

**THE CHARTER OF THE
CHURCH: SIX LECTURES ON
THE SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLE
OF NONCONFORMITY**

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CHARTER OF THE CHURCH

SIX LECTURES ON
THE SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLE OF
NONCONFORMITY

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PREFACE.

THESE discourses appear at a time when the eirenical element in them is severely strained by the clerical demand for a new church-rate in the shape of increased public subsidy to Church schools. And an effort toward some understanding of our own spiritual foundation is not unlikely to be submerged in the just irritation thus created. A time of political warfare is not the hour when men's minds readily turn to consider either their own first principles or the enemy's real affinities with themselves. The writer himself would have found it much more difficult to maintain the tone he has here striven to keep if the discourses had not been written before the new Education conflict became acute. And he cannot complain if some minds should find it hard for the present to fit themselves to a charitable and dispassionate treatment of the chief issue. In a crisis it is not our first duty to understand the enemy with careful sympathy. That is but a second duty at such a time; and it must not be allowed to interfere with the first, which is to beat him and make ourselves understood. I hope that the absence of any direct reference to the question of the hour will not rob these

discourses of all worth as a contribution to the object last named.

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The Charter of the Church is not in any saying of Jesus, who, perhaps, never used the word church. It is not a documentary charter at all. Such a textual commission would make the Church what it always tends to be in the hands of those who base it on *fiats*, documents, and protocols—a chartered company, licensed to exploit the world by means whose ethics are those of an institution rather than a conscience—of an enterprise rather than a cause.

The Church's Charter is the principle incarnate in the eternal and irreducible personality of Christ, and in Him chiefly as crucified. It is the old Reformation principle of free grace, which is the rediscovered soul of the New Testament and the native accent of the Holy Ghost. It is this principle which must guide our new reforming of the Reformation, and keep religious our theological and ecclesiastical completion of a work which was religious or nothing at its source in Luther's mighty miracle of soul.

All religion is a response to revelation; and revelation is real just in proportion as it is free, spontaneous, and autonomous—that is, as it is neither extorted nor discovered, but *given*—given in an act whose nature is absolute unsearchable grace. The ultimate idea of Christianity is neither faith, works, truth, nor love, but grace. Our Christian life is our due response to that. Our faith is simply its human echo; it is God's

redeeming grace returning *through* man upon itself—
the Holy Spirit returning to Him who gave it.

According to the freedom of the grace revealed must be the freedom of the answering faith. If grace be absolutely free, so must faith be. If it be redeeming grace, its product must be a redeemed—a liberated faith. If faith obey another power than God's grace; or if it do not deal directly with God's grace, with Jesus Christ, with the Holy Ghost, it is an enslaved faith—even if it is broad enough to hold all the population and all the heresies. A faith truly free draws its breadth from its height. And for a faith thus loftily free there is but one congenial expression in human society. And that is a Free Church—free in the sense of autonomous, and not in the sense of comprehensive. The freedom of comprehension is only the freedom of culture, not of grace, and, sometimes, hardly of religion.

Culture, æsthetic or even religious, is now the most deadly and subtle enemy of spiritual freedom. It is the growth of culture in the decay of Gospel that the soul's freedom has increasingly to dread. It is there that our Nonconformity is in most danger of being untrue to itself and its mission. We *are* suffering. But it is less from grievance now than from success. We share a prosperity which is passing through variety of interest, refinement of taste, æsthetic emotion, tender pity, kindly careless catholicity, and over-sweet reasonableness, to leanness of soul. It is more at home in literature than in Scripture, and in journals more than either. And it tends to substitute charity and its sympathies for grace and

its faith. These are tendencies of the time which we have not escaped. I cannot measure the extent to which we have been affected by them. I may only say that, if any churches can thrive on them, it is not ours. To us they are not only dangerous, but fatal. Humanism must indeed find a home in grace which it has never occupied yet. But it is another thing when it becomes a church's note.

The Church's changeless note is Grace. The Charter of the Free Churches is Free Grace. And the Free Churches are the inevitable response to that freedom of grace which is the one article of the Gospel and the one source of the Church's being and well-being alike. If that cease to be our note, we must cease to be at all. A redeemed Church must become a Free Church, which is only the inevitable social expression of the freed soul. And, as a National Church is one of the great impediments to missionary success, so an Established Church, uttering as it does law rather than grace or Gospel, is, *quâ* established, in standing contradiction to the first principle of the religion for which it exists.

THE CHARTER OF THE CHURCH.

I.

Our Historic Principle: The Unity, Autonomy, and Continuity of the Church.

"WHY are you of no religion?" says a poet of last century, and he answers himself, "Because of religion." Some use the same plea with far less reason to-day. They say they are too religious to be satisfied with any of the forms of religion that are current.

There was much more justification for the epigram last century than there is this. It sounds a little affected to-day, and is often no more than a mannerism of the æsthetic or literary *élite*. I parody the epigram in another connection. If I am asked why I do not belong to the Established Church, I reply that my chief reason is, because I am such a Churchman—a High Churchman—with such a high ideal of the Church.

I will come back to that, however. I pause for the moment to say that a good reason (though not, perhaps, the deepest) for being a Nonconformist is to have been born and brought up one; and to have had the advantage of a religious education which does not leave the intellect to the world, or the principle of the matter at the mercy of fancy, taste, or fashion.

I observe the levity, and even the frivolity, with which many of the under-educated sons and daughters of the upper middle classes are giving up the order of faith in which they were born and bred. I see them doing it before they are in a position to form a judgment on the subject, doing it out of mere fancy at times, debasing religion even to please a woman, or taking a step which should be so solemn as a change of church just because they will gratify their taste in music. Well, when I see that I am more sorry than usual for the state of religious education, I am sorry that young people are left to pick up convictions out of gossip, novels, newspapers, and light magazines, that religious matters are not taken more gravely, and that church principles are not drawn from the New Testament, bound up with the fundamental principles of deep personal religion, and deduced from them. I object, in what we see going on among some young people to-day, far less to the change of church than to the miserable and frivolous grounds on which it is made.

But I may be asked this question—Is it a sufficient ground for remaining in a particular communion that you were born and brought up in it? I speak only of a permanent removal to another body, not of attendance for the time on a profitable ministry. And I answer, Yes, till *conscience* urge you to another course. Till *conscience* compel you, you owe more to the Church of your parents than to any other. And the choice of a church *is* a matter of conscience whenever it becomes matter of choice at all. It is a *moral* choice. You may not choose out of mere fancy, liking, taste. Nobody should leave the Church of his fathers but as a matter of duty, with some regret and some sacrifice. "*Spartam nacltus es, hanc exorna*"—(Sparta is bequeathed to you, go on to adorn it!)—is an old and worthy maxim. Your religious home