

THE ASPECT OF THE TIMES.

[From the N. Y. Independent.]

Our English Correspondent has kindly forwarded to us in manuscript a copy of the "Circular Letter" of the "Yorkshire Association of Baptist Churches," adopted at their meeting in Sheffield, on the 20th of May, 1849. It is from the able pen of the excellent and venerable Dr. Godwin, formerly pastor of the Baptist Church in Oxford, and is filled with profound views, judicious counsels, and edifying reflections. We give some extracts, showing the character and value of the whole piece:

"THE ASPECT OF THE TIMES ON THE CONDITION OF THE CHURCH."

"The year that has passed since our last association was held has been one of general turmoil and agitation, of action and re-action, of high hope and gloomy fear. Nor does the horizon, especially of continental Europe, betoken anything like speedy tranquillity. Dark clouds are drifting across it; and, with occasional gleams of sunshine, are seen huge masses of dense vapour, which may be dissipated, or from which terrific storms may burst. No one concerned for the interests of humanity can, at such a crisis, remain indifferent; and none who are alive to the progress of that kingdom which is 'righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost,' can be otherwise than solicitous as to the manner in which these changes may influence the Church of God.

"The Church, indeed, is dependent for its existence, and life, and power, on higher influences than any which this world can exercise. It is a spiritual community, bounded by no geographical limits, identified with none of the ranks, or grades, or classifications, by which human society, according to its various temporal interests, is distinguished. The kingdom of Christ is composed of 'all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,' who are born from above, citizens of the new Jerusalem: it is a great fraternity, temporally disjoined, but spiritually united, under the presidency, and guidance, and protection of Christ, the sole head of the Christian Church; whose 'life is hid with Christ in God.' The end for which this community was constituted was, 'to show forth the praises of him who hath called them out of darkness into marvellous light,' the object which, in connection with their own salvation, they pursue, is the extension of the kingdom of Christ, the conversion of the world to God; and the peculiar functions which they have to discharge are, to bear witness to the truth, to hold fast the word of life, and to diffuse the principles of the Gospel, like sacred leaven, through the whole mass of society. The nature, the spirit, the objects of this community are wholly distinct from those of politics, or commerce, or anything which pertains solely to this world. Although the Church is a kingdom not of this world, it is a kingdom in this world. It has to do with men of this world. It is always coming in contact, at many points with the world. Its subjects are made 'of one blood,' and are 'men of like passions' with others. The individuals who compose it have earthly relations, earthly engagements, earthly interests and corresponding duties devolving on them, together with many solicitudes, and pleasures, and difficulties of an earthly kind. Affairs of a commercial and political nature must necessarily affect them; their efforts for the maintenance and diffusion of evangelical principles, their action on the world in carrying out the purposes of God's mercy and benevolence, may therefore be greatly aided or obstructed by legislative acts, by political changes, and by the general condition of society. The inquiry, therefore, is natural and proper, when any new and important movement is made in the world, when any new power is brought into action, when any plans are tried, in forms of government, in social life, and in the relations of the several classes of society towards each other, what aspect has this new phase, this unexpected development, on the condition of the Church?

"If illustrations were necessary of the influence which the condition of the world has on the position and movements of the Church, history would furnish us with ample materials. How much the diffusion of Christianity was forwarded by the Macedonian conquests, which made the Greek a kind of common language, and by the consolidation of the Roman empire which gave new facilities of intercourse to all its extended provinces; in what way the interests of the Church were affected by Nero and Constantine; how in more modern times the persecution of the Stuarts

influenced the subsequent destinies of the United States, and commercial cupidity, joined with political ambition, opened India and China to the Gospel; all who are acquainted with the records of past events are fully informed.

"And are not all the changes in the political, commercial, and social condition of the world under the superintendence and guidance of Him who, as the head of the Church, has all power in heaven and on earth? Is not the whole of the Divine government conducted with reference to the final triumphs of the Church? Are not all those events which may confound the wisest statesmen, and nonplus all human wisdom, the evolutions of his purposes? Are not all the phenomena occurring in the Church and in the world, all spiritual influences, all secular changes, all disturbances of long established modes and systems, the innovations of new discoveries or gradual improvements, distinct but connected parts of the same vast machinery, guided by the same hand and working the same end? To be, therefore, unobservant and uninterested spectators of these movements of the human mind, and of those startling changes which, on so large a scale, are occurring around us, would be to incur the rebuke of our Lord, 'ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?'"

The address proceeds to consider the general restlessness of men's minds, the searching spirit of inquiry, the universal discontent and desire for change among the masses of people, the rapidity with which changes have been effected, the fearful collision of opposing principles, the advances of truth, the constant improvements in the social condition of mankind, the gain to the rights of conscience, the discoveries of science, and the openings for the spread of the Gospel.

"It is almost superfluous to say how perfectly Christianity harmonizes with every social improvement, and rejoices in whatever promotes the temporal as well as the spiritual well-being of man. Nor has it anything to apprehend from whatever is true and good.—No discoveries in science, nor investigation in the laws and order of nature, can possibly interfere with it. Minds predisposed to infidelity may eagerly catch at any partially understood phenomena, which may appear adverse to the statements of the Bible; but in so many instances has a more extended acquaintance with the subject proved that the triumphs of skepticism were premature, that the friends of Christianity feel assured that when anything novel of this kind is announced that the same result may be expected.

"It must be so. All truth must be in harmony. It is only a partial acquaintance with it, or a precipitate judgment, that can apprehend discrepancy. All that nature teaches, and all that revelation discloses, must be accordant; the great Author of both is the same. And are not all ameliorations in the condition of man perfectly congenial with the spirit of Christianity? Does it countenance wrong in any form? Can it be reconciled with oppression, or tyranny, or despotism of any kind? To do justice and to love mercy is an essential requisite of Christianity. To do good to all, and evil to none, to rejoice in the happiness of others, and to sympathize with their sufferings, are its constant injunctions. Every improvement in the social condition of man must therefore find in it a friendly coadjutor. 'Peace on earth, and good will to man,' is, in its characteristic motto, joined with 'Glory to God in the highest.' All improvements of every kind bring out the benign spirit of Christianity, give more scope to its benevolent action, and favour its more general reception, by showing that it is, in the highest sense, and in every sense, the friend of man.

"The whole world, we have seen, is in a state of transition; the Church cannot but be affected by it. We see a progress in human affairs which nothing can stop; we may expect, therefore, still further changes, political and ecclesiastical. The stability of the Church cannot be shaken, but it is not unsusceptible of modifications by increasing light and new circumstances. Christianity, while ever remaining essentially the same, has a power of development and adaptation which is sometimes overlooked. 'The times' present and to come may 'try it as by fire,' and whatever proves to be but 'wood, and hay, and stubble,' however long revered and tenaciously held, will be detected. While therefore we cleave to the 'truth as it is in Jesus,' with determined steadfastness, let us carefully and scripturally examine, whether in sentiment or in practice, individually or denominationally, we are blending any worthless or perishable ma-

terials with the 'gold, and silver, and precious stones' of the pure and unsophisticated religion of the New Testament.

"In all the collisions and commotions of the present times, let us, dear brethren, earnestly endeavour to avoid the opposite evils to which such a state of things expose us. Let us beware of violence in defence of what is right, or in opposing what is wrong. 'The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.' The truth must be contended for in love. The followers of Christ are subjects of the Prince of Peace; gentleness should temper their firmness, and charity be blended with their zeal. But on the other hand let principle be held sacred. 'Buy the truth, and sell it not.' And let us not in avoiding the noisy strife of heated partisans, omit, because we are Christians, any duty which is binding on us as men and as citizens. Christianity destroys no social tie, dissolves no relation of civil society, and dispenses with no obligation that was antecedently binding.—We do no honour to Christianity by neglecting our duties as citizens.

"But above all, amidst such opportunities of diffusing the Gospel, how criminal would supineness be! While we pray 'thy kingdom come,' how inconsistent would it be to omit any means within their reach to hasten its advent. 'The fields are already white to the harvest.'

"Let each of us, dear brethren, be found steadily at his post, diligently employing whatever talent the great Head of the Church has entrusted to us, watching the course of events, marking the hand of Divine Providence, and 'always abounding in the work of the Lord.'"

Spiritual "Exempts."

These are a class of professors, far more numerous in the Church than is consistent with her welfare. They are always willing to have everything done. They complain if it is not done. Very ready are they to bind the heaviest burdens on others; yet, somehow or other, they are always adroit enough to remove their own shoulders from the load.

"Oh yes, the Sabbath-school ought to be efficiently sustained. It is very necessary to gather in the children, who would otherwise be running about, desecrating the holy day, and growing up in idle and vicious habits!" "Well then, come, take a class." "Be a visitor." "Let me report you to the Superintendent, as ready to begin next Sabbath."—Ah, you get no such permission. You find that, by some convenient method of reasoning these persons have learned to consider themselves "exempt" from such service. They do not indeed wear a badge to this effect, like the ex-fireman or the soldier who has served his seven years; yet, just as coolly as if they did, they refer you to somebody else, as the one who is to discharge their duty. You would naturally suppose (if the thing were not impossible) that they had hired him as their substitute, in the army of Christ!

The prayer-meeting also, they have no doubt that ought to be sustained. It would look very badly, to say the least, if it were given up. Their pastor would feel very sorrowful about it, if none of the church were willing to assemble for the purpose of prayer. They have some recollection, moreover, that they have promised, in their covenant, over and over again, that they would not "forsake the assembling of themselves together." Yet here also we have the supplication, which they put up more frequently than any other: "I pray thee have me excused." As in the former instance, they would fain have the duty devolve on some one else. They do not say, precisely in so many words, that others like praying better than they do; they only say that "they have more time." How it may be in other churches I do not know; it may be different with them; but this I can say, that those who compose my own body-guard as a pastor, the picked of the flock who are always there, the Aarons and Hurs who stay up the feeble hands of my ministry, are not by any means only those who live nearest the church, who have the most of this world's goods, who are the least industrious in their lawful avocations, or are the most able to afford the loss of their time. They have somehow or other learned to forget the worth of dollars, when thinking of the worth of souls, and dare not plead to their brethren excuses that will not avail before God. Other instances might be stated to point the way at these men, and show who they are, but these two will suffice. Their name is sufficient to indicate them; and, unfortunately, they are a class with whom most

of our churches are but too well acquainted. If any doubt remains as to those who are intended in this article, ask your minister. But before you do so, ask if it is not Mr. — or Mrs. —, that is, my dear brother or sister, just you yourself!

Now we have often puzzled ourselves no little, to discover the method by which these spiritual exempts reconcile it with their consciences to live as uselessly to themselves, and as unprofitably to others, as they do. Do they make one duty that is performed, stand as a sufficient offset for a dozen that are not performed? That is Romanism. Do they suppose their nightly prayer obtains forgiveness for their daily and habitual sins of omission and commission? If so, they do not know how to pray at all. Are they looking forward to some time before they leave the world, when they really will begin to live in some measure as they ought to do? This is so much time that can never be regained; so much happiness gone, that never can be enjoyed; so much guilt that will loudly call for chastisement and repentance. Is their conduct really an honest index of their deliberate convictions in this matter? Do they in fact believe, that there are some in the Christian vessel who are to go to heaven as passengers, while others are to have all the toil and trouble of bringing the ship into port? Do they regard the Church as a joint-stock concern, in the labours and profits of which, as a whole, every member of it is hereafter to share, and share alike?—They know as well as we can tell them, that such views are utterly at war with the letter and spirit of the Gospel.

The sad and most frequent conclusion at which we arrive, is that these self-constituted exempts are those who are deceiving themselves with a name to live while they are dead, who have the form of godliness but are destitute of the power thereof. For our hope, God indeed has not revealed how little grace in the soul may be consistent with final salvation. But much more for our fears has he told us that many, who all their life long counted upon heaven, will discover, when it is too late to remedy their mistake, that hell is to be their everlasting portion. Perhaps no sight would so much surprise us in that world of despair, as the number of false professors who are now "suffering the vengeance of eternal fire."—N. Y. Presbyterian.

An Indian's Gift to Christ.

In a portion of the southern territory from which the red man has now been driven, I once attended a large protracted meeting held in the wild forest. The theme on which the preacher dwelt, and which he illustrated with surpassing beauty and grandeur, was "Christ and him crucified." He spoke of the good Shepherd who came into the world to seek and to save the lost. He told how this Saviour met the rude buffetings of the heartless soldiers. He drew a picture of Gethsemane and the unbefriended Stranger who wept there. He pointed to Him as He hung bleeding upon the cross.

The congregation wept. Soon there was a slight movement in the assembly, and a tall son of the forest, with tears on his red cheeks, approached the pulpit and said,—"Did Jesus die for me—die for poor Indian? Me have no lands now to give to Jesus, the white man take them away; me give him my dog and my rifle." The minister told him Jesus could not accept those gifts. "Me give Jesus my dog, my rifle, and my blanket; poor Indian, he got no more to give—he give Jesus all."—The minister replied that Christ could not accept them. The poor, ignorant, but generous child of the forest, bent his head in sorrow and meditated. He raised his noble brow once more, and fixed his eye on the preacher while he sobbed out, "Here is poor Indian, will Jesus have him?" A thrill of unutterable joy ran through the souls of minister and people, as this fierce son of the wilderness now sat, in his right mind, at the feet of Jesus.—The Spirit had done his work, and he who had been so poor received the earnest of an inheritance which will not fade when the diamonds of earth shall have mouldered forever.—Am. Messenger.

Discipline.

Discipline, like the bridle in the hand of a good rider should exercise its influence without appearing to do so; should be ever active, both as a support and as a restraint, yet seem to lie easily in hand. It must be always ready to check or to pull up, as occasion may require; and only when the horse is a runaway, should the action of the curb be perceptible.