

Sunday Reading.

Conversion and Christian nurture of Children.

BY REV. F. E. CLARK.

One great trouble with the church has been that it has depended almost exclusively upon conquest. It has looked with complacency upon the figures and facts which tell of its depletion, and has said, "Oh, well, it is all right, one of these days we will have a great revival. It is a time of declension just now, to be sure; but one of these days the Lord will raise up some great spiritual general. A Moody or a Nettleton or a Finney, will institute a regular warfare upon the evil one, sinners will be converted to Christ, the ranks of our churches will be swelled once more, and a great company of captives will be dragged at Zion's chariot wheels." This, then, is one indication of the need of Christian nurture, that the church is depleted except in times of special revival, and that it relies for its strength upon conquest from without rather than upon growth from within.

Another indication of a great need in this direction is the patent inefficiency of many Sunday schools in the conversion of souls. It is not pleasant to say anything against an agency which in these days is almost an object of superstitious worship, nor in what I may say would I cast any reflection upon the Sunday school of this church. No church could ask for a more faithful band of officers and teachers than we have. This faithfulness is shown by the fact that the conversion of souls is held up by our teachers as their prime and constant aim, and that no year passes by without the reception of many into the church from this, its nursery.

The need of greater effort in the line of Christian nurture is also shown by the acknowledged difficulty of reaching persons in mature life by religious truth. If most people are reached at all, they must be reached early in life, so of course there is an imperative demand for early Christian nurture. I have noticed that the mason always uses his mortar before it is set and while it is yet soft. I have noticed that the blacksmith welds the iron while it is white hot and malleable. I have noticed that the gardener trains his trees while they are young and flexible. I have noticed that the Christian tries to turn the soul to God when it is old and hardened and unimpressionable. He quite reverses the processes of nature, and uses the stiff, brittle mortar in building up a Christian character, and strikes his blows upon the cold, unyielding iron, and tries to bend the gnarled and toughened oak tree according to his will. The parent, the Christian teacher, practically says in nine cases out of ten, "My little boy, my little girl, you are quite too small to be a Christian now; but in about ten years, after you have been for a while a bad boy, a dissipated young man, a light-headed, frivolous young woman, after you have been such an one for a certain number of years, then some powerful whirlwind of religious experience will smite you, and you will be dreadfully sorry for your sins, and then Christ will save you; but you must go through all this experience, you must do something wicked to be sorry for first; you must be very bad before you can be very good." Not that any one says this in so many words; nay, you are even shocked to have these words put into your mouths; but that is practically what every one says who urges children to wait until they are older and more experienced before they give their hearts to Him whom they are old enough to know died for them. And remember, my friends, the sapling is a sapling but once. All the strength of Hercules cannot make the oak tree ever into a flexible twig. Your boy will be ten years old but once in his life, and when the flexible age is once passed, it is forever passed. These, then, are three of the indications.

Now what are obstacles in the way of the conversion of children and the nurture of child Christians? All these obstacles may be grouped under two heads, opposition and indifference, opposition and indifference of parents and teacher and churches. It seems almost a libel upon parents and teachers and churches to say this. What! parents and teachers and churches opposed to the conversion of children? I speak that I do know when I say this. I am fully aware that much of this opposition is not intended as such, but it is not the less deadly. I know that many parents who love their children dearly, and respect the cause of religion, would yet hold back their Christian children from an open profession of religion, from what seemed to them the very best motives. They fear that their children do not know what they are about, do not mean what they say, do not realize what a ser-

ious and far reaching thing it is to be a Christian. And I sympathize with you in these fears, my friends, and see in them oftentimes only the excess of parental anxiety; but I would also remind you that the Bible has given us a test, and only one test for conversion and we need set up no other, "By their fruits shall ye know them." This test applies to the young tree as well as the old one. The little slender apple tree that has just come into bearing condition, and whose branches hang with only a half dozen apples, can be tested just as well as the tree that is loaded to the ground with fruit. What fruit are your sons and daughters and Sunday-school scholars bearing? That is the all important question, not, how old they are?

Once more, the opposition of parents often arises from unreasonable expectations of perfection and growth in grace. Said one parent to a little girl scarcely a dozen years old, who had begun, as she thought, to serve God, "Now, my child if you are a Christian, I shall never expect you again to show the least sign of fretfulness or impatience as long as you live, and, if you do, I shall conclude that you are deceived." I should like to see some great supernatural being, and archangel for the example, take that woman by the arm and say to her, "If you are a church-member now, I shall never expect to see the least imperfection in your character, and, if I observe the least flaw in temper, in disposition, in imagination or in word, I shall conclude that you are deceived." "A child," says Dr. Bushnell, "acts out his present feelings, the feeling of the moment, without qualification or disguise. And how, many times, would all you appear if you were to do the same?" We should expect to derive only childlike faith from child Christians.

The restrained temper, the ready obedience, fairness in sport, the willingness to pray and to read the Bible, the love of children's meetings,—these should all be taken as indications of the new life growing up within the young soul. The quick parental eye, that is neither caustic nor overcritical, will very soon discern the germs of grace in the boy or girl whose heart is reached.

But, says another parent, I fear my child won't hold out. I fear the present indications of Christlikeness are the result of feeling rather than deep rooted principle. Perhaps so. There is danger of this to be sure, but we'll wait and see. Do not pronounce it mere emotion until it has proved itself to be nothing more. One rough footstep on the tender plant just sprouting from the ground may crush it to the earth. Are you willing, parent, to step rough-shod with your suspicions and your doubts, on your child's soul?

You are afraid your child will not hold out? The Spirit of God then is not equal to such a task as that of keeping your child from falling. He can sustain the bronzed and hardened sinner. He can keep the drunkard from falling. He can save the red-handed murderer's soul and he can put his strong bands of love around the life of the gay, frivolous woman of the world, and preserve what little there is left of her heart from further corruption, but to keep the fresh soul of your comparatively innocent child is too much for Him. It is a task quite beyond the Spirit's power. That is what the parent says who is unwilling that his child should start in the Christian life for fear he won't hold out.

Are you willing to say that? Oh, I do not envy the feelings of that parent who looks upon his grown up son to-day, hard, thoughtless, indifferent, unapproachable, and remembered that once when that boy was younger he wanted to be a Christian, but by home indifference or opposition was made to feel that he was too young to be saved. No, I do not envy such a parent's thoughts!

But I have said the indifference of Christians as well as their opposition was a great obstacle in the way of the conversion and Christian nurture of the young. It seems to me, my friends, that if we saw this matter in its true light, that the conversion of children is the very last thing we could be indifferent about. Something that causes the heavens to ring with joy surely ought not to cause sleepy indifference on earth.

Will you work and give, that the open door of the gospel may be set before the heathen, and then, by your indifference, shut the door which God opens before your own children? Will you rejoice over the full blown flowers whose petals are just ready to drop away, and care nothing for the buds which are yet to bloom in the garden of the Lord? Oh, I call upon you and upon my own soul,—would that my voice might reach every Christian in the land,—as we love the future of the church, as we care for something beyond the passing hour, as we desire the perpetuity and continued triumph of Christ's cause, let us never, never show any indifference to the conversion or nurture of the lambs of the flock.—*Christian Mirror*.

Ecclesiastical Councils;

THEIR ORIGIN, LEGITIMATE USE, AND AUTHORITY.

Prepared at the request of the Kings County Ministerial Conference, read at its recent meeting, April 4th, and now published in response to the vote passed at that meeting.

BY REV. GEO. ARMSTRONG, D. D.

Though Christian churches are composed of regenerate persons, or those who profess to have received spiritual life from Christ, they are yet human societies, and partake, to a considerable degree, of the attributes of ordinary humanity,—imperfect knowledge and comprehension, liability to misconception, prejudice and error; and to be warped and misled by ignorance, selfishness, and passion, or induced by influences from without to pursue or adopt a course divergent from truth and the path of righteousness,—one alike injurious to their own spiritual welfare, and inimical to the progress of Christianity in the community. It need, therefore, occasion no surprise if Christian churches, anxious to fulfil their mission, should sometimes come into a condition of doubt and perplexity as to what is right or best to be done or adopted in some special and trying emergency, and should, therefore, feel the necessity of getting help as far as possible from accessible and reliable sources,—the churches of Christ accepting with them the common faith of the gospel,—by enquiry and consultation with whom the needed knowledge and judgment, counsel and direction may, with the blessing of God, be secured.

And the propriety and duty of a Christian church in serious difficulty asking help from another church or churches, either in the way of counsel and direction, sympathy and support, arises from the relation of those churches to Christ, their unity or professed unity in doctrine and spiritual privileges, and community of interest in respect to the kingdom of God. And the fraternal fellowship and reciprocity commanded by the Lord Jesus demands that churches seek help and counsel in critical cases of difficulty, or render it when required by their fellows.

"In the multitude of counsellors is safety," is an utterance of Divine Wisdom applicable no less to churches than to purely human governments, enterprises, and communities; and it is wise and proper in churches to seek whatever good can thus be obtained. And the early history of the church shows that resort was had to this method of obtaining help and direction at an important crisis in the fortunes of Christianity. We have a record of the case in the 15th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.

A very grave difficulty had arisen in the church at Antioch in Syria, which threatened the peace and unity of that body, and also to interfere seriously with the progress of Christianity among the Gentiles. This church was in a very favorable position to decide for itself the question, for to say nothing of the independence in virtue of which it is claimed a church is entitled to decide for itself, without reference to other churches, what it will believe, promulgate, and practise, the church at Antioch had at the time two Apostles to teach and direct them. And, no doubt, these Apostles were competent to authoritatively decide the question. Paul, at least, never had to learn any truth or principle respecting the kingdom of Christ from the other Apostles; and Barnabas was on the matter in perfect accord and sympathy with the Apostle Paul. But though there was much discussion at Antioch respecting the matter, neither the church nor these Apostles thought it best to decide the question.

The matter that had caused the difficulty in the church was one of great consequence; for though it was concerning an outward ordinance, it yet seriously touched not gospel liberty only and the unity of the church of Christ, but also the progress and fortunes of Christianity itself,—nay, the great doctrine of salvation by the grace of God through faith in Christ. And thus, sooner or later, the question would very seriously affect morality and discipline in the churches, and also communion and co-operation in the service of the Lord. Much, therefore, depended on

its proper adjustment, and this required deep consideration on the part of the two leading and most influential Christian churches of that age, the one among the Jews, the other among the Gentiles. The church and the Apostles at Antioch acted most wisely in not deciding the matter for themselves, and without regard to the views, judgment, and co-operation of their brethren in Judea; but despatched a deputation of their number with Paul and Barnabas "to Jerusalem unto the Apostles and elders" to consult and determine with them as to the disposal of the serious question that had arisen in Syria, and caused such trouble to the church in Antioch. The Apostles and brethren from Antioch having arrived in Jerusalem, "were received by the church, the Apostles and elders; and the former declared to the latter all things that God had done with them" among the Gentiles. In Jerusalem itself were believers who maintained the view the promulgation of which had caused trouble and dissension in Antioch, viz.: That in order to the salvation of Gentiles who accepted Christ, it was necessary they should submit to circumcision, and obey the law of Moses.

The Apostles and elders and the whole church, (vs. 6 and 22), it would appear, came together to consider the question thus brought up. In the preliminary meeting (vs. 4) a good beginning was made towards the solution of the matter by the Apostles and brethren from Antioch "declaring all things which God had done with them;" which recital had special reference, no doubt, to "the conversion of the Gentiles," which the delegation had been announcing in their journey through Phoenicia and Samaria, and which caused great joy to all the brethren in those places.

The grave and important question is now fairly before this great assembly of Apostles, elders, and Christians. Much disputation seems to have occurred without apparently much progress having been made towards a settlement of the matter. Now Peter arises and reminds the meeting how God had formerly chosen him to preach the gospel to Gentiles, and that they believed the message, and that God had accepted them, and given them the Holy Spirit in the richest measure, thus making no discrimination in the bestowment of the choicest spiritual blessings between believers in Christ, either because of their Jewish connexion or their Gentile separation. The Apostle referred, no doubt, to his mission to preach the gospel to Cornelius and his friends in Caesarea, and the wonderful success which attended his mission,—the bestowment of the Holy Spirit upon the converts in an extraordinary manner. He intimates strongly that to put the yoke of the law upon the Gentile disciples,—a yoke which, he says, neither we nor our fathers were able to bear,—would be a tempting of God; and closes with this clear announcement, "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved even as they," which sweeps away all distinction on account of race or lineage between the two, and says plainly enough that Jews and Gentiles stand on the same level in respect to salvation, that both alike are saved alone by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Barnabas and Paul follow most appropriately, recounting to the assembly the miracles and wonders of a spiritual kind which God had wrought by their ministry among the Gentiles. The representations of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas are a strong argument in favour of the perfect equality of Jew and Gentile before God in respect to the privileges and blessings of the gospel and kingdom of God. The meeting must have been well convinced on this point, and it was therefore prepared to accept the proposal made by James, the Lord's brother, and a bishop of the church in Jerusalem, viz.: "That we trouble not those among the Gentiles who have turned to God; but that we write unto them that they abstain from pollution of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled and from blood." The Apostles and elders and the whole church concurred in the view of James, and adopted his proposal as their decision on the matter which troubled and perplexed the church at Antioch, and forwarded the same by Judas and Silas, a delegation from their

own body, who were to travel in company with Paul and Barnabas, and to assure the brethren in Syria and Cilicia, if necessary, as to the spirit and view of the church in Jerusalem respecting the important question submitted.

And when these Apostles and prophets came to Antioch, they called the brethren together and delivered the epistle which, on being read, caused great satisfaction and joy to the church. "And Judas and Silas being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words and confirmed them." Thus while the observance of circumcision and of certain institutions of the Mosaic code was not assailed, or declared to be positively wrong, yet a sure foundation was laid for the gradual but certain disuse of the ceremonies and customs of the law among the Jews; while thence and ever to the end of time the Gentiles are freed from the yoke of legal observances imposed by Judaism, and have the fullest liberty of access to all the blessings and privileges of the gospel and kingdom of Christ without being in any measure under the trammels of a law which God designed to be only temporary and for one people, and that was of necessity, therefore, to vanish away before the brightness and glory, the grace and universality of the gospel.

The decision arrived at by this great assembly in Jerusalem was accepted by the churches generally, and produced a very happy effect in allaying trouble and dissension, and in fixing the doctrinal view of the churches on an important matter, and tended much also to further the progress and triumphs of Christianity in the heathen world at a great crisis in its history.

This was the most perfect and influential Council that ever convened. The Holy Spirit was present and directed and sanctioned all. Hence "the Apostles and elders and brethren" composing it, could declare that in the decision reached they had the guidance and concurrence of the Holy Spirit. In this respect it is eminently a worthy example which Councils and churches should earnestly strive to imitate.

But it has, however, been objected that this meeting in Jerusalem was not a Council, and that we are not entitled to so regard it, since there were present delegates from one church only,—that at Antioch,—and they could not form a Council; and, moreover, even waiving this point, they did not meet apart and discuss and decide the matter among themselves, but met and acted with the church at Jerusalem. But surely it would be mere wanton technicality to attach weight to these circumstances, and thus seek to deprive the meeting of its character as a body assembled in the spirit of Christian fellowship and brotherhood, to discuss and determine in regard to an important question that had been referred to it, a question that had caused serious dissension in one church, and was of such a nature as to produce the same in other churches.

Surely the absence of the precise formalities which churches in difficulty find it convenient to employ in later times, cannot do away with the essential facts already mentioned, which made it necessary or desirable to refer the question at all, viz.: that a church in serious difficulty and division in Syria sought by delegates to obtain from a church in Judea direction and help, a right understanding and judgment on the matter in dispute; that this latter church entertained the application, and, in the presence of the delegates from Antioch, and with their concurrence and co-operation, entered into a grave and protracted consideration of the question referred; that they all came to an understanding and agreement on it, which was accepted cheerfully by the former church, and also by the churches generally. The objection that delegates from one church only were present, appears futile. For surely what a church can do by delegates or a committee, it can, of course, do itself, if in circumstances to act, and choose so to do. For delegates are appointed by the church, and are, in such cases, to act for or in behalf of the church. Surely the presence of an entire church, with resident Apostles, prophets, and elders, was at least equal in value to any number of delegates appointed in the most approved way from any number of

churches that could be named in that, or any other age.

In substance and reality that great meeting in Jerusalem had all the essential characteristics of an Ecclesiastical Council in the best and holiest sense, and served all the best uses of such Council. Help, counsel, proper understanding, and direction were needed and sought on the one side, and, on the other, their necessity was recognized, and the desired assistance and guidance given. These are all a church can ask or receive from any or all its fellows; and it makes no essential difference whether it be done directly in a meeting of the church, with delegates present from another church, or in a meeting of delegates appointed by two or more churches to consult and determine on the matter referred to them. In either case the church is considered as acting directly or indirectly in the matter. Instead of appointing delegates to confer with those from Antioch to discuss and decide on the question in dispute, the church at Jerusalem admitted the delegates from Antioch to attend the meetings, and participate in the business, so that two churches in the most favourable position to deal with the question, were present and acting, the one in its entire membership and ministry, and the other by representation through its delegates and ministry.

It may be in place here to state what matters may, in the writer's judgment, be properly and wisely referred to a Council for advice and decision.

1. Serious differences touching the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, especially such differences as would endanger unity and co-operation in Christian work among the members, or isolate a church from other churches holding or professing to hold the truth as it is in Jesus, and to walk in the same; or, generally, any principle, position, or course adopted, maintained, and persisted in by members of a church, in sharp and decided antagonism to the truth and grace of the gospel in essential or capital matters, should be so referred, if the church cannot otherwise convince or reclaim such members, and bring them to submit to the teachings of the gospel, or act in harmony with the church.

2. Closely allied to this are serious errors relating to and misapplications of Christian ordinances. The case referred to the assembly at Jerusalem was that of a Divine ordinance which had been so interpreted, placed, and used, though honestly and conscientiously, as to militate directly against the freedom and fulness of Divine grace to justify and save the sinner that believes in Jesus. False and unscriptural views of Christian ordinances generally operate against Christianity itself and the salvation of men. A church should use all proper efforts to keep the ordinances of Christ pure, and in their proper relation, and to the end for which He instituted them.

3. Serious difficulties between the pastor and the church, which they have sought but failed to settle among themselves.

4. Grave business or other differences between two or more members, which the church cannot settle, or, from its gravity, is unwilling to undertake.

5. Determined and persistent opposition by one or more members to the action of a church in a case of discipline, or other matter, which such member or members may conscientiously regard as wrong and unjustifiable, and therefore a real grievance and hindrance to fellowship and co-operation on their part. A church should afford to aggrieved members, who request or require it, all reasonable facility and opportunity to get such difficulties properly and satisfactorily adjusted, and thus secure, as far as possible, harmony, good will, and co-operation among its members.

6. As the setting apart of men to preach the gospel, teach and lead the church, and administer the ordinances of Christ, is intimately connected with the welfare and progress of the churches, and the extension of God's kingdom in the world, it is generally very desirable, if not necessary, that other churches should be called upon to consult, determine, and act in reference to so important a matter. The Apostle Paul speaks of "the laying on," in such cases, "of the hands of the presbytery,"—Christian eldership or ministry. But