

FAMILY RELIGION—ITS INFLUENCE, SOCIALLY AND IN THE CHURCH.

THE CIRCULAR LETTER FROM THE NOVA SCOTIA CENTRAL BAPTIST ASSOCIATION TO THE CHURCHES OF WHICH IT IS COMPOSED.

Dear Brethren,

We have chosen this subject for our annual epistle as its importance is worthy of serious consideration. We cannot speak of any matter in connection with our churches in which are not included family interests. There are distinct duties and obligations resting on both churches and families which may be best treated separately. When God placed man on earth he set him in families. He made the household earlier than human laws and institutions, prior to all church organizations. From the growing necessities and wants of families sprung human laws, civil government and church order. Communities are but a congregation of households, and are prosperous or otherwise, in proportion as the associated families act under Christian influence or reject its sacred principles.

Christian families do not spring from church organizations, nor do they exist only on account of church membership; rather are churches the offspring of family piety, and their prosperity and growth depend upon the due cultivation and maintenance of piety in the household. Communities would be happy indeed if every household in their vicinities were a truly religious one; and soon the results would be seen in the banishment from their borders of every vicious and demoralizing influence. Seldom do the majority in any town or village consist of those who live under and are wholly influenced by the principles of the Gospel. Christian families in a community are like salt, which purifies and preserves the mass from corruption; and from them spring churches, Sabbath Schools and other kindred institutions, and these act upon society, and through influences thus exerted the mass is made better. As one community exerts an influence on another, and this again on still another, so the circle widens till distant lands are reached and become truly blessed.

Socialists and philanthropists, so-called, such as Robert Owen and others have started Colonies and select Societies to embrace within their limits all that could tend to the well-being and happiness of man. But their schemes have ever after trial proved a failure. The reason is evident; all their plans, rules and regulations were based on human laws and principles, without regard to the true organization of Society, which can only succeed by being built upon the foundation that God has laid for the regulation of families and their associations, the corner stone of which is his Divine Word. The community of Moravians in Germany was formed on Bible principles, with God's laws for its basis of action. It has existed for nearly two centuries, sending forth from its Society missionaries to almost every part of the world. Compare the settlements of the United States with that of the South American republics, and you can trace the prosperity of the former to the immigration of Christian families to New England, although the latter possessed the more fertile soil and more salubrious climate. They were led by Catholic priests who ignored the Bible; therefore, anarchy and revolution marked their course, as the true foundation was denied them for raising a noble and enduring superstructure. We therefore infer that society, in either large or small communities, is prospered and blessed in proportion to the number of Christian families of which it is composed. When we refer to Christian families we intend to designate those who are not only professors of religion, but rather those who are the truly regenerate children of God, for only can Christian duties be discharged and Christian acts performed by those who are under true spiritual influences. But we see Christian influences checked and in many instances Christian duties abandoned from the improper and unscriptural marriage of Christians with unbelievers. This is denounced strongly in the Word of God, and when persisted in usually leads to the abandonment of active piety of the party who is the professor of religion. The design of God in the constitution of the Christian family is to make it the foundation of all virtues, the citadel of religion and the nursery of the Church. The Church itself is but a number of families united under certain rules and obligations. By Christian efforts in domestic life the Church is largely sustained and strengthened. Every true Christian has an inner and an outer life; the latter exhibiting to all observers the true state of the former. So in family religion, there is internal action which cannot be confined to the family circle, but the influence therein exerted penetrates beyond and permeates the community around. Family religion cannot be defined by strict rules or unvarying arrangements; it is by principles worked out in daily domestic life, by which it must be influenced. Enoch walked with God, and so the Christian in the family must by a consistent walk and holy watchfulness maintain his position and make daily progress in his heavenly course.

Still, there are points of action and specific duties which must be attended to, or the Christian life will be a dwarfish one. In entering into the family compact, obligations are assumed by the Christian which must be discharged, and duties arising therefrom must not be omitted, nor can they be delegated to others. The peculiar relation existing between parents and children can only be maintained by carrying out the obligations devolving on each, and such as are imposed by God himself. The obligation is more particularly binding on the heads of the family to provide for the culture and Christian training of the children and household committed to their care. To speak of family training in a scriptural sense is to open up a large field of thought, and therefore only a few points can be touched in a letter like the present. As a foundation, we must lay the duty of family prayer; no other teaching will supply the place of this. In fact, if this be omitted in the domestic arrangements, other Christian duties will seldom rise to any prominence. The influence of family prayer is better felt than described. It is the lubricating oil which causes the complex machinery of family life to run smoothly, without jar or noise. Its influence is felt by the head of the household, who engages, morning and evening, in this important and delightful service. The cares of domestic life are many and often very oppressive, how suitable then to carry our cares to Him who careth for us, and who lightens every burden and gives strength for every duty. How differently the Christian goes forth to the discharge of life's duties after seeking wisdom from God, from Him who relies on his own strength and by his own efforts aims to overcome surrounding difficulties. The influence of family worship on the heads of the family is great in leading to watchfulness in their intercourse with those associated with them. When one remembers that in a few hours he is to bow at the family altar, how strict he is in controlling his actions, lest by unguarded or hasty words or a fretful disposition he makes his prayer an unmeaning and unprofitable ceremony to those who bow lowly with him. Where family prayer is rightly observed and strictly kept up, we may expect to find peace and good will prevailing among all the members of the household. The influence of family prayer on children and servants is very great. It is a daily silent and effective sermon poured into their ears. Children are early observers of the actions of their parents,

and whilst very young are anxious to be present at family worship. A training is there given which is seldom forgotten in after life. We have reason to fear that many professing Christians neglect to discharge this binding obligation. Various excuses are offered for the omission. Diffidence, deficiency of suitable qualifications and want of time are set forth as reasonable objections; but these can all be overcome where the heart is truly engaged to serve God.

Other obligations rest upon the heads of the household than the one referred to. "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Here is a strict command to duty, and a gracious promise annexed as encouragement in its performance. This training cannot commence too early, nor does it end till life here is succeeded by life in a future state. Parental teaching is done both by precept and example. The command of Moses was in reference to God's house and ordinances, that they were to be kept continually before the family. It was not to be an occasional service, but a daily one. "The words I command you this day shall be in thy heart, and thou shalt teach them diligently to thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest down and when thou risest up." Here is oral teaching and a model that cannot be excelled; very brief, but most comprehensive, and if carried out to its full extent, the most beneficial results would certainly follow. Example must accompany precept, or not much good will be accomplished. Children are quick and critical observers, and early learn to look on their parents as their wisest and safest guides, and will be generally influenced by them.

If parents are strict in their observance of the Sabbath, so will be their children, and the same may be said of attending public worship in God's sanctuary. To these observances should children be early trained, also to the Sabbath School should every attention and encouragement be given by parents, to induce the regular and punctual attendance of their children. If there is an unwillingness on their part to attend, then let the parents lead them there, and encourage them to persevere by continuing their own presence. Parents often complain of the indifference their children feel in regard to attending meeting on the Sabbath or the Sunday School, and think that no coercion should be used, whilst by a judicious course of action we think all opposition on the part of children to attendance on these means of grace referred to will be overcome, still, if necessary, parental authority should enforce obedience, and whilst under the parental roof children should be taught to obey every reasonable demand and especially should no trifling excuses be allowed to interfere with attendance at Sunday School and public worship on the Sabbath. No parent indulges his children's wishes in remaining at home in preference to attending daily the public school. How much more is it imperative for him to require their attendance on services intended for their spiritual good.

The Sabbath in the Christian household should be observed as strictly as a day of spiritual good. It is not to be so kept as to make it a weariness; it should be made a day of joy and gladness, in commemoration of that joyful event, our Lord's resurrection. Let conversation be cheerful, but apart from worldly topics. Suitable reading matter should be furnished, that the children's time may be pleasantly occupied. The children should be encouraged to talk of the sermon to which they have listened or the lesson taught in the Sabbath School, making the Sabbath a day of delight. Parents should discourage their children running from one place of worship to another, as is often the case in towns and villages where there are different churches, a practice which is unprofitable and tends to unsettle those who indulge in it, till they fail to see a distinction between truth and error. Parents are not free from blame who do not place truth, in all its force and scriptural importance, before their children till they fully discern the certain from the false path. Parents, for fear of being called bigots, often allow their children to choose their own place of worship, before they are capable of weighing the evidences of religion and its peculiar doctrines. They should be restrained till mature age would enable them to make a wise and scriptural decision.

The obligation to practice hospitality rests strongly on Christian families; where cheerfully accorded, good will certainly result. It is double benefit resulting in good to those who receive and to those who bestow the kind act. The visit of ministers of the gospel should be encouraged; their influence will usually be felt by all the members of the household. The Shunamite woman felt it a great privilege to have the good old prophet occupy her spare room in his frequent journeys. Many Christian families gladly welcome such spiritual visitors. Religion leads to economical training in the family, and points to simplicity, in our houses, in our dress, and in the various surroundings of the domestic residence. But the object of saving should have for its chief end benevolence, and benevolence should be cultivated. The Christian escapes many expenses that the worldly and ambitious indulge in, and therefore has more to spare in consequence for worthy objects. The Word of God requires the Christian to give, and promises to return to him good measure, pressed down and running over. It is only weak faith that leads to the withholding of the means that God has liberally bestowed when He has promised to more than make it up to him again. No complaint should be heard of the frequent calls for benevolent aid. But rather should there be rejoicing that so many streams are carrying life and fertility to water the various parts of the earth, on which we may cast our bread to find it again after many days. The Christian parent should teach his children to be generous, and encourage them to earn means of their own; they will then feel a deeper interest in the contributions made. Whilst parents practice giving liberally, let it be done in full view, and, if possible, with the concurrence of the whole family. A Christian father once requested that his contribution to his pastor might be kept secret lest his grown-up sons should chide him for doing too much for his church. His six sons grew up to man's estate, not one of them became religious, and the father's property in his old age was nearly all squandered by those very sons whom he failed to train in Christian duties.

We will here say a word on the obligation resting on the Christian parent to educate their children. It is not optional whether he will do so or not; God will hold him accountable for any neglect. He should not only educate them to the extent of his ability, but see that the education given is of a moral and religious character, as well as secular. No Christian parent can at the present day remain excusable who would send a daughter to a convent to receive an imaginary popular training, when such momentous interests are at stake. Let no parent consider it a hardship to spend money on his children's education, money so spent is better than the same amount laid up to furnish them with worldly advancement hereafter.

The Christian family should be a happy home. To make it so let the mind be fed by suitable books and papers, such as will both interest and instruct. No education is so cheap as that supplied by reading sound literature. The complaint of parents that their children spend their evenings abroad is often the result of neglect in this respect. No family should in any case fail to take a

religious newspaper. At the low rate the denominational paper are published, none should feel too poor to subscribe for it.

It would be pleasant to speak of the Christian's place and influence in the community where he dwells, but this must be inferred rather than described. We have aimed to confine our remarks as touching chiefly on the internal duties of the Christian family, rather than dwelling upon its outside bearing. As in the days of Nehemiah, so now, it is well for every man to build the wall over against his own house. If this is neglected, however active the Christian life may be in other respects, the complaint will be, "They have made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept."

The influence of a mother in the training and directing the household is especially great. Her presence being more continual, she may guide and direct; whilst the father, from his peculiar duties, is necessarily frequently from home. Especially is the mother fitted for the object referred to, by her sympathizing nature, by which she patiently and affectionately bears with the waywardness of her children, and ultimately, if not immediately, moulds and fashions their lives and actions. The instances given in Scripture of maternal solicitude and pious training are quite numerous, and will readily occur to Bible readers. Moses, no doubt, received such training from his pious mother in his early years, which led him in mature life to refuse to be called son of Pharaoh's daughter and to choose to suffer affliction with God's people rather than enjoy the honours and treasures of Egypt for a season. Hannah early consecrated her little Samuel to the Temple service, and his eminent career no doubt resulted largely from his mother's early teaching. Hezekiah and Josiah each began to reign in early life, and did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and their mother's names are both mentioned. The last chapter of Proverbs is filled with beautiful and holy precepts, the words of King Lemuel which his mother taught him. Thus it is intimated that the good lives and good government of these kings were largely due to early parental training. In the days of our Saviour's mission on earth we see what anxiety mothers manifested to place their offspring in his arms to receive his blessing. Young Timothy is spoken of by Paul as knowing the Holy Scriptures from a child, and tracing the same to the unfeigned faith which dwelt in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. The religious training of children cannot be commenced too early. The Jesuits are well aware of this, and by every means in their power obstruct the attendance of the children of their flock at our common schools. It has been said by them, "Give us the training of the child till eight years old, and you may have him afterwards." John Angell James, a well-known English divine says, "As soon as reason dawns in the child, instruction should commence; the subject matter of which should include everything which forms the fundamentals of revealed truth. The character of God, the spirituality of his law, the fall of man, the evil of sin, the person and work of Christ, the need of repentance, the justification of the soul by faith, &c., &c. All of these should be familiarly taught as the child is able to receive them, and all proved from beginning to end on evangelical principles; and the basis of all teaching should be the Bible itself."

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to change the heart and nature of the child, but God in the kingdom of his grace works by means, and if these are faithfully used, early conversions of the young will certainly be the result. If there should seem to be a failure it must arise from the imperfection in the teaching, and not in any want of God's faithfulness in fulfilling his promise.

There is not space in a short letter like the present to do more than glance at the encouragements to efforts in family training and family piety and to speak of its great and salutary influence on the world and on the church. The happiness of the family is only safe and permanent when based on a truly religious foundation. The cares of daily life, and the trials and perplexities constantly surrounding us, are calmed and smoothed down by the influence under which each inmate of the domestic circle is trained to act by living a Christian and pious life. Under the sanctified rule of divine truth each strives to bear the burden of the other, and together an aim is taken to follow Joshua of old, who said, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord."

The toils and anxieties of life are well rewarded when those in the van see following after them the children of their household. No parents need feel they have lived or laboured in vain if they have trained even one immortal soul for Heaven. Parents often labor and toil anxiously to gain property to advance their children's temporal interests, or to provide for their wants, which in itself is not wrong. But an anxiety to train their offspring for a place in the Church of Christ and a desire to leave them the legacy of a bright Christian example is much better than any patrimony that they might inherit. Christian parents are often discouraged from not witnessing immediate results of their teaching in the conversion of their children. "In the morning sow thy seed and in the evening withhold not thy hand, for thou knowest not whether shall prosper this or that." The writer met recently a widow with several children, her health poor, her struggle with worldly trials many; she strove for some years to keep her family with her on a small farm. After listening to a detailed account of her difficulties, the enquiry was made, "Are you a Christian?" The response came immediately, "Oh, yes; I am a member of the church, and so are all my children." Did this woman live in vain? Were her toils, her anxieties, and her prayers of no avail? She was amply rewarded for all her privations and struggles; and what a benefit her humble efforts had bestowed on the church, a legacy of far more value than any amount of earthly treasure. Then let parents take courage and let their life work be to train up their offspring for service in the Church of Christ, next to giving themselves to Christ. To have through their efforts, their children added to His church, is the highest boon they can possibly seek,—one which will prove of infinite value long after they have taken their departure to the heavenly home.

Family religion is not confined within walls nor restrained by bars. Like the broken pot of precious ointment, its influence bursts forth through every opening, pregnant with odors to perfume and benefit surrounding society. Not only the village and surrounding community, but distant lands receive the blessings poured forth from the family circle. The father mourns the departure of his son to a distant land, and the mother weeps over the daughter who follows her husband to a far off country, perhaps never to return. But if these have been trained in the ways of true piety, they go forth to benefit the places where they may pitch their tent, and not unfrequently to locate a church or a Sabbath School where one did not before exist.

Thus we see that through family religion the household is first benefited; then the church is enlarged, strengthened and sustained; the Sabbath School exists and prospers through its aid and influence. The pious walk of a Christian family permeates society in its immediate circle, and from the inner to its outer circumference, from village to town and from country to country, its influence is directly or indirectly influential. And when the day arrives