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Circular Letter.

THE RECEPTION OF CONVERTS TO CHURCH FELLOWSHIP.

THE CIRCULAR LETTER FROM THE NOVA SCOTIA CENTRAL BAPTIST ASSOCIATION TO THE CHURCHES OF WHICH IT IS COMPOSED, 1872.

(Inserted by Special Request of the Association.)

Beloved Brethren,—

The object aimed at in this letter is to impress upon the churches the necessity of employing greater caution in admitting members to church fellowship, and greater care in training them in the ways of godliness.

An important principle, strenuously maintained, at least in theory, by the Baptist Denomination, forms the basis or groundwork of this epistle. It is this, A Christian church is a community of believers, an organized society of persons who have been born by the Spirit of God. None who are not regenerate have any right to seek or find admission into a Christian church. No people contend for this principle as Baptists do. It is regarded as a tower of strength, because grounded on divine authority. Hence the necessity that our practice should, so far as it is possible, illustrate and dignify the principle. It is, by no means, supposed that any of the churches of this Association have given up this fundamental doctrine, or have intentionally relaxed in its practical application.

This truth has doubtless been proclaimed with commendable fidelity from all Baptist pulpits, but it is to be feared that in many instances it has been interpreted and understood in the light of existing practices, rather than in the light of the Divine Word.

There are many inducements or temptations to a hasty, and sometimes, injudicious admission of members to the church.

The pastor's success in the ministry is often estimated by the number he may be instrumental in introducing into the church. The history of individual churches may indeed clearly prove that the greatest victories over the world and sin are not always achieved at the time when the largest additions are being made, nevertheless it is difficult for one to divest himself of the feeling that both, in his own community and elsewhere, his reputation and influence in the work will rise or fall with the numerical increase or decrease of his own church.

Denominational zeal among the members may operate in the same way, and with similar results. A feeling of satisfaction is always experienced when statistics show that the denomination to which one belongs, and to which he devotes his energies, is in the ascendancy or on the increase. So far as this is delight in the victory of truth over error, it is certainly commendable. But it may spring from a mere spirit of rivalry, ambition for the triumph of the party. Efforts to secure persons of doubtful piety lest they should be induced to unite with some other denomination are not likely to produce permanent good. To lower the standard of admission for the sake of numbers is a gain, which will turn out in the end, to be a loss, a temporary triumph, which will prove to be a defeat. 'Tis the fatal mistake, so often made, when quality is sacrificed for the sake of quantity.

Financial considerations may sometimes operate in the same direction, especially when churches are small, or some of the members become indifferent or disaffected; the responsibilities of supporting the cause frequently fall heavily on certain prominent members, and it is not, by any means, a matter of surprise that the burden is felt to be onerous, and that any hope of assistance should be welcomed. Additions to the membership are expected ultimately to add to the financial resources, and thus increase the means of usefulness in all directions. Hence a tendency in some cases, perhaps to increase the numbers as rapidly as possible. But the greatest danger of injudicious haste in this matter arises from a very different source. Nothing is more natural or common than for persons, very readily to believe that to be true, which they greatly desire to be so. Small arguments convince when "the wish is father to the thought." What do christian people so much desire as the conversion of the ungodly? And when ungodly men declare themselves regenerate, what is more natural than to believe it to be true? To question their motive, to seem to doubt or distrust the profession appears unkind, uncharitable, if not entirely unchristian. The strong desire that the profession may prove to be genuine, united with a broad christian charity that hopeth and believeth all things, may overpower the judgment and close the eyes and ears against great defects in the evidence, so that the church may, with open arms, receive to her bosom persons, of whom the outside world, looking from a different standpoint, has formed a very unfavorable opinion. It might, however, be thought quite unnecessary to guard the church against possibilities and dangers not likely to occur, since unconverted persons will not be inclined to wish or seek the fellowship of a christian church. While this, in ordinary cases, is readily conceded; there are many exceptional cases. In seasons of special religious excitement a whole community may become so aroused that the usual precautions are, for the time, forgotten. The young and inexperienced are borne along with the strong current of popular feeling, and may mistake mere sympathy with the common enthusiasm of the occasion for genuine conversion, and who can be ignorant of the fact that there is in every community a host to be found, who are always ready to fall in with, and aid whatever may be for the time the triumphant party; either to shout, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord," or "Crucify him." They think they are sincere, but are, in fact, only following the impulse of the hour.

Many other inducements to hasty admission might be referred to, but it will be in point here, for a moment, to enquire whether facts will warrant the conclusion that the danger has, in reality, been to any considerable extent realized? Do the lives of all our church members agree with the standard of a christian's life marked out in our guide book? The answer will readily occur. This is scarcely to be expected, when it is remembered, that there was a Judas even among our Lord's disciples. But where twelve have been admitted to church fellowship, will the history of our churches in these pro-

vinces warrant the expectation that in a majority of instances eleven of the twelve will prove to be genuine disciples of Christ? Why is it that the proportion of active, zealous members is so small, compared with the names on the church lists? In a church of 200 members how few will be found ready to co-operate with the pastor in every good word and work? How few are prepared to lead the devotions in social exercises? In the absence of a pastor, how few are fitted to visit the house of mourning and utter words of soothing and comfort to the afflicted. But, not to mention mere lack of religious fervor and zeal, is there not great reason to fear that many are to be found in all our churches who do not even pretend to live what can, from a scripture standard, be called a christian life? Honest, honorable, truthful, moral, they may be, but prayer in public, in the family, and in private has been long abandoned. The word of God is an uninteresting book to them. Growth in grace, advance in holiness, increase in the knowledge and love of God are neither, by them, desired nor sought for. The world fills all their thoughts, engrosses all their attention, and fully taxes every power of both body and mind. They are religious only in this sense, they became members, in the usual way, of a christian church, and no formal action of the church has erased their name. That a too hurried admission into church fellowship is the sole cause of this state of things, no one probably would maintain; but that it has greatly aided in bringing about such an undesirable condition can hardly be denied, while the neglect of careful training may perform no small part of the same result. Again some good may be secured by noticing occasionally even an enemy's estimation; and, in this connection we will venture to state what the foes of religion sometimes affirm. They do affirm that a profession of religion and admission into a church, and long continuance in this position, are no guarantee of good moral conduct,—that truthfulness and common honesty in the practical business of life, are as frequently found in the world as in the church,—that even those who pray and commune together on the Lord's day feel the necessity of strict vigilance of each other in the work of the week,—that gross immorality and licentiousness are frequently indulged in by those who profess great zeal for truth and righteousness. These affirmations are often mere slanders or suspicions without foundation or reason; but are not instances, which furnish our enemies with weapons to assault us, too frequently occurring? While absolute purity, in church membership, is not in this sinful state to be hoped for, may it not be safely affirmed that the proportion of unreliable or doubtful members is much too large? To be a member of a christian church should be a guarantee of truth, honesty and honor. The simple word of such a one should be equal to another's oath; nay to his own declaration in a court of law,—his verbal promise equal to his signature on a legal document. A certificate of church membership should be all the reference he would require as to general deportment and faithful performance of any duty assigned him. There may be error, or difference of opinion, as to how far this could be brought about by the adoption of more caution and delay in admitting members to church fellowship, but that there might be some approximation towards it by this means can scarcely be questioned.

Let us next notice some of the evil consequences resulting when unconverted persons are admitted into church fellowship.

1. To the member received. The nature of the injury inflicted may vary greatly, according to the disposition or temperament of the individual. When to one of a proud spirit, who is naturally unwilling to confess a mistake, even in unimportant matters, the unpleasant truth is brought home, that without religion he professed religion, that without repentance he declared himself penitent, he will be strongly tempted to bury the discovery as a secret in his own breast, not to be disclosed, perhaps, even to his nearest friends. Then, for the sake of appearances, the form of religion must be maintained, but, alas, the power and pleasure are wanting. There is plenty of religious duty and drudgery, but no holy delight, no joy in the Lord. He is regarded as a christian, and spoken to as such, he listens and replies as though he were, or believed himself to be a child of God. This religious deception, settles down to a habit of life, and the pride of heart which made it necessary, strengthens by exercise, and may give a kind of support to the sinking spirits, even on the verge of the grave.

2. Again, let us suppose an unconverted person of a very different stamp, to become a member of a christian church. The world is full of individuals who have but little power of independent thought. To think is not their avocation, to reflect not their habit. They are the actors on life's stage, they do what others propose, they execute what others design. Their nature is in every thing to put their entire trust in their leaders, properly called "pinning one's faith to another's sleeve." Such an one asks admission to a christian church. His christian experience, so called, is related, is satisfactory and he is received. Now, is there not great danger that persons of this class may sometimes, perhaps, unconsciously take the action of the church in their reception, as confirmatory evidence of their conversion. Perhaps, with great hesitation and doubt they presented themselves, but the church without further enquiry received them. It is very natural for people to feel complacent, to be entirely satisfied with themselves, if only they can get the approbation of others. The conclusion is easily reached. The church has heard my relation, it appears fully satisfied, why should I entertain doubts or seek for more, when those better able to judge of these matters, believe me to be worthy of membership? and thus they settle down upon mere membership, resting upon the empty, and to them profitless, formalities of church ordinances. No warnings to sinners terrify them, no gospel invitations are heeded, because they have come, by degrees, to believe themselves secure. They do not examine their own hearts according to the word of God. They cannot detect the very great contrast between their state and that of one who is living by faith on the Son of God—they are simply deluded, by the fact that they are church members, into the groundless belief that they are on the way to heaven. They may plead, "we have eaten and drank in thy presence," and the reply may be, "I know you not, whom ye are; depart from me all ye workers of iniquity."

Again there are the shrewd common sense practical men of the world, who, upon the whole, love honor and honesty, and detest sham and mere pretence in every thing. Suppose one of this class

has been induced, in early life, or under some special excitement in later years, without conversion, to become a member of a christian church. In the course of time he becomes convinced that he has not in his heart what the book and the preacher describe as genuine religion,—that he has really professed what he never experienced. He begins to enquire whether his case is peculiar, or whether many others may not be in the same condition.

A little observation will probably soon conduct him to the conclusion that his is by no means an isolated case, but that too many are standing upon a similar sandy foundation. What is his next step? Doubt whether any others may be in a better position: then distrust of all religious profession and religious men: then confirmed infidelity. If he is of a worldly avaricious disposition he soon regards religion as an agency to work upon the credulity of the ignorant in order to draw money from the people to support the priesthood. If he is immersed in politics he may regard it as an engine with which to work out deep political plots and secure rich offices for designing men. Thus each viewing the matter from his own personal standpoint will interpret all religious movements in the light of his own whims, and colour them to suit his own fancy. No inducements can lead such to reconsider the matter. They have already, in their own estimation, made trial of religion and it has failed them. It has not proved to them what it was represented to be. It did not make them unselfish, nor harmless as doves, nor holy, nor happy, and they are too honest to hold on to the mere pretence, to the shadow, while the substance is wanting. How far may the church, which encouraged and received into its communion these unregenerate members, be held responsible for the fearful consequences? And these consequences are not confined to the persons referred to. The influence spreads and many listen only too eagerly to whatever may be advanced derogatory to the cause of truth and righteousness. Doubt, unbelief, religious indifference are fearfully contagious. Once admit into church fellowship a strong minority, even of unconverted members, and a blight, a plague, a pestilence, has been let loose upon that religious community; the fearful effects may not be visible at once, but the heaven will work. The young, the weak, the unwary, will catch the spirit and imitate the example,—the religious tone is let down to a lower, and still lower, key, till the church becomes a mere name, a by-word, like Samson when his locks were shorn, something to be mocked at and derided, and the scoffer delights to inscribe on the door posts of the sanctuary "mene mene tekel upharsin."

This letting down of religion, in the world's estimation, is one of the fearful consequences of introducing unfit, that is unconverted, persons into the church, and the inconsistencies of professed christians is the strongest argument infidelity can employ against the doctrines of the Bible. To the same extent that these inconsistencies are frequent and open to the world, is the church stripped of its power and robbed of its glory. But a worse consequence, if that is possible, remains to be touched upon. Faith in God, and some faith in each other, are both essential in order to secure harmonious action, and the accomplishment of the glorious designs of the incarnation and death of the Son of God. Christian men honest, honorable and true, may lose confidence in each other, and the very foundations appear to be sliding away. You may just as well let the wolves loose among the sheep, as to allow distrust, want of confidence to run rampant in a religious community, just as well cut away the roots from the tree as take away the trust which the christian reposes in his brother.

Now one source of a want of reliance of man upon man in the religious world is this, Too many profess the truth who do not live the truth. Giddiness, levity and indifference are manifested by some; dishonesty and fraud practiced by others; gross immorality is charged upon and proved against those who have long been regarded as pillars in the faith; truth and righteousness are sacrificed, and the result of the whole is members of the same body, or even church, lose their faith, not in God, but their trust in each other, lose heart and interest in the cause for which under other circumstances they would have given their lives. Brethren, is the description here given borne out by any facts within your own knowledge? Have you ever had occasion to feel that the ground beneath your feet was insecure, that you scarcely knew where, on what, or in whom, you could place reliance? Then, let us labor more faithfully, and in unison, beseech the throne of God's rich grace, that men everywhere, may be regenerated, and that all our churches may be filled with those who, by humbly walking with God shall be enabled to give undoubted testimony, that they have passed from death unto life. Then indeed shall Solomon's beautiful prophetic vision be realized, for the church shall have become "fair as the moon, clear as the sun and terrible as any army with banners."

ON SABBATH OBSERVANCE.

The following is the Report of the Committee of the Central Association on this subject:

The Great God has ordained that man should work six days, and then rest one day. That is his will. It was declared immediately after the finishing stroke was put to creation. God ceased to create, and then he rested. Man, too, must have his resting day, and it is no arbitrary appointment. It is a merciful and wise dispensation, and obedient compliance with it promotes health and lengthens life. Men cannot live long who are cheated of the resting-day. All history confirms this statement.

The Lord's day is the worship day as well as the rest-day. We obey the original command by cessation from work, and we honour the Lord Jesus by employing the day of rest in his service. Happy are they who are "in the spirit on the Lord's day!"

All the day belongs to the Lord. The Papist may go to mass in the morning and to the theatre at night. The mere professor may spend his hour or two in the place of worship, and give the remainder of the day to feasting or pleasure-taking, or to talk about politics or pelf,—but the true christian will devote the whole day to the Lord, in getting good or in doing good. It is emphatically "THE LORD'S DAY," and the servant of the Saviour will occupy the hours as he would do if he saw the Lord overlooking him. And He is overlooking us.