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CAUSES OF THE LOW STATE OF RELIGION IN THE CHURCH.

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The present state of the church suggests the question, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?"

This question is not intended to suggest a doubt as to either the existence or the skill of the physician, nor yet as to the efficacy of the remedy which he prescribed, but only astonishment that, under such favorable circumstances, the health of those who profess to have submitted themselves to the treatment of the great physician is not recovered. Where there is no ground for doubt of either the character of the physician or the fitness of the remedy, there is room for suspicion that the patient is either refusing or neglecting to appropriate and apply the remedy put in his hand.

The beginning of our spiritual life is our being born of the Spirit, and its development is the effect of the continual communication of his influences in the "sanctification of the Spirit." The cause of the low state of religion might then be told in few words—the *lack of the Spirit*. But to answer the question in this summary way, would be talking to little more purpose than if a physician would tell you that his patient was dying for *want of vitality*. You would still want to know the *cause* of this lack of vitality. As the Spirit is the source of all life, if we lack the Spirit we must be lifeless. But why do we lack the Spirit? Our Saviour represents God as more willing to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him than an earthly father is to give his son bread. There can then be no doubt that one cause of the low state of religion in the church is the *want of prayer for the Spirit*.

When Jesus departed from his disciples after promising to send them another comforter before many days, it appears that they never rested, but continued instant in prayer till the promise was

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fulfilled. If the church were as diligent and as earnest in prayer to-day, there is no reason to doubt that it would be also as successful. It should not be forgotten that in the 36th chapter of Ezekiel where God promised the Spirit to his people, (verse 27th,) he annexed to the promise this condition, (verse 37th,) "I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them." It would have been as easy for Christ to pour out his Spirit on the disciples while they gazed after his receding form in the clouds, as to keep them in suspense for a number of days; but he saw that it would be more profitable for them to wait and exercise themselves in prayer before their expectations were realized. It is manifestly only of the church when in this prayerful condition that it is written, "It shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer, and while they are yet speaking, I will hear."—(Isa. 65: 24.) He cannot "hear while they are yet speaking," those who do not speak to him, and those who do not *habitually* call on God are not answered even *after* they call. "Wisdom crieth without . . . turn you at my reproof; behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you. . . . Because I have called and ye refused, . . . I also will laugh at your calamity . . . then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early but they shall not find me," (Prov. 1: 20–28.) In view of this threatening, how important it is to consider the exhortation, "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption."—(Eph. 4: 30.) And what is more likely to grieve the Spirit than such indifference towards him as not to ask for his presence?

But, it may be said, the petition is often heard in the prayers of the church, "Pour out thy Spirit upon us." The reply that must be made to this is that it is more reasonable to doubt the sincerity of the church in asking, than of God in promising the Spirit to those who ask; "Yea, let God be true, but every man a liar." Can it be supposed that the searcher of hearts is flattered by words that proceed from the lips only? Is it less likely to grieve the Spirit not to ask at all than to ask without sincerity? If we cannot have bodily health without breathing pure air, our souls cannot be in health unless by sincere prayer we breathe in the Holy Spirit. How can we be healthy if we breathe a vitiated "air, the Spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience?" But why should we continue in a loathsome dungeon and be poisoned with its fetid smell? For "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty," and we have only to ask and receive, and knock, and it shall be opened to us.

A *second* cause of the low state of religion may be found in the character of the food on which the present generation, (some Christians not excepted,) depend for their nourishment. There is no food more suitable than the "sincere milk of the word." But when people, by reading the popular literature of the day, have

acquired a taste for something more stimulating and exciting, they lose their appetite for the nourishment which the Holy Spirit has provided in the Scriptures. The present generation has such a taste for reading novels that even religious truth is not relished, unless it is served up in "novel" style. If we knew how much unwholesome food is devoured by the people in the form of serial stories and other light reading, which is often mixed with a strong seasoning of poisonous error, and how little the Bible is read, we should not wonder that there is so little profit apparent from the preaching of the gospel. However soundly it is preached, it will have but little effect on those whose minds and hearts are filled with what leaves no room, and gives a distaste for wholesome nourishment.

Pure air and wholesome food will not preserve the health without exercise to promote a circulation through the whole system. And if there is an analogy between the body and soul, we may find a *third* cause of the low state of religion in the *want of spiritual exercise*. Motion seems essential to life, and voluntary exercise of the vital powers to a vigorous, healthy life. This is as true of the soul as of the body. It is the first tendency of spiritual life to manifest itself. As the little child must be stirring about, so the inclination of the regenerated soul is to exercise its newly acquired powers. The soul that has experienced that the Lord is gracious, desires to give honor to the God of life. Its natural language is, "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul."—(Ps. 66: 16.) If this instinct of spiritual life is repressed, (as it too often is,) it has the same effect on the soul that the nipping of the first bud that makes its appearance has on a newly set plant. Every converted soul should confess Christ before men. Every Christian ought to be a missionary; for the language of the apostle, though descriptive particularly of the early preachers of the Gospel, is applicable to all believers: "We, having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed and therefore have I spoken, we also believe and therefore speak."—(1 Cor. 4: 13.) This spirit accounts for the irrepressible activity of the early church. They believed and therefore spoke. They could not but speak the things they had seen and heard, because they really believed them. The healthy blood of their young life was coursing through their veins and they must exercise every member and muscle of their spiritual nature. If it were understood now as in the early days of Christianity, that every member of the church was expected at once to take an active part in the work of the church, the life of Christians would not become cramped and enfeebled as it so often does now. The church seems to have forgotten that the command to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," is given to the church to the end of the world, as the promise connected with it shows. If every Christian, as soon as he came to Christ, felt the spirit of faith impelling him

to speak of his Saviour for the good of others that are perishing, not only would the effect on the world be astonishing, but the church itself would also have a rapid and healthy development of its own spiritual life, instead of the stunted and deformed growth which is so common now. Too many Christians understand religion to consist in a theoretical faith, and forget, if they ever knew, that if they *believe* they must *speak*; if they live in the Spirit they must walk in the Spirit; and that if their life is "hid with Christ in God," the fruits of it will be manifest to men. Contact with the world would do Christians no harm if it was sought, not for the sake of worldly pleasure, but to bring the knowledge of the Saviour to the perishing.

Lot, moved by worldly considerations, "pitched his tent towards Sodom," and seems finally to have built his house in that wicked city. The result was that his own soul was vexed and his family lost. But if his motive had been different, there is no reason to believe that the result would have been the same. Who ever heard of a missionary among the heathen receiving damage either to his own spiritual life or that of his family? On the contrary, the vigorous exercise of the spiritual life keeps it healthy and increases its vigor. The want of such activity is one of the greatest causes as well as one of the clearest evidences of the low state of religion in the church to day. We cannot expect our church to flourish until the members in general go to work for Christ. No member of the body of Christ ought to be useless, no *true* member *can* be wholly so, but it is to be feared that many, even of the genuine members of his body, are, at the present time, comparatively unprofitable, partly through ignorance and partly through negligence.

Some scarcely know that it belongs to common people to do anything for Christ; others who really know better, are content to let the officers of the church practically do all the work that is done, while they themselves forbear to do as much for their help as Aaron and Hur did for Moses when his hands were weary. It is my conviction that this want of exercise is the principal cause of the church's malady. If all would go to work in earnest to promote every cause of reform, and to try to lead sinners to Christ, I believe that the other causes would naturally be removed; for healthy exercise would soon stimulate an appetite for the substantial nourishment of the pure word of God, and when Christians felt that they had something to do for Christ, they neither would nor could fail to ask earnestly and without ceasing for the strength which the Holy Spirit alone can give. It may be that "the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass."

Let us then rise from the common people to the eldership, and inquire whether the elders are "ensamples to the flock" in all things, and whether they take pains to inquire particularly into the evidences of regeneration in applicants for fellowship in the church.

Is it not sometimes the case that we are so glad to see an increase in our membership that we rather take for granted, than take pains to ascertain, that the privileges of the church are sought from the proper motives? I incline to think that we may, and ought to learn something on this point from other churches that require as a basis on which to judge of the new birth of applicants, a narrative of their religious experience. If the church could only be brought into such a state that a disposition to confess Christ and to work for him were considered an essential evidence of fitness for a place in the church, it would produce a vast change for the better. The church had better put out some that are in than make haste to lengthen her cords and *weaken* her stakes by receiving more that are of a worldly spirit and life. We are commanded to "open the gates that the righteous nation which *keepeth the truth* may enter in;" and the question is well worth investigation, whether those who have been taught and have learned the truth *can* "keep" it without imparting it to others. The man who thought to make his talent safe by hiding it in the earth, lost it; while those who generously used their talents for the advantage of others, as well as for the interest of their Lord, not only *kept* but *increased* them. Mere scientific truth, when acquired, may be kept by the simple exercise of memory; but the truth of the gospel is of a practical and moral nature, and is held, not so much by being remembered, as by being practised.

I feel that it would be well if we could have a paper, from some one of considerable experience, on the character of the evidences that we should insist on in receiving applicants. I do not mean that we should try to reduce every Christian's experience to one outward form, but, if we could ascertain the general principles that would be applicable to all cases, and settle on some rules for the application of them to particular cases, it might be a means of revival to the church. It is a very difficult matter to reach with discipline those who should never have been admitted into the church, and yet their influence is damaging to the other members. Perhaps this evil might, to a great extent, be prevented by more careful discrimination at the very opening of the gates.

Another question that should be considered is, whether the state of things complained of in the church is not partly caused by a *want of attention to the young*. John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elias to turn *first*, "the heart of the fathers to the children," and afterwards, as a result of this, "the heart of the children to their fathers," that the disobedient might learn the wisdom of the just. It was by such means that he was to "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." If our attention and our heart were turned to the children, is there not reason to hope that the next generation would be a people prepared for the Lord, in at least much greater degree than the church of the present day?

Next, let us rise from the eldership in general, to the preaching

elders in particular. Are we not at fault, to some extent, in not presenting the gospel in its simplicity? Christ says, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God." Does this not teach us that the most of our preaching ought to be in such plain language that children could understand, and would be interested in it? And ought we not to preach some sermons specially for them? Experience shows that when the gospel is preached in language to suit children, it is listened to and relished by all who love the truth. It ought not to be forgotten that while milk is the sole nourishment of babies, it is also a wholesome diet for men. There is probably room for improvement in all of us in plainness of speech. I do not observe any tendency among us to ignore Christ or his cross, but I wonder if we make the person and work of the Spirit as prominent in our preaching as we ought.

I believe the main fault of the ministry which is worthy of special mention among the causes of the low state of religion, is the *want of earnestness in our work*. There is little reason to doubt that if, after the example of the early preachers, we preached "in season and out of season," and went from house to house, "giving ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word," intent on the saving of souls, we should be used as instruments to inspire the whole church with the missionary spirit, so that even the children would be filled with it. If the whole church is at fault in not sincerely praying for the spirit, doubtless the chief blame lies on the ministry. The Lord says, "I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, who shall never hold their peace, day nor night; ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence and give him no rest till he establish and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth." (Isa. 62; 6, 7.) Can we feel otherwise than ashamed when we compare ourselves with this model? We sometimes talk about "live preaching," but it seems to me that the best of us are in the condition of the man who "went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves who stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed leaving him *half dead*."

The early church, after the Spirit was poured out, "went everywhere preaching the word," and they "preached the gospel with the Holy Ghost sent down from Heaven." Where is our *zeal* compared with the Master who could say, "The zeal of thy house hath eaten me up," or with John the Baptist, who was "a burning and a shining light." He adopted a mode of living that made him independent of the people; "his meat was locusts and wild honey," which he probably gathered for himself. He had no fear of being deprived of his living by denouncing the vices of the leading men, who were leading the people to destruction. He boldly addressed them as a "generation of vipers," and warned them, just as he did the common people, to "flee from the wrath to come." Is it any wonder that people crowded to hear such preaching, and that it

roused them from sleep, and put them upon asking, "What shall we do?" But as for us, preaching is our profession; we are satisfied if we please our people and secure our salaries. If we would see the prime cause of the lukewarmness of the church, let us look within. A live preacher in the pulpit would almost certainly kindle some of the coals in the congregation, and these again would re-act on the pulpit; and when this state of things shall become common, the church will be kindled into such a glow as to become really, what it is theoretically, "the light of the world." That we may be more fit for the Lord's work, we should continue to observe our rule to have an opening sermon at each meeting of Presbytery, and also to make religious conferences and devotional exercises a special feature of our meetings, in which we should take pains to stir up each other to more zeal in our work, and make special prayer for the outpouring of the Spirit on ourselves, and on the churches to which we minister.

THE BEAUTY OF GOD.

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In our efforts to apprehend the nature and character of God, there is no richer field of study and research than the many terms which the Spirit has borrowed from objects with which we are familiar, to help us to correct ideas of divine attributes and perfections. These terms, almost innumerable, and gathered from the wide sweep of the universe, are a revelation of God, more especially in two aspects, first, of his nature and being, and secondly, of his relations to his creatures, particularly to the members of his redeemed family. Thus to reveal his nature and being we have terms taken from light, heat, space, time, duration, gravity, beauty, sublimity, majesty, purity, &c., &c.; whilst his relations to his creatures are set forth by such terms as creator, preserver, father, king, judge; and his peculiar covenant relations to his redeemed are indicated by terms taken from human relationships, natural objects and processes, human pursuits and from almost everything suggestive of the security, happiness, enjoyment and unending good, flowing from his being our God and we his people.

Among the terms setting forth the divine character and perfections, there is none more peculiar and interesting than that of beauty, and yet perhaps none less frequently considered, although the underlying idea is often expressed both in substantive and adjective form. Thus in the substantive form we have it in such expressions as, "To behold the beauty of the Lord," (Ps. 27: 4,) "Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us," (Ps. 90: 17,) "Thine eyes shall behold the king in his beauty," (Isa. 33: 17,) "For how great is his goodness, and how great is his beauty," (Zech. 9: 17). In the adjective form we have, "Fairer than the children of men," (Ps.