustain no public opinion of their own, higher and purer than that which may conventionally prevail at any given time in Christianized society, it becomes hard to say of what practical use they can be to anybody.

On the other hand, if they are really defences from evil for the young and inexperienced; if they are truly conservators of that hidden and higher life which influences from without are so likely to impair; if they directly promote a devout and painstaking study of Scripture; if they obviously elevate those who come into their fellowship,—*so obviously* that all who have to deal with them perceive at once that such persons are more trustworthy, more gentle, more humble, more self-denying, and more disinterested than men generally are;

if, though it only be in degree, they are found really to check prevailing ambition and greed of gain ; if worldly distinctions and social exclusions exercise less power over church members than over others ; if plain, positive, tangible distinctions can be perceived by ordinary observers between *their* spirit, conduct, and character, and the temper and conversation of worldly people, — *then* instead of being unrealities, are Christian fellowships the most living, powerful, and heavenly institutions that are to be found in this fallen world.

Since these sentiments were expressed seven eventful years have passed over us, and during that time little evidence has been afforded that the institutions in question have done much, if anything, towards moulding men after the divine pattern, or making those who have joined them wiser, better, or more spiritual.

During these years Christianity in England has been gradually losing its moral power. Scepticism has both deepened and extended. A rapidly increasing number of young men have, one by one, silently separated themselves from all Christian worship and communion, while one of the most important sections of the community—the skilled artisans—have, almost to a man, been confirmed in their alienation from all forms of religion. To such an extent is this now the case that, in shops of workmen consisting of three to four hundred men, it is difficult to find more than three or four who ever enter any place of public worship. Some are avowed atheists. More are purely material, hard work and mere animal enjoyment alternating in their lives. All, with very few exceptions indeed, are at present not simply indifferent, but *averse* to the religious institutions which were familiar to their

childhood,—for most of them have been brought up in Sunday schools.

Those who have made it their business to mingle more or less with the working classes, and who have gained their confidence, find that, as a rule, *three reasons* are given by the men themselves as, partly at least, accounting for this state of things.

The *first* is the supposed defective character of many who occupy prominent positions in particular sections of the religious world, as leaders, deacons, or wealthy members in places of worship. It is a *common belief* among the artisans, whether sustained or not by facts, that such persons are, as a rule, harder in driving bargains, less generous in their transactions with those they employ,—in short, *more* selfish and less charitable in their judgments than others.

The *second* reason is supposed to be found in the greater respect always paid by religious bodies to the richer members of their respective communities. That all men are equal before God may be universally admitted, but the doctrine is not acted upon. A poor man, in a modern church, is not unwelcome when regarded as one willing to be taught and guided by his betters, since he is in that case a living evidence of good supposed to be accomplished. But this is a very different thing from welcoming him as a guest. The man himself does not wish to be other than he is. He *prefers* to sit apart and associate with his own class. What he wants is to be regarded as a brother, not merely when he joins the society, begins to pay pew-rent, or is called upon to subscribe his pence to a missionary society, but from the first moment that he enters a religious assembly, *worship,*

bewildered, or sceptical. Not such, however, is his reception.

The *third* is a persuasion that premiums are held out for religious profession by the bestowal of pecuniary or other benefits on those who unite themselves to particular places of worship. Professors of religion—often, it is said, mere hypocritical followers either of the Church of England or one of the sects—are always *preferred* by the richer members to men who, however faithful, do not belong to them. This, say they, renders it difficult for a working man to become religious, in the ordinary acceptance of the word, without exposing himself to the suspicion of acting from mean and interested motives.

The truth is—and why should it be disguised?—modern churches always represent *classes*, and cannot do otherwise. *Formerly* the Church of England was distinctively the church of the aristocracy, and *being such*, it had a kindlier feeling towards the poor than exists at present, for the peasant and the peer are capable of being brought much nearer to one another than are any intermediate orders in society. *Now*—in this age of great cities and of trade—not the Episcopal Church only, but emphatically the churches of the Nonconformists, are essentially middle-class institutions, and it is on this account, more than on any other, that they are shunned by the working man. Everything that is congregational belongs to the middle class. All arrangements are adapted to them. The wealthy among them are the chief subscribers whenever money is needed, and therefore necessarily rule. As deacons, as main supporters of the ministry, of the schools, and of the various churches or societies affiliated to the sect, they count the



church or chapel, as it may be, *their own*, and they insensibly introduce into its management all the faults of the order to which they belong.

Among such *the class spirit* is strong,—the commercial spirit perhaps stronger. Money is naturally regarded by them as all-important, and its possessors are deemed to be chief among the brethren. These men render important services to the religious bodies with which they are connected. The good they do, when disinterested, springs out of the Christianity they profess. Their faults and weaknesses—love of power and patronage, and a certain vulgar pride more or less disguised—mark them as *common-minded*, and occasion them to be disliked by persons in the rank of the skilled artisan.

These things cannot be changed so long as the advancement of religion is inseparably associated with gifts of money and with expensive places of worship. The respectable working man feels that under such circumstances he is placed at a great disadvantage; he shrinks from endeavouring to occupy any office which he is conscious can be more acceptably filled by a wealthier man; and he shrinks still more from the position of one who may perhaps be suspected of a desire to benefit by the liberality of others. The result of the whole is, he stands altogether aloof from religious association.

The men tell us frankly they do not see Christ in the Christianity by which they are surrounded. What they want is a somewhat different development of Christianity from that which is usually taught. A new version of it; not *new*, but strange to this generation; a version of it which prevailed in the Roman world for about half a

century after the death of Christ, but has scarcely ever been generally proclaimed since; *lost*, in the first instance, through the inroads of ecclesiastical despotism, and in later days by the prevalence of stereotyped creeds, and the multiplied conventionalisms of an artificial civilization. They want a fresh presentation.

We have had enough, say they, of ecclesiastical religion; we want something that is independent of priests and churches. Would to God that this were possible! that the beautiful picture drawn by Robert Burns in his 'Cotter's Saturday Night' could be realized in England! that our strong-handed and well-skilled artisan could be found seated at the proper time at his own table as a priest in his own house, where, gathering his family around him, he should perform the sacred rites in person. What can be conceived of more likely to give dignity to his position, or to secure attention to the duties it would involve, such as good example, prudence, temperance, and such forms of self-denial as are essential to happiness? Can it be doubted that just so far as household piety of this character took root it would elevate the homes of the working classes, and bind husbands and wives, parents and children, in new bonds of peace and affection.

In the practice of a home religion of this character, if patience and forbearance were cultivated, many, now sceptical, would soon come to perceive that while all men have not the same light, the same order of intellect, or the same way of viewing things, truth is best proved by the evidence it brings with it to each person that it is *truth for him*; by its accordance with that sense of right in obedience to which things 'fulfil the real law of their

being;' by its obvious tendency to promote goodness and happiness. For as a child born into the world brings love with it, and creates a kindred love in parental hearts, so a true and divine thought comes home to the man who is prepared for its reception, with an evidence not unlike that which he has that the sun shines in heaven. He feels its warmth, he receives its life-giving influences, he rejoices in its beams. Read thus, the Bible would become another book to the working man. Questions about inspiration and miracles, and discrepancies of statement, and diverse views regarding orthodox or unorthodox theology, would soon settle themselves if they were habitually subordinated to righteousness; while all that is divisive, professional, and not disinterested, would ere long be merged in one consideration,—'How can we best promote love to God and love to man?'

It is easy to say, 'What hinders so blessed a consummation? Where is there a church that would not unfeignedly rejoice to see all its members thus realizing their privileges *at home?*' The reply is,—true, but *only under conditions*; the first and chief being, that the household must be subordinated to the Church; that piety at home must be *the result* of influences radiating from the public assembly; that it must not be separated from what is supposed to be a higher organization; that it must on no account be regarded as *complete in itself*. But this involves everything at issue. We may grieve over the matter if we will, but it is unquestionable, whether we like it or not, that if religion cannot be separated from church or chapel going, from pew-rents, from incessant collections of money, from ecclesiastical