

Christian Messenger.

A REPOSITORY OF RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE.

"Not slothful in business: fervent in spirit."

NEW SERIES.
VOL. VIII. No. 42.

HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 21, 1863.

WHOLE SERIES.
Vol. XXVII. No. 42.

Poetry.

For the Christian Messenger.

Teach me thy way, O Lord.

PSALM LXXXVI. 11.

Lord, at thy throne, I offer my prayer,
Confessing my needs, supply them all there;
My heart, and the world, would lead me astray;
Foolishly wayward, "Teach me thy way."

Even to me, let thy mercy reach;
O Lord, even me, I pray thee to teach;
My heart, and the world, would lead me astray;
Lord, I beseech thee, "Teach me thy way."

Thy way which leads, from darkness to light;
Thy way, which is pure, and holy, and right;
Thy way, which shall bring to heaven's bright
day;

The way of all truth, "Teach me thy way."

The way, which The Word marked as the path,
The way of escape, from well-deserved wrath;
The way which is lit by the Spirit's ray,
Proceeding from thee; "Teach me thy way."

H. J. G.

Cape Canso, 6th Sept. 1862.

Religious.

Our week-evening services.

The following article from the *London Freeman*, contains some very important suggestions. It is perhaps intended to apply to Churches in large cities more than in scattered localities, but the principles it rests upon, and the spirit it inculcates may be no less suitable to every place. The desire to accomplish something by all the servants of Christ, and in all their services is the true spirit of Christian consecration.

There is a time in the history of every institution when it has to be reviewed. Except—as in the case of the Sacraments, for instance, it has been authoritatively commanded by God, the hour of its birth is rarely that also of final thought. Sometimes years only, sometimes ages even must elapse, before the last judgment concerning it can be pronounced. Needed only for a time perhaps, it slowly waxes old, and unexpectedly is ready to vanish away. Or it is of permanent utility, change of manners calls for change of form; or possibly abuses have grown round it as ivy around a fortress which, because they are falsely identified with the institution itself, must be cut down with no sparing hand. In any case to be able when the fullness of time has come to take a calm survey of the whole, and then, undaunted by prejudice and the clamour of vested interest, resolutely to remove what is needless, and to prune off the false, is one of the highest exercises alike of philosophy and faith. If we invite our hearers to go with us as we attempt something of this kind, it is because we deem it necessary, and can confide in their charitableness.

Ecclesiastical history is silent as to the time when religious week-evening services were first stately held. The tenaciousness with which the Church has clung to them is their truest sanction. For many ages it has been her invariable practice to establish them wherever she has built her temples, and the rare uniformity with which this has been done among nations who have had little in common but their sin and their faith, stamps them with an authority which is the authority of heaven. The fires of persecution even have not destroyed them. In the upper room, or in sequestered glen, multitudes have met thus to hallow the working days of the week. The most prophetic sagacity does not seem to anticipate a time when they will come to be abandoned. Granting, then, that they are indispensable now, and that besides they are of permanent design, the question arises, Do they attain their end, or can they be improved? No trustworthy reply can be given without an impartial study of their nature, and this is by no means easy. To pierce the husk of forms to which we have been accustomed from infancy, and with clear, open eye to view the living truths they enclose, requires

an insight and freedom from prepossession to which few can lay claim. Yet on these depends the title to be either reformer or advocate.

There is a very general impression that these services are largely a failure. We doubt if it be so well founded as is supposed. It must be admitted that in order to complete success they require more careful cultivation than they commonly receive; but we demur to the notion that they are less successful than they were. Many a minister is unnecessarily pained at the scanty numbers which attend them, merely because he does not duly consider the circumstances of his people; and gratuitously torments himself when he really ought to be filled with thankfulness and hope. Now, of all tests that can be devised that of mere numbers is at once the most comforting and unsound. Arithmetical processes are radically distinct from spiritual results; and mere bulk captivates the eye by imposing on the judgment. It is frequently said that these services are the pulse, so to speak, of a church. And in so far as they reveal its spirit of devotion, and its thirst for the Word, they are. The health of a religious community may fairly be determined by the extent to which it has prayer for its breath, and for its appetite a craving for truth. But of itself, the presence or absence of human bodies says very little, if anything, about these. The chapel may be crowded, the petitioners may be many and fluent, and yet, after all, there may be, and often is, less real piety than where the gathering is small, and but two or three invite the presence of Christ. We do not wish to be invidious; but for the sake of making this plain we take a practical illustration, and we say that it may fairly be questioned if the unprecedented numbers which throng the Surrey Tabernacle at the week-night lecture of themselves indicate the existence of a piety in any way superior to that of neighbouring churches, whose similar gatherings are comparatively fractional. Taste has a great deal to do with the size of congregations, and scores are attracted to a popular preacher by no higher influence than that which takes others to hear a popular lecturer. To look with unmixed satisfaction on a well filled room or chapel because it is well filled, may indicate, indeed, a very natural sympathy with numbers; but, as well, a very shallow idea of religion if it be therefore inferred that more good is necessarily achieved than would be if one-half of the benches were empty. The true criterion differs immensely from this, and our firm conviction, is that before, from poverty of numbers, feebleness of religious life is inferred, the temporal circumstances of a congregation should be carefully examined. Nor is a comparison between attendance on the Lord's-day and that in the week by any means an infallible sign. The leisure of the former is often followed by something very like slavery throughout every day of the latter. Many indeed might, and ought, to attend who do not; but who can compute the number of those who would but cannot—those persons of every age and of either sex who yearn to be at a prayer-meeting but are compulsorily detained? And yet the piety of a church is sometimes largely veiled in such. They are the feeble members who yet are the more necessary. Something, too, must be allowed in these days of high pressure for relaxation. It is monstrous to expect that the one evening on which alone and then, probably, but for an hour, the claims of excessive labour are relaxed, should always, or often even, be passed in a chapel. Our Lord, who walked with His disciples through fields of corn upon the Sabbath-day when that day was kept with a strictness comparable in modern times only to that which obtains north of the Tweed, would, in their case, sanction obedience to the natural law He Himself has imposed, and more than permit recreation and pure air. Let, then, the just deductions be made which the peculiarities of the times suggest, and we are satisfied that in some respects a more hopeful view will be taken of the state of the churches. What is really wanted here in order to improvement is that in an age in which capital is a monopoly, in which servants are many and masters are few, there should be freedom for labour. We regret to have to say that in their haste to grow rich Christian employers are amongst the worst offenders;—

they are often as arbitrary in their rule as are unreligious masters. They may give more domestic advantages but not always more liberty; keeping their bondsmen and women so closely at work all day, and every day, that the attendance of these at our services is simply impossible. Humanity, as well as religion, calls loudly for reformation here; a little care in arrangement would ensure that some, at least, should be able to indulge their better aspirations. We know a deacon—we devoutly hope his case is unique—conspicuous amongst his brethren for devotion to "the cause," his praise in all the churches, who actually performs his much-lauded labours at the lamentable expense of imposing a stricter confinement and increased toil on his employees!

The efficiency of these services will, as we have intimated, greatly depend on the care that is bestowed on them. They are often wanting in variety and preparation. The sermon is the product of the moment, and there is a singular repetition and tediousness in the prayers. Week after week, the same persons present substantially the same petitions, with the same quotations or misquotations from Scripture, and of the same length almost to a minute. The wonder is that so marked a want of freshness and spontaneity does not diminish the attendance until none but the minister and the regular staff of supplicants is left. These, however, are matters of detail into which we do not now care fully to enter; we are much more anxious to suggest one or two changes in the hope that they will be found to be improvements. Broadly, then, we believe the time has come when these services must be both revised and consolidated, at once better arranged and fewer in number. Of course no inflexible plan can be devised. It is the very essence of an institution that, however permanent in design, it should be elastic and untable, adapting itself with wise accommodation to local requirements. In rural districts, for instance, where villages cluster round a small town, the preacher as a rule best discharges his duty by becoming an evangelist. His work being chiefly of a missionary character, he properly spends in preaching and visitation a great part of the time his brethren as properly pass in the study. The "sphere of labour" thus decides its own claims, and consequently no standard of duty, no plan of action, can be formed, which could be of universal application. We confess, however, to a wish that the various services could be so readjusted that their exact place might be assigned them in the degrees of their relative importance. If this were done Bible classes and catechetical instruction would often rank higher than preaching. Sermons are of secondary value to the young. The staple of our churches in the future, they require to be intelligently grounded in Scripture, and to have lessons of unworldliness and charity pressed home on them with a directness which can only be secured by meeting them apart from the congregation and in the company of each other. Paul did something of the kind when he went from house to house in Ephesus, isolating families and addressing them alone. Bible-classes would yield a noble opportunity for the pointed and univocal exposure of youthful vices and temptations; for true acquaintance with individual character and lot; and as well for the awakening of that personal affection between preacher and hearer which, more almost than anything beside, gives force to pulpit appeal. It is not enough that the truth be spoken in love: the electric circle is complete when love takes what love is ready to give. It is worth a thought too, whether an alteration in the time of these services is not sometimes desirable. Why should they always be held in the evening? In many places more business is done between five o'clock and eight than at any other part of the day, and both morning and evening are comparatively unemployed. Parents, again, conscious that the formation of character in their children depends to no slight extent on the influence of association and example, have a wellfounded objection against forsaking them once or twice every week during the only hours at their disposal. We do not exaggerate when we say there are a multitude of instances in which were they to do as they would be religious robbers of their offspring; and act in direct contraven-

tion of that patriarchal system on whose rigid maintenance depends the training of a family in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Preaching is to supplement, not to supersede, parental care; and we confess to a strong sympathy with all who conscientiously decline to quit their homes at the only time they can devote to them. In saying this we do but emphasize the remark that the transference of these services, wherever it is practicable, is much to be desired.

We shall have to tax the charity and candour of our readers still more, as we add that these services are likely to benefit by consolidation. If they could occasionally be condensed—we do not say abandoned—their union would prove to be their strength. The chief end of a minister is not to multiply sermons, or of a congregation to hear them. We are speaking of courses on a broad average, not of cases which are made special by peculiarity of gift; but we are confident the general conscience will respond to the remark that whenever these services can be legitimately brought into the compass of one, or, at the most, of two nights, the alteration ought to be a great gain all round. And in many ways. The pastor's home would suffer less from an intolerable neglect; more time for culture and new kinds of usefulness would be at his command; the fallacy that the presence of Christian people or the means of grace is the all of Christianity, would be exploded; but above all would the one gies of our most devoted laymen be set free for direct evangelistic work. As it is, our churches, are much less spiritual organizations for the amelioration of suffering, and for conveying the Gospel to the world, than they are combinations for preaching and prayer; and that is commonly thought to be the most flourishing community which, on the greatest number of nights, can command the most crowded house. The results of this vicious way of thinking are most disastrous. But a small percentage of our members unite in the labours steadfast and immovable; the majority, fatally content with going to chapel, and unaffected by the sin and misery without, bear neither gifts or Gospel to the poor. Our best men, again, raised to the deacon's office, are hedged in by its temporal duties as by *cheveux de frise*. Custom expects them to be at their post as often as the doors are open, and the sum of their spiritual work includes little more than an occasional visit to the sick, conversing with candidates, taking money, and letting pews. All this is necessary enough, no doubt, but where it is all it is a wholly inadequate return for the expenditure of so much valuable time; and to the extent to which the present method is chargeable with making it so that method undoubtedly ought to be reformed. First of all to impress the Church with a sense of its duty in relation to the world, and then to free it from mistaken demands which engender inaction and quiescence, in order that the discharge of its duty may be possible; is the plain dictate alike of reason and piety. If this could be accomplished: if the Church were saturated with the conviction that every member of it holds the Gospel in trust to dispense it in some of its many forms to others, and its energies, withdrawn from occupations in which they are comparatively wasted and absorbed, were concentrated on the doing of the work its Lord died to initiate, then the time for the ingathering of the harvest would have come. Potentially, at all events, the fields are always ripe unto it: the thrusting forth of more labourers is the grand desideratum; and we have indicated one way in which it may be supplied. We are sorrowfully conscious that the suggestions we have felt it our duty to make will probably excite some opposition. In operation they have done so already, but we cannot say it has always been very intelligent. But lately a certain minister, whose thoughts have run in the same channel with our own, abolished one service and enlarged the other, grafting the prayer-meeting on the stock of the lecture. He was sharply censured in consequence by a lady—a member of his church. "Well," he said, "but for years you have never once attended on 'the Monday.'" "Yes, that is quite true," was the reply, "but then it was so nice to feel you were being prayed for." "I have lost that consolation now." Not, indeed, that we mean to insinuate *ex uno disce omnes*.