

Sunday Reading.

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CIRCULAR LETTER.

The Cause and Cure of Religious Declension.

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

Dear Brethren,—

It is cause of deep regret that in many of the letters from the churches complaint is made of coldness in spiritual life, and of not much having been accomplished in church work. Men are actively endeavouring to grasp gain, or pursuing popularity, but the things of God are left to suffer. We lament the want of spiritual activity and loss of Christian manhood in those who promised to be useful in the churches. On account of unfaithfulness and disloyalty to the cause of Christ there is spiritual dullness in the work of God. While there are many things in this world of sin to affect the spiritual life of the soul, we believe that upon a little reflection it will be seen that a want of proper regard for the Holy Scriptures, and prayer, lie at the beginning of every believer's departure from God.

I. One of the causes of religious declension is a want of proper regard to the Word of God. It has pleased God to magnify His word more than His name, and only when Christians love the truth are they found walking in the truth. In the Bible, God is speaking to the human soul, and he that hath ears to hear let him hear.

If transgressors are exposed to the eternal displeasure of God; if a door of hope is opened to them; if it is at no less expense than the death of God's dear Son in man's nature; if through the atoning death of Christ God can be just, and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus, if this is the only possible way to escape the punishment of sin, and through this way we are acceptable, and become well pleasing to God, it is of vast importance to every man.

Truth is important in its relation to philosophy, history and politics, or any other branch of science, because it affects the present and future condition of mankind. But what is truth in this direction, compared with the truth that involves the eternal destiny of the human soul. To answer the question, "What must I do to be saved?" is infinitely more important than the latest work on evolution or materialism. But man, who believes in the Divine authority and inspiration of the Sacred Scriptures, may not prosper in spiritual life:

(a.) By neglecting to read and meditate upon revealed truth. The Sacred Scriptures are a rich mine, abounding in diamond treasures, but it is a mine that must be worked. If men read the Word of God to advantage, it must be in meditation and prayer. "My son," says the wise man, "if thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thy heart to understanding, yes, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding, if thou seekest as for silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures, then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God."

The truths of salvation are in God's Book, and by study and meditation we can receive them into our minds. If close application is required, close application and sincere thoughtfulness can be given. Among insects that subsist on the sap of flowers, there are two very different classes. One is remarkable for its breadth of wing and beautiful plumage, and as it circles from flower to flower gracefully, you admire it; but in the same field is another worker, whose brown vest, and straightforward, business-like habits may not be as pleasing to the eye. His graceful neighbor lights here and there, feeding upon sap nearest the surface, but the dingy plodder makes it a point to light upon every flower, and whosoever he finds more or less of honey. If the flower-cup is deep, he goes to the bottom. If the dragon's mouth is closed, he forces its lids asunder; if the passage is concealed, he explores until he discovers, and entering finds his way to the sweetness. His rival with larger wing and a covering that sparkles like gem dust in the sun, has not patience for such work. But what is the end? The one will die next October with the flower it feeds on, but the other will be found in the hive with the cells packed full of rich food that will prepare him for another summer's work. A blessing is pronounced upon the man who meditates upon the Law of the Lord: "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither, and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper." "O how I love thy law; it is my meditation all the day. Thou, through thy commandments, hast made me wiser than mine enemies, for they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for thy testimonies are my meditation."

(b.) By not reading the Scriptures for the purpose and end for which they were given. We are told that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. To study the Scriptures for doctrine is to have a creed resting upon the authority of God's Word. To study the Scriptures for reproof, is to have sin rebuked in the soul. To study the Scriptures for correction, is to expel all the theories and practices of men; and to study the Scriptures for instruction in righteousness, is to learn more about God, to be built up in their most holy faith, and to walk in the Divine ordinances. But if men form false opinions of God and Christian life, and admit no truth, either doctrinal or practical, except it will associate with some former teaching, they dishonor God, and cannot read His revealed will for correction, or for instruction in righteousness. It is not enough that we call no man master. We must have one Master, even Christ. Said a certain ship captain: "I have unrolled the chart of the British North American coast many times. I have followed along down with my finger, and observed the dangerous places and the harbors. I have noticed a light-house here and another there and have studied the sailing path of ships. But, supposing I had been in an equinoctial gale, not far from the dangerous coast, and had not seen the sun for many days, and were trying to enter some harbor, then I would study the chart with a deeper interest. Yes, with the men to hold it, on account of the rolling and struggling of the ship."

I would look earnestly for signs, and endeavour to find out all things possible. So men must study the Bible in the light of eternal realities. "He that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man who built his house upon a rock." Here is a head-land: "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Here is the light-house: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." And there is the channel of duty: "If any man will come after Me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." It is the Book of Life, so take heed how you read it. In reading it see you have the truth and not the semblance. See you are stirred by the Divine Spirit and not by emotion. It can teach you about God and heaven, and may God lead you from cunning and subtle interpretations of truth to the living fountain and solid substance. May men everywhere search the Scriptures and learn what the Spirit's voice is to individuals and to the churches; and may men bring out of the great treasury that which God has put in, nothing less and nothing more."

(c.) By forming low opinions of the value of the truths taught in the Scriptures. It appears to be the spirit and opinion of the present

age that no matter how polluted the fountain is, if the streams are only pure, but the question is, Can the streams be pure when the fountain is corrupt? Our Saviour said: "A corrupt tree cannot bear good fruit." Actions apparently good and beneficial to society may flow from a heart at war with the doctrines and teachings of God's Word. "Yet whatsoever is not of faith is sin, and without faith it is impossible to please God." Some people have a strong prejudice against what is called doctrinal religion, and go hand and heart for what they call non-denominational truths. We have yet to find a man who is a true, earnest Christian and has no doctrine, and when he does appear he will be like a man without any spinal column, a ship without any keel or keelson, a house without foundation. Does not all true religion come from God? Is it not placed in the soul by the working of the Divine Spirit. You are first taught the doctrine of sin, spiritual life through Christ, salvation by grace, sanctification by the truth, resurrection from the dead and glorification in heaven. God has bound those great doctrines together, and they are all necessarily connected. Doctrinal, experimental and practical religion must stand or fall together. He that said, "Ye must be born again," said, "By their fruits ye shall know them." The influence of the truth upon the heart is the origin of the Christian life, and that life must flow out in the keeping of the Divine commands. "When you come to the Scriptures do not come with a mind warped by party feeling, for you are not permitted to hold the scale when judgment is placed in the balance. The Apostle John speaks of Gaius being in a state of soul prosperity, because he had the truth dwelling in him. He was walking in the truth; he was beloved for the truth's sake, and was a fellow-helper in the truth. May the time speedily come when every church that has sent lamentations in their letters to the Association may have such men living in the community and standing in God's house."

Closely allied to a study of the Sacred Scriptures is prayer, and a few remarks upon prayer shall form the second part of this letter.

II. The second cause of religious declension is the way many regard daily prayer to God. Prayer is the desire of the heart ascending to God in petition and supplication; the soul's moving in the presence of God in holding communion. In answer to prayer we receive out of His fulness grace for grace, but how is it so many of our prayers are unanswered? He tells us the reason: "Ye ask and ye receive not, because ye ask amiss." "If I regard iniquity in my heart," said the Psalmist, "the Lord will not hear me."

(a.) When we pray, do we really desire the things we ask? It is an awful thing to come intentionally into the presence of the great Heart-Searcher, and not feel the need of the things we ask. Yet an influence of this solemn working may run through our prayers. It is dangerous to ask God to keep us from besetting sins and still practise them. The godly man will seek the Lord and his strength: seek his face evermore. "I love the Lord," said David, "because He hath heard my voice, and my supplications, because He hath inclined His ear unto me, therefore will I call upon Him as long as I live." "Pray without ceasing," said the apostle; not that the Christian can always be engaged in the positive act of prayer, but he should have the nature of prayer in him. The bird is not constantly on the wing, but is ready to fly at an instant. So the Christian should live in such close communion with God that he can reach the Divine Power in the hour of danger and in the time of need.

(b.) When we pray do we confess our sins, and desire to forsake them. Confession of sin must come into every acceptable prayer: "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

(c.) Are we desirous at the throne of grace? We ask God for such things that we need, do we wait for the answer. "We feel the power of sin in the soul, and a spiritual stupor settling down upon us. Do we take it to God, and ask him to revive us again, that we may rejoice in him? Do we seek the submissive spirit to trust unreservedly to God whether he gives or withholds. There are two kinds of mercies for which we have to pray. Mercies which God has not promised to give directly, but indirectly, such as earthly comforts and some things in a religious life. David prayed for the life of his child, but God did not spare the life of his loved one, but gave him the assurance that parent and child should be re-united in the better land. Paul asked God to remove a physical infirmity, God did not remove the thorn in his flesh, but gave him grace to bear it, so the Apostle could rejoice in affliction. Our dear Lord prayed that the cup of agony might be removed from him, and after offering the prayer he said, "not my will, but thine be done." "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God, for God cannot be tempted with evil; neither tempteth he any man, but man is tempted when he is drawn away with his own lust, and enticed. But remember when you ask God to remove the temptation, no temptation hath taken you but such as is common to man, but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above what ye are able, but will with the temptation also make a way of escape that ye may be able to bear it." Then there are mercies which God abundantly bestows through the riches of his grace in Christ Jesus. "If ye abide in me and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified that ye bear much fruit, so shall ye be my disciples." Among the wonders science has achieved, it has succeeded in bringing things to light that were invisible and incomprehensible. The barometer makes us acquainted with the actual state of the atmosphere. It takes cognizance of the slightest variation, and every change is pointed out by its elevation or depression, so men can be acquainted with the actual state of the air at any given time. In like manner the Christian should have with him an index by which he can measure the degree of spirituality. However difficult this may appear in the experience of some, all will admit there is a barometer within to determine the elevation or depression of the spiritual principle in its expressions to God. As the spirit of prayer moves up there is true spiritual elevation, as it goes down there is depression. As is the spirit of devotion and communion with God, such is the man. "In every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God, and the peace of God which passeth all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

III. Another cause of religious declension is a lack in benevolence. God still loves a cheerful giver, but for want of time I cannot enlarge—2 Cor. ix. The cure of religious declension is already sufficiently indicated in what has been said. If we study and meditate upon the truths of God until they become part of our inner lives, and comprehend the true purpose for which the Bible was given, and place all the doctrines side by side as being of equal importance, we shall grow in grace and in the knowledge of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Like the Christians at Thessalonica, "ye shall also thank God without ceasing, because ye have received the Word of God which ye heard from us. Ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God, which effectually worketh also in you," adding the words of Peter, "Being born again not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, by the Word of God that liveth and abideth forever." When believers in church feel the burden of their petitions at the Throne of grace, and receive the cure for all sin, and agonies with God for spirituality, even to the breaking of bones and the dislocating of joints, then swift messages will come from heaven. Enjoy thy prayers and they alone come up for a memorial before God.

When every man who enters into church covenant shall lay aside

on the first day of every week a portion of his income as God hath prospered him, not of necessity, but as a bounty, there will be a higher type of Christian manhood in our churches, and the doors may expect a hundredfold in this life and in the world to come life everlasting. "Brethren, meditate upon these things, give thyself wholly to them that thy profiting may appear to all. For if these things be in you and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The following report of the Committee on Missions, adopted by the Eastern Association, will interest many of our readers:—

Report of Committee on Missions.

The people of this body have had the honor to be intimately associated in the work of evangelizing the world, some of our best missionaries having gone from this Association. We trust that they will take an ever-deepening interest in this the great business of all the disciples of Jesus Christ; and that they will pray and contribute in order that our missions may be sustained at an ever increasing rate of efficiency.

Your Committee note with great satisfaction that during the year two of our sisters, Miss Hamilton, from New Brunswick Women's Missionary Aid Societies, and Miss Wright from the Nova Scotia Societies, have devoted themselves to the Foreign work. These ladies are commended to the sympathies of the churches of this Association, and we trust that the fond desire of their hearts may be realized, of becoming good missionaries of the Son of God.

We would record our gratitude to God that the Rev. Geo. Churchill and wife have been brought home in safety, and would assure them that the kindest welcome awaits them in all our churches. We trust that they may find needed rest and strength in their native clime, to return to their loved missionary labors at an early day.

Another man is wanted for the Foreign department of our Missionary work, and we would again urge the oft repeated command, "Pray ye the Lord of the harvest to send forth labourers into His harvest."

OUR HOME WORK

Under the efficient management of the Board in Yarmouth, is being prosecuted with vigor. There is room for more aggressive effort in these Eastern Counties of Nova Scotia. Your Committee deeply feel the necessity of following up with scriptural training the work of the evangelist and the missionary. We must study how to build up churches. We must see to it that they are supplied with pastors, else we shall lose what we have gained.

Our Home Mission has taken an unexpected turn. Providentially, as your Committee believe, the thoughts of one of the youngest of our ministers, the Rev. Walter Bars, has been directed to the extreme west of this Dominion. The soil there is virgin to the Baptists, and Bro. Bars goes out under the auspices of our American brethren to be the pioneer of what will, under God, be a great work. The Baptists of the Lower Provinces cannot stand uninterested spectators of this forward movement. They see the promise of a great return from a generous seed-sowing of New Testament principles, and trust that, as in so many other instances in our history, this may prove but the beginning of a work that shall increase from one small body owning our principles, to an Association of churches like that assembled here to-night.

D. A. STEELE, Chairman.

A Short Memoir of G. W. Fisher, Esq.

BY REV. D. O. PARKER.

"Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord"

As a small token of affection, and as a duty to a valuable citizen, I beg to put on record this humble tribute to his memory. Mr. Fisher was born in 1820, near his late residence in Somerset, and was a connecting link between the pioneer settlers and the living present. In early life he was an attentive hearer of bible truths as preached by the late Rev. Wm. Chipman, and from an intimate acquaintance with him acquired business habits of remarkable readiness and precision. In the confidence of the public he moved over a large circle, and filled offices of trust with fidelity and honor. He was ever foremost in the interests of education, temperance, and all the industrial and agricultural enterprises of our land, fluent in address, ready and chaste with his pen. Like others he was subject to the frailties of weak mortality, yet his christian life as a whole was exemplary. His religion was neither sectarianism nor latitudinarianism, but the conservatism of the bible. He was a member of the Wesleyan Society, but his creed was no human formula of belief. He received as readily the pure bible gems of Calvin as the choice gold of Wesley. He measured all systems of belief by the bible, and received and rejected all human dogmas, however venerable with age, or cherished in the affections of millions, according to the dictates of his own enlightened conscience. He planted himself upon the bible, and would rather all the greatest names of earth should perish, than cherish for a moment one sentiment that would reflect discredit upon the Book of books. But the one point which I wish to emphasize is, his long and untiring devotion in the Sabbath School.

The first Sabbath School in Western Cornwallis was organized in May, 1825, in a log school-house, where the village of Berwick now stands. Mr. Fisher, then in his sixth year, was one of the original scholars of that school, and often graphically portrayed to the third and fourth generation, the rise and progress of the many schools emanating from it. In a poem, "Scenes of the Past," he once wrote, the many fond memories that gathered about the old log school-house,—

Though cares roll on and troubles come,
And age with chilling blast,
Be eighteen hundred twenty-five,
A "green spot" in the past."

From then to the close of life he claimed an active, yet pleasant, home in the Sabbath Schools, and for many years officiated as Superintendent. As teacher and superintendent in the Union School of Somerset, he closed life's work with the harness on. Many now even in distant lands fondly cherish his memory. An old pupil in California, on hearing of his death, writes that she spent a sleepless night, but felt that another guardian angel was hovering round. A few years since he met a young woman at the Berwick R.R. station, who had been absent some time, teaching in an American college, and who is now a devoted missionary in China. She there assured him that as her teacher, God had made him instrumental in inspiring her with lofty purposes, in leading her to Christ, and in moulding and directing her future life. In a letter under date of 1881, addressed to this distant missionary sister, he wrote so feelingly that I cannot be more faithful to his memory than in an extract let him speak for himself. Aside from its connection with this review of a faithful teacher's life, it is worthy in its own merits of a permanent record, and I need not apologize for its length. He writes: "I have been striving since my seventeenth year, as Sabbath School teacher, to win for the Master, and to save from the errors of this sin-stricken world, such as would hear from my lips the story of Jesus and His love, with how much success, God only knows; but if only one soul is bettered through my influence, it is to the glory of my Redeemer, and I am thankful. Your remarks to me the day we met at Berwick were like 'cold water to a thirsty soul,' and only those who are

engaged in the pursuit of Christian knowledge for themselves, and in its impartation to others, can know the deep depression of spirit that sometimes, like the ocean's waves, sweep over us. Mine was the picture of a wasted life, myself the central figure, and beautiful material in wreckage and ruin scattered all around, making the desolation more desolate. Your remarks concerning our past associations as scholar and teacher in S. S. life awakened some of the most pleasing associations of past

life, and revived the assurance in my own mind, that my feeble efforts, under the blessing of the Great Teacher, had encouraged one at least to trust, to study and pray. You will allow me to say dear sister, that the brief, very brief conversation we had at the station in Berwick gave me consolation and strength to rise above my fears, and press forward in the good old way, teaching the story of Jesus and his love, and to-night, although three score years of my poor, fruitless life for good have passed I can say, all the dearest reminiscences are connected with Sabbath School work, and to-day "I would rather be a door keeper in the house of God than dwell in the tents of wickedness." It is true I see but little of the fruit of all my labors for the Master, but that is no reason for discouragement, I am not the harvester but the sower, I have the unwavering conviction that I am sowing precious seed, and am encouraged to know that some will fall upon good ground and bear fruit, some thirty, some sixty, and some an hundred fold. What shall the harvest be? Be glory to God and a finished salvation to man. I frequently turn up the map of Palestine when preparing my Sabbath School lesson, and sometimes, may, often find the city of Jerusalem peopled, in imagination, as it was when Jesus walked its streets and taught in the temple before the proud and aristocratic Pharisees who listened to his teaching with malice aforethought in their hearts and contempt in all their manners, yet afraid to open a controversy with the poor untutored Galilean, lest the people should see their confusion in his answers. I notice with heartfelt satisfaction the innovations his teaching made on the established customs of their worship, the enlargement of the common people's liberties, and last, not least, the prominence he gave the children, allowing them even to shout Hosannas in the temple, and not a Pharisee to lead the choir. Angels sang heralded the advent of Jesus to earth, child-song his ministry to man. For this we teach, as far as in us lies, the Sunday School to sing. If the Divine placed such a value upon song, we should never cease to sing. His advent to earth was announced in song, his ministry was begun with song, and when the supper was ended, and His public ministry was closed, they sung a hymn and went out." Constitutionally gifted with a genial nature, and always buoyant with cheerfulness, he never appeared to grow old. During his last brief sickness he suffered much. A little before his death, with my hand pressed in his, the last words I heard him speak were, "It is just as I would like to have it, asleep in Jesus." And so he fell asleep on the 30th of May, 1884. His funeral was on the ensuing Sabbath. A procession almost a mile long followed his remains to the Berwick cemetery. Venerable old men from distant parts of the county were there to pay their tribute of respect. The Rev. Mr. Johnson and Rev. E. O. Read, pastors of Wesleyan and Baptist churches in Berwick, together conducted the funeral solemnities. This was befitting a neighbor, teacher and brother, everywhere respected, esteemed, and beloved.

"The sweet remembrance of the just,
Shall flourish when they sleep in dust."

I am of the opinion that one element of our heavenly felicity will be found in our employments. These capabilities of ours, restored and perfected, will be employed in some service worthy of their highest exercise, and which will afford the purest pleasure. The rest of heaven will not be found in sleep. It will be found in exemption from all annoyance, and in adequate power to sustain the vision of God and all the fruition of the spiritual world. Nothing will exhaust our power, but everything will increase our strength and energy. That work without weariness—will not that be blessed? To worship without fatigue—how glorious? To be with God uninterruptedly and eternally—how infinite and exalted to bliss! "Forever with the Lord." That is my heaven. Still, I have no desire to be dismissed from His service here. If I can only spread the savour of His name among perishing sinners, and bring them to behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world, I sit down with a great while before I sit down with my Master on His throne. The pleasure of advancing His kingdom on earth is only second to the felicity of His presence in heaven.—Bishop James.