

# The Christian Messenger.

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## Associational Documents.

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### Religious Declension.

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

Dear Brethren,—

That there is a large amount of religious declension in the Church at the present time, few I presume will be disposed to deny; and its removal is a consummation devoutly to be wished. A feeble state of piety in a church impairs and hinders its usefulness, depriving it of power to carry on Christ's work. To many a Christian, and many a church the charge brought against the Church at Ephesus might be made:—"Thou hast left thy first love."

It may be profitable to look at some of the causes of religious declension.

#### 1. The spirit of selfishness so prevalent in the Church.

It is greatly to be feared that the love of money which Paul describes as "the root of all evil" lies very largely at the root of religious declension. As the love of gain increases, the love of God decreases. "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." There is perhaps no greater danger to which Christians are exposed than that against which Christ utters a distinct warning: "Take heed and beware of covetousness," which Paul calls "idolatry." It was this that led to the betrayal of our Lord and Saviour by Judas: "What will ye give me, and I will betray him unto you?" There is still a very close connection between love of money and betraying and forsaking the Lord Jesus.

Nor does the evil rest with the individual alone; it extends much further, because that which might be well expended in furtherance of Christian work, and fulfilling the commission of Christ is boarded up, or loaned out at an exorbitant percentage, thus robbing God of his own, the heathen of the gospel, himself of peace, turning himself into an idolater and an extortioner, concerning which men, the Bible is exceedingly clear as to the future: "Nor idolaters. . . nor extortioners (whether in the matter of interest, or buying, or selling, or employment of labour) shall inherit the kingdom of God." This love of gain is a worm that gnaws at the very heart of many of the professed people of God, and although condemned by God himself, it prevails, we fear, to an extent that is fearful to contemplate.

#### 2. Neglect of the means of grace.

To the principle just named may often be traced neglect of the Lord's house on the day or days usually set apart for prayer and praise during the week. The man above described does not see the wisdom of going to meeting when he can much better improve his time either in making money, or laying plans whereby it may be made. "Not forgetting the assembling of yourselves together" is a Divine command, and he who faithfully obeys it is a great gainer thereby, and he who does not is a great loser. Sabbath attendance is scarcely a criterion of the spiritual state either of a church or an individual. You must consult the week-night prayer-meeting if you would know how the church pulse beats. Spiritual prosperity, growth in grace, advancement in holiness, should be the Christian's highest aim, and he who neglects the ordinary means of grace, neglects one important means whereby these blessings may be realised, and enters on a course of decided religious declension.

Possibly there is room for improvement in the manner of conducting our prayer-meetings, to make them more attractive (a subject well worth careful consideration) but till we find how it is to be done, staying away altogether is certainly not the way to do it. And indeed as to attraction, the promise of God that whenever two or three are gathered together in his name, he will be in the midst of them, ought to be attraction enough to any and every follower of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Another means whereby spiritual decline is brought about, is,

#### 3. Neglect of God's Word.

Careful, thoughtful, prayerful attention to this is as necessary to a Christian as close attention to the chart and compass is to the mariner; neglect in either case may prove disastrous to the voyager. "Moreover," says David "by them is thy servant warned, and in keeping of them there is great reward." To him they were "more to be desired than gold yea than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honey-comb."

When a man holds, and continues to hold, God's Word in the manner just described, he is in little danger of backsliding from God and on the other hand, immediately his value of that book declines, his godliness declines also; he is on the down grade, and in a fair way of turning his back upon God. The book that has God for its author, and Heaven for its aim, given by God to men to teach them how to reach that Divine abode, cannot be safely neglected by any one.

#### 4. Neglect of family worship also tends to spiritual declension.

This has reference more especially to parents. No family where both, or even one, of the parents is a Christian should be without the protection and safeguard of family prayer.

The benefits to the parents, and especially to the children is more than can be told. Care should be exercised in the conducting of this most important duty that it be made attractive to every member of the family. It is well that reading, singing, and prayer should find a place in the exercise. It has been well said "Those who pray do well, those who read and pray do better, but those who read, sing, and pray, do best."

Of Abraham God said: "I know him that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment." When this can be said of Christian fathers, and it ought to be of every such father, a blessing to the family will be secured, christian stability made more stable still, and religious declension much more rare. Where "piety at home" is carefully cultivated, it will manifest itself abroad, and help in no small degree to prevent the sad experience of backsliding from God which the neglect of it is so apt to produce.

5. May not the backsliding of some of our young converts arise from our neglect to look after them?

Is it not to be feared that in too many cases we are satisfied with getting them into the church? as if that were the sum total of our duty? Does not our interest in them often begin to flag when they have received the right hand of fellowship? Do they not need as much careful attention after union with the church as they did before? Jesus says: "Feed my lambs;" do we not often starve them by neglect and cold indifference, instead of feeding them with brotherly love, and kindly admonition, and loving counsel, and faithful caution, and christian experience, and cheerful encouragement, and lively hopes? May not the relapses of many of our young converts be the fruit of negligence on the part of the church, of which, it must not be forgotten, the pastor is a member, and to whom these duties largely, though by no means entirely, belong.

6. Another cause of backsliding and indifference may arise from too much dependence upon spasmodic efforts.

Evangelists, as ordinarily understood, are means of great blessing, if they are sent of God. Revivals are blessings when they come down from God, but not when "got up" by man. Such seasons are often sources of vast good, but we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that in many cases just in proportion as religious life and enthusiasm run high at such seasons, does it run correspondingly low when the revival has past; just as the highest spring tides are succeeded by the lowest ebb.

The fact that revivals take place, show that they should never be needed. The very word 'revival' implies a state of things that should not exist. Did we but live as it is our duty and privilege to live—by daily dependence upon God and communion with him, then instead of the extremes of heat and cold which too many suffer from, we should enjoy a much more constant and healthy temperature: the church would enjoy better spiritual health; revivals as commonly understood would become much less frequent, while at the same time, as many, if not more would be added to her numbers. All the benefits of revivals would be enjoyed without the usual drawbacks, among which the chief may be the low state into which so many fall after the revival, so much so, that the question presses itself upon one's attention whether revivals are to be sought after, and extraordinary means used for a longer or shorter season, or whether it would not be better to expend our strength in seeking to get ourselves to understand more clearly our relation to God, to the Lord Jesus, to the world, and to one another, by use of the ordinary means. A revival is better, infinitely better, than a state of dearth and inactivity, but a regular, healthy, steady though slow growth of the church in grace and numbers, is very much better than a revival, in which in most cases there is a great blaze of zeal and earnestness which frequently appeareth for a little while and then for a long while vanishes away. We should not then have so often to mourn the low estate of Zion, nor grieve over the backsliding state of so many who once bid so fair, and promised so much fruit, nor our own coldness in the cause of our Redeemer.

The last I shall name, though far from the least, is,

#### 7. Neglect of private prayer.

It is here perhaps more than in anything else, backsliding begins. There are many temptations to neglect this all-important and indispensable christian duty, every one of which must be stoutly and manfully resisted. It stands true as ever that

"Prayer is the christian's vital breath,  
The christian's native air."

Nor is it any less true that

"Long as they live must christians pray,  
For only while they pray they live."

Beyond doubt many there are who have wandered far from hope, and happiness, and heaven, and God, who might trace it all back to the neglect of this holy duty, or rather say holy privilege. No justifiable reason can be urged for putting it aside even for a day. It is not safe. "I pray," said Mr. Spurgeon, "many times in a day, and I pray because I cannot help it." "When the Lord's people often enter into the secret place of the Most High:" when the soul often darts heavenward: when drawn by the irresistible power of love, they commune with their Lord because they "cannot help it," there will be little or no danger of falling into a cold, indifferent state of mind and heart.

No christian can afford to neglect that which brings the peace of God into the heart, and keeps sin out. Even in the busiest season he should find his parenthesis for prayer. A praying heart will ever find both a time and a place to pray, and whenever the thought to pray enters the mind give it room, let no excuse prevent its exercise, it needs but little time to go to Heaven and come back again, for the wings of faith are swifter than the swift-winged lightning. It was not without purpose that the Saviour taught this high privilege when he said, "And thou when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father, &c." Were there not moreover an earnest need for it we should not find the admonition, "Pray without ceasing," for we are in wants without ceasing, in dangers without ceasing, in temptations without ceasing. If the duty could be dispensed with, and if it were not a strong safeguard against falling back from God, then the Saviour's words were vain when he said: "Watch and pray lest ye enter into temptation."

We do not ask for less public prayer, but more private prayer. It is here our main strength is obtained to battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. It is here humanly speaking, the battle is lost or won.

#### THE REMEDY.

What is the remedy for the low state of religion we so often see in churches and individuals?

1. By a close and careful examination as in the sight of God and eternity seek out the cause. Seek by God's help to retrace our steps to the place where we turned aside from the straight path of duty, and then with a prayerful vigilance watch against the next temptation in that direction.

2. Pay good heed to the directions given in the Bible against apostasy. "Be watchful," says John in Rev. iii, "and strengthen the things which remain that are ready to die; for I have not found

thy work perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard; and hold fast and repent." Paul says in Heb. x, "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering, for he is faithful that promised," with many other exhortations, and especially that found in Eph. vi: "Finally brethren be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil . . . praying always with all prayer and supplication in the spirit and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication, &c."

3. Frequent meditation of the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Let all who in any way suffer the woeful effects of religious declension, or are in danger of it, and who is not? Often, very often think of the price paid for their redemption, of the agony endured in Gethsemane, the scourging, the crowning, the mocking, the shame, the spitting, the untold suffering both in body and mind of the Redeemer; of his death which ensures our life: of his resurrection which ensures ours: of where he now is: of the promises made to his followers, and the never-to-be told joy in store for them through him: of the mansions he is prepared for them that are his where they shall dwell with him in light and life eternal. These, and other thoughts that cluster around the name of Jesus the Christ, often and devoutly indulged in will serve in no small measure to prevent us from falling into a state of coldness and indifference, which is alike injurious to ourselves and to the cause of truth, as well as dishonouring to God. At the same time such meditations will also tend to increase our love to God and our Lord Jesus and bring us more into conformity with his image; to attain which, the christian should bend all the powers of his heart, and mind, and soul, and strength.

And now my brethren beloved in the Lord, may the God of all grace, who brought again our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, establish and strengthen you in every good word and work, to do his will, and whose operations are confined chiefly to the Telooogos, grant that both you and all his people of every name and place may ever be sustained and upheld by grace divine: that you and they may ever live in the conscious enjoyment of the smiles of our Father's face, and that when your work for God and humanity shall end, there may be "ministered unto you an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

## Report of Committee on Missions.

The Committee on Missions are thankful to be able to report that our Missions at home and abroad are in a prosperous condition. The Foreign Mission which is located in the Madras Presidency, India, and whose operations are confined chiefly to the Telooogos, has been making progress during the past year. Brethren George Churchill and R. Sanford and their wives, have been greatly cheered by the arrival of Miss Carrie Hammond, of New Brunswick, at Bimlipatam, their field of labour. The work of the Lord has prospered in their hands. Several have put on Christ by baptism, and quite a number seem to be feeling after God. The native assistants of the missionaries on this field, Lazarus Edwin, Mark Leslie, and John Andrews, are proving to be helpers indeed. Rev. W. F. Armstrong and wife have been labouring indefatigably, and with encouraging success at Chicacole. Their four assistants, including a Colporteur and a female teacher, have greatly aided them in their work.

Your Committee regret that Mrs. Armstrong's health became so enfeebled as to seem to demand, at one time, her immediate return to her native land. More favourable reports, however, concerning her health have since been received.

The Mission to the Oryan people, in the Jeypore district, under the direction of Rev. R. Sanford, is producing encouraging results. The little church organized there some two years ago is quite vigorous. In this connection your committee must express their gratitude to God for the wonderful blessings which have rested upon the labours of our American brethren on the Telooogo field, where nearly 10,000 converts were added to the church by baptism in one year. Truly we may say in reference to this, "What hath God wrought!"

Our Home Missions have been doing a noble work for the Master on the whole field during the past year. 123 Mission Stations have been occupied. 50 weak churches have been aided by subsidies; and by the help of the Home Mission Board, they have enjoyed the means of grace. Pastors have been encouraged to look after feeble interests, and many young men have been recommended to fields of labour. 35 missionaries have been employed, who have laboured 921½ weeks under the direction of the Board. Sermons 2,407. Other meetings 1814. Over 7,000 family visits have been made, and 101 baptized, and 37 received by letter. This Home Mission work, therefore, seems to be of incalculable importance. Its influence is not confined to its own immediate field; it has a powerful bearing on the cause of Education and of Foreign Missions. Hence it is a matter of regret that larger receipts did not come into their treasury, that the Home Mission Board might have been able to do more for the Master in this department of christian work.

Your Committee rejoice in the great success of N. S. Baptist Home Missionary Union during the seven years of its existence, and they hope that the new Board of Home Missions will have a wider field of labour, and be able to do more and better work for the Lord.

The French Mission has been conducted very much as in former years. Rev. M. Normandy has laboured diligently, as his reports to the Board clearly shew. But as the difficulties on his field are very formidable, the apparent results have not been very marked. Good has undoubtedly been done, and the seed sown last year as well as during the many previous years of the mission must ripen into an abundant harvest.

Your committee believe that this Mission should be sustained by the prayers and contributions of our Denomination, and that the operations connected with it should be greatly enlarged and improved.

Respectfully submitted,

G. E. DAY.