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FINDING THE BOOK OF THE LAW.

BY ROBERT WHITTET, SR.

“When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he rent his clothes.”—2 KINGS xxii. 11.

To know not we're amenable to law—
 A law we wot not of, nor yet can tell
 Aught of its precepts, nor how far they're well
Or ill; to feel no sense of solemn awe
Inspiring rev'rence for their maker, or to draw
 Obedience, and then—as does light dispel
 Night's darkness, and show the hidden pits that dwell
Unthought of in the way, and every flaw,
Revealing perils that entail defeat—
 How startling 'tis, though past the danger point,
 To see the risks we've run! and when once more
We feel that safety is assured, how sweet
 To let the heart in gushing joy anoint
 Itself in gratitude, and faith restore!

“THE DECLINE IN THE CHURCHES.”

BY REV. SAMUEL M. SMITH, D. D.

MUCH has been written of late about the scant increase of the churches during the last decade, and many reasons have been offered to explain this lack of growth.

The solution is manifestly influenced in each instance by the personal equation of the solver. Writers of the “broad” school are very unanimous and very earnest in attributing it to the narrowness of the conservatives, the repellent influence of dogmatic creeds, seemingly oblivious of the plain, prosaic fact that the churches nearest their ideal show the least progress of all—the Unitarians and the Universalists still competing for the lowest place.

Some are clamorous in the assertion that heresy-hunting is the blight, and charge that “persecution” of the progressives is simply killing the church.

But here again the argument is confounded by another stubborn fact: The church charged with this crime has grown faster than the Methodist Episcopal Church, which has been innocent. If the chill in the ecclesiastical atmosphere that caused certain Presbyterian professors to seek a sunnier slope stunted the growth of God’s garden, it would seem that the yet frostier air that congealed around the eminent Baptist professor ought to have left even a deadlier blight on that part of the Lord’s plantation, whereas the figures show that the Southern Baptist Church has actually grown faster than either the Northern Presbyterian or the Northern Methodist!

Many contrasts have been drawn between the peace reigning in the Episcopal Church and the war waging in the Presbyterian. But the artists in ink are evidently more familiar with the latter than with the former; to ears attent equally in both directions will be borne sounds from the Episcopal point of the compass not indicative of the profoundest peace, and if their church press be a reliable index of feeling, everything is not so harmonious as some Presbyterian recalcitrants would lead us to think.

They may find in such papers strictures and complaints and protests which will match even the severest of their own, which is saying much.

A great deal has been said in some sections, particularly in the latitude of New York City, about driving Presbyterians into the Episcopal Church; and repeatedly has the growth of that church been held up as a rebuke and reproach to our own. As this is the most persistent form criticism takes, it will not be amiss to remark:

1. That there is nothing new in this. Your grandmother will tell you that this complaint was infirm with age in her girlhood. There always has been, and there always will be, an exodus from other churches to the Episcopal. If you observe carefully, you will not be hasty in coming to the conclusion that this exodus indicates a spiritual decline in other churches. If you reflect deeply, your surprise will be, not that this church grows so fast, but rather that it grows no faster.

2. When this periodic panic is on and one is tempted to fear that the Episcopal Church is about to swallow the Presbyterian, it is well to examine the figures our critics make such alarming use of and see what grace is allowed us.

A mathematical calculation based on the percentages of increase in the two churches demonstrates that Episcopacy will catch up with slow-moving Presbyterianism when their present seven hundred and twenty-six thousand, one hundred and seventy-four communicants have grown to *eighteen million, nine hundred and twenty-two thousand, nine hundred souls!*

Granted that the present somewhat vaunted superiority of increase holds, this will be their strength when they overtake this sluggard Presbyterianism.

It is certainly possible that even Presbyterianism may be aroused before that point is reached.

Leaving the field of comparison and addressing ourselves more directly to the topic before us, we need not be too certain that there is a decline in the churches. It may be that a decrease in the rate of numerical increase is not after all a sure indication of spiritual deadness. It is not always the congregation which cuts the largest figure in the column of "accessions by examination" that has the best developed spiritual life; the presence of God's spirit is not invariably gauged by a numerical register.

There never has been a time when people were easily won to sincere, genuine religion. Our Lord said, Narrow is the gate and narrow is the way that lead to life, and few there be that find it." It is therefore possible that present rate of increase, even though slow, is not abnormally so.

Moreover, is there not something periodic in the flow of religious feeling? We know full well that in the individual congregation a period of very rapid increase is inevitably followed by one of much slower progress. Several years of large numerical growth will necessarily be succeeded by years of small increase. Will not this hold true likewise of the aggregate at large? If such be the case, then periods of flow and ebb will be normal in the church.

Once more: There is sometimes a tone in the discussions of this subject that virtually ignores the Holy Spirit. The writer of this paper heard last summer an address from the pastor of a large city congregation, delivered at a sort of hallelujah meeting to celebrate his return from his vacation, in which a forecast of the coming year was given, the whole air of which was as though he said, "Go to, now, we will add two hundred souls to the church," very much after the order of commercial push and self-sufficient enterprise.

It is well to remember that if the Lord build not the house, they labor in vain that build it. The ignoring of this fundamental fact sometimes trenches very hard upon the borders of irreverence.

With all caution against imperfect generalization, hasty deduction, misleading comparison, *et id omne genus*, it still remains true that the progress of the church is not what it should be. As long as this is the case thoughtful people will inevitably, and will properly, seek the reason therefor. The recollection of our opening paragraphs may well give us pause in suggesting a solution of the question. Let it be said in the outset that probably no one cause is decisive. The slow growth of the church is due doubtless to a combination of concurrent causes, the influence of each of which will be registered in the mind of the reader much according to his individual bent.

Prominent among the hindrances to rapid progress are suggested the following:

1. *The conditions of true discipleship.*—"Ye cannot serve God

and Mammon." There is nothing new in this; but it is not on that account to be lightly dismissed. Though a difficulty as old as the dawn of Christianity, it is a difficulty greatly aggravated at the present time by the remarkable increase of wealth and luxury; the multiplied seductions of Mammonism, its enlargement without and its increase within, the church spreads a widening, deadening paralysis over that spirituality which is the rigorous condition of a growing life. Times of increasing luxury have always been periods of decreasing spirituality. There never has been a time when worldliness was more insinuating and more pervasive than it is at the present.

2. *This is a period of unfaith.*—Along with mammonism will always be found materialism; they are really only the reverse sides of the same thing. Those things which are seen and temporal obscure those which are unseen and eternal. *Practical* skepticism is rampant. We may defend the spirit of the age as we can and excuse it as we will, but the unstinted admiration bestowed upon its audacious enterprise, its intellectual alertness, its philosophic expertness, and the enthusiasm lavished upon its phenomenal advance along every line of scientific progress—all must be moderated and sobered by a recognition and an appreciation of the fact that it is an age of unfaith. This is indignantly denied by many, and much ostensible argument is made to prove that it is not true, and could not possibly be true. But it is true nevertheless. The tendency sets steadfastly away from that temper of mind and heart inseparably linked with the attitude and spirit which invite God's blessing.

"According to your faith, be it unto you," is Christ's measure of blessing; progress is slow if faith be weak.

3. *The discount of vital doctrines.*—Coincident with the causes already suggested comes the further serious fact that in all the modern popular presentations of religious truth that find such insistent advocacy and such ready acceptance, those doctrines most vital to the growth of the church are discredited greatly, if not wholly retired.

The whole conception of God's character, the nature of man, man's relation to God, the nature of sin, the office and work of the Holy Spirit, the atonement of Christ, the judgment of God, the destiny of man and its determining factor—all these fundamental doctrines have passed and are still passing through a

stage of transition, and the change is not in a direction to hasten the cry, "Men and brethren, what must I do to be saved?"

4. *The authority of the Scriptures is being steadily undermined.*—The process has been going for years. At first and for long it was strenuously denied. Results now, however, are becoming so plain that candid writers cease denial, and content themselves with showing that in the passing of "the authority of a book" the church sustains no loss. The influence of this undermining process is patent in the press discussions of religious questions, and is becoming somewhat evident in the pulpit. There is a constantly diminishing appeal to the authority of the Bible, and more and more reliance is had upon philosophy, reason, history, conscience, inner sense, common sense, common consent, analogies of nature, and what not. The Bible is passing rapidly from the realm of law to the domain of literature.

Just so far as this tendency progresses, just that far will the sanctions of eternity all be weakened, and the appeal, once so irresistible, fall on heedless ears. Nothing short of a practical faith in the absolute truth and the supreme authority of God's word can sustain the revival spirit.

5. *Some injury has been done by a certain class of popular novels.*—During the past few years we have had a succession of books having an ominously large circulation, the chief motive of which seemed to be an attack on the church as organized in the earth. Plausible perversion and exaggerated fallacies woven into an attractive story, the hero of which, endowed with all desirable qualities, goes forth as the knight errant of a regenerated Christianity, waging a noble warfare against existing church institutions, the representatives of which are set forth in the story as knaves, hypocrites or fools; and the whole insinuating mass of misrepresentation and fallacy designed to discredit the visible church and weaken its influence.

What effect this literature may be having it would be difficult to say. The wide welcome given it is not encouraging, and the presumption is that harm is done.

6. *False conceptions of the nature of the church.*—This influence appears both within and without. An indication of the former may be seen in the disposition to broaden the mission of the church until it includes all that is desirable, and occasionally much that is even undesirable, in the betterment of man's con-

dition, physical, mental and moral, reaching its final embodiment in what is coming to be known as the "Institutional Church" (as though every church were not institutional!), by which is meant an institution in which the kitchen beneath is as important as the pulpit above, and the game-room ranks with the Sabbath-school, and the employment bureau is much more effective than the Bible class. Such things are good in their place, and will always be immensely popular, but God's word does not set them forth as the mission of Christ's church. The gospel of soup, soap, basket-ball and billiards is a good gospel, but it is not the gospel of Christ.

Outside of the church the false conception appears in the increased number of people who "cannot see any necessity of joining the church." In the olden time there used to be in most communities some person generally esteemed a Christian, but who, from some idiosyncrasy, could never get his consent to confess his faith and identify himself with any branch of the visible church. Such a person was always considered peculiar and eccentric in his views of such matters. Believers who "make no profession" are getting to be much more common. They are growing into a distinct class recognized in modern religious literature as "Christians without the church." They are perhaps far less numerous than they are credited with being; but still there are more of them than there ought to be, and their development is due to this false conception of the nature of the church.

7. *The reaction against "evangelism."*—For twenty years the peripatetic professional revivalist, misnamed evangelist, has flourished in the land. Students of Drs. Dabney and Peck will recall the earnest warnings of these eminent men and their solemn cautions against what they considered a dangerous and growing evil. Some who then considered such views extreme in their conservatism may now recognize the wisdom of them. Churches which stately employ the services of this class in a few years begin to suffer. The oftener such a man comes to the same congregation, the more strenuous grow his exercises, and the more scant becomes the visible result. After a few years of such repeated visits it becomes practically impossible to have a "successful meeting." The "evangelist" then scores the community as godless, and begins to refer to it abroad as a sort of

Sodom! If this be true of a single congregation, must it not also hold in the church generally?

Multitudes of these pepper-and-ginger operators have gone up and down among the churches, and have so thoroughly burned over vast sections of the territory that another generation must grow up before the evil is counteracted. It is not at all improbable that a slow growth may be somewhat due to their offices.

Such are some reasons which occur to the writer as accounting for a slow growth in the church. As my paper draws to its close I recognize the fact that my readers are likely to feel that the listing of such a number of serious hindrances is inconsistent with my hesitation to admit in the beginning that the decline was real or abnormal. I have not space to attempt a vindication of my consistency. I must content myself with assuring the reader that I have not been hasty in either direction. For years I have been calling attention in various ways to these tendencies; but while fully recognizing them, I have never grown pessimistic, nor would I ever cease to sound the note of hope and cheer. This is God's world. The hand that sways its sceptre is the pierced hand; his dominion is a universal dominion, and the Lord will surely come to his own.

In this sign we conquer.

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