

CIRCULAR LETTER,

To the Churches comprising the Eastern New Brunswick Baptist Association.

DEAR BRETHREN,—Through the goodness and mercy of our God manifested towards us, we are again privileged with meeting according to appointment in our Annual Association. We trust that God will manifest his gracious presence, and send us a time of refreshing. Some of our Churches are without Pastors, and are wholly destitute of the Gospel, and probably the most of them have to complain of the want of more zeal and devotedness in the things of religion. We fear but very few within the bounds of our Eastern Association during the past year have professed their faith in Christ, and become his devoted followers. Yet, on the other hand, some things afford ground for encouragement. Many of our congregations are large and attentive, and a desire after the word of life is, we think, upon the increase, and some precious souls have been buried with Christ by Baptism. In selecting a subject for your consideration, we have thought it best in the present letter to point out some of the causes of declension in religion, of which many complain, and the means of their removal. The first thing that we shall refer to, is the want of a greater regard for the Word of God. It has been the good pleasure of God "to magnify his word above all his name," and if we become convinced of its importance we shall magnify it too. It is by an experimental knowledge of the truth that we are delivered from the slavery of sin, and made meet to become the partakers of the heavenly inheritance. The Psalmist manifested a great love for the Word of God in the 119th Psalm. "Oh that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!—Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy Word. Open thou mine eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law. I will run in the ways of thy commandments when thou shalt enlarge my heart. Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight. Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake thy law. O how love I thy law, it is my meditation all the day. Through thy precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Rivers of water ran down mine eyes because they keep not thy law. Thy word is very pure: therefore thy servant loveth it. Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them."

If we enquire into the cause of the great anti-Christian apostacy which has extended its unhallowed influence over many parts of our world. The principal reason appears to be the rejection of the Word of God. During the wicked reign of Manassah, the book of the law of the Lord was lost, and lost in the temple itself, and then idolatry prevailed to an alarming extent. When Josiah came to the throne he anxiously desired to restore the true worship of God. The lost book of the law was found, and the King sent messengers to enquire of Huldah the prophetess "who dwelt in the college" concerning the fate of the nation. In the days Ezra and Nehemiah, a glorious revival of religion extended its influence among the Jews through their instrumentality. Ezra and his companions stood upon a "pulpit of wood," read the law and explained the meaning to all the people, and they wept bitterly, and entered into a covenant with their God. When the blessed Saviour came into the world religion was reduced to a very low state, and the principal cause no doubt was that the Pharisees by their traditions had "made void the law of God." The glorious reformation which then followed by the preaching of John the Baptist, Christ and his Apostles, was by means of their making known the true knowledge of God as revealed in the Scriptures. From a consideration of these things how important that we should search the Scriptures, inasmuch as "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

Another cause of declension is, we apprehend, resting satisfied with present attainments, without advancing in sanctification. Some people seem to us to be satisfied with about as much religion as will be thought necessary to constitute them children of God, and as will just suffice to carry them to heaven without aiming at growth in grace or holiness. As a certain writer remarks, "a few insulated services may satisfy a formalist, but

he that believeth in Jesus hath his heart enlarged and runs with delight in the ways of his commandment." The true believer is anxious to know how high a degree of spirituality is attainable in the present life. "He adds to his faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge temperance, and to temperance patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity. But he that lacketh these things is blind and cannot see afar off and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins." When a mere formalist has once established his religious character, he will commonly sit down contented, thinking that his work is done, but the child of God will be desirous "to bring forth fruit to old age;" to be fat and flourishing and to go on in the strength of the Lord and praise him more and more. The Christian's gracious dispositions are increased and strengthened by exercise. The more he abounds in the love of God and holiness, the stronger will his desires become after greater spiritual blessings. He will be constantly "pressing towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." It has been said with propriety that "a little religion will make a man miserable, but much will make him happy." It is by following the Lord fully that we shall enjoy peace and comfort in our own minds. The Christian is not only to be born, but he is to grow. The New Testament every where represents the Christian life by things denoting growth and advancement. "The path of the just is as the shining light which shineth more and more unto the perfect day." There is first, the babe, then the young man, then the father in Christ. When a kernel of wheat is deposited in the earth, through the process of vegetation, there appears the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear; and so in the spiritual life in the true believer. "He that does the will of God shall know of the doctrine, and beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord is changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the spirit of the Lord."

Another cause of declension, is, the neglect of secret prayer. Our Saviour has enjoined upon us this duty, "Enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret, and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." How distinct is this command. And yet it is to be feared, that by many professed Christians it is more neglected than almost any other. The blessed Saviour retired into the wilderness to pray, and how interesting was the scene exhibited on one occasion, when, "as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered and his raiment was white and glistening." We have many instances in which he prayed with his disciples, but every day he left the crowds by which he was surrounded, and went alone to hold communion with God. Is it not important that a duty should be fulfilled which is enforced by the Saviour's command, and exhibited by his example? The example of pious men shows the importance of prayer. Daniel three times a day retired to his chamber for prayer, and Paul was probably engaged in prayer when he was "caught up to the third heaven and heard unspeakable words which it is not lawful or possible for man to utter." How many cold hearted professors there are who are languid and spiritless, whose lives are passing unprofitably away because they do not strengthen their faith and animate their zeal by the devotions of the closet. The neglect of prayer is often the cause of numerous doubts and fears, and of that utter prostration of religious feeling which makes so many a burden to the Church. Prayer affords the most direct intercourse the soul can have with God, and there is no exercise in which the child of God can engage, which has so powerful an influence in promoting spirituality of mind. Communion with God seems to introduce us into his immediate presence, and if we go to our closet from day to day and confess our sins, and make use of that holy importunity which the Syrophenician woman possessed, we will not fail of receiving an influence in our hearts which will be abiding. And by following up this course we shall become spiritual and growing Christians. It is this which gives that "closet walk with God" which ensures "a calm and heavenly frame." When Jesus went to the garden, as his baptism of sufferings approached, he was in an agony, but he came forth from the garden calmed and composed through the influence of prayer.

Another cause of declension we apprehend, is too great a love for the world. A few years ago there was a great pressure in the mercantile world. In this Province the crops almost wholly failed; business too was in a great degree suspended, and the people found much difficulty in procuring the comforts of life. The hard times have passed away, and prosperity has again returned, and a great desire is manifested by many of the professed followers of the Saviour after worldly riches. The sad effects, as respect the want of great spirituality of mind, are manifest. How true is the saying of Scripture, "If any man love the world the love of the Father is not in him," and the fearful language of Paul "They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil, which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." And the language of the Saviour, "Verily I say unto you that a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." As a certain writer remarks, "We have known professors of religion the better for adversity, and if any are the better for prosperity is it not regarded as a prodigy of grace? On the contrary, how many have we known whose piety has declined as their wealth increased; and even where religion has not totally disappeared amidst accumulating opulence, it has retained only the form or shadow of what it once was." No man thinks the worse of religion for what he sees in the openly profane, but it is different with respect to religious professors. If he that professes to be a follower of Christ departeth not from iniquity, the Saviour is dishonored by his conduct. The Church of the Laodiceans was not aware of its condition, but imagined that all was going on in prosperous state, while it was "wretched and miserable, and poor and blind, and naked." "I counsel thee, says the Saviour, 'to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich, and white raiment that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear, and anoint thine eyes with eye salve that thou mayest see.'"

Fuller, in his little work called the backslider, makes the following remarks—"It has long appeared to me that this species of covetousness will in all probability prove the eternal overthrow of more characters among professing people, than almost any other sin; and this because it is almost the sin which may be indulged, and a profession of religion at the same time supported. If a man be a drunkard, a fornicator, an adulterer, or a liar—if he rob his neighbor, oppress the poor, or deal unjustly—he must give up his pretensions to religion; or if not, his religious connections, if they are worthy of being so denominated, will give him up; but he may 'love the world and the things of the world,' and at the same time retain his character. If the depravity of the human heart be not subdued by the grace of God, it will operate. If a dam be placed across some of its ordinary channels, it will flow with greater depth and rapidity in those which remain. It is thus, perhaps, that avarice is most prevalent in old age, when the power of pursuing other vices have in a great measure subsided. And thus it is with religious professors whose hearts are not right with God. They cannot mingle freely with the profane, nor indulge in gross immoralities; but they can love the world supremely to the neglect of God, and be scarcely amenable to human judgment." These we think, Brethren, are some of the causes which have produced those declensions which we lament. But do we indeed lament them? If we do, we shall be anxious to inquire what course shall we adopt for their removal. One means of the removal of these causes is to attend to the advice given by the great Head of the Church to a backsliding people. "Remember from whence thou art fallen, and repent and do thy first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of its place except thou repent." "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain that are ready to die; for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember, therefore, how thou hast received, and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore, thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee." Only

acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the Lord thy God, and hast scattered thy ways to the stranger under every green tree, and ye have not obeyed my voice, saith the Lord. Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married unto you, and I will bring you to Zion."

Another means we apprehend is the carrying out a wise and healthy discipline. Great and numerous evils have resulted from impurity of communion. Every Church was intended by Christ to be a light in the world. He commands his people to be holy, and says that without holiness no man shall see the Lord. Peter represents the people of God as "living stones built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." Paul represents them as "beloved of God called to be saints," or holy persons. To receive or retain unholy persons as members of our Churches is a fearful corruption of the Church of Christ. How severely did Paul rebuke the Church in Corinth for retaining a corrupt member, and how peremptorily did he command that Church, "To deliver such an one unto Satan, for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." To retain persons as members of the Church, whose lives are inconsistent with their profession, is a most fearful connivance at sin, and yet how unwilling are many to have such transgressors excluded. But the peace and safety of the Church require it, and it must be done. How many are there in connection with our Churches who give but little evidence of possessing vital piety. What numbers are there who frequently neglect the regular meeting of the Church, and how little anxiety do they feel for the advancement of the Redeemer's kingdom.

Another means, we apprehend, is the cultivating a spirit of benevolence. The scripture plan is given by Paul, 1 Cor. xvi.: 2, "Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store as God hath prospered him." Nothing good or great can be effected without system. Men in business are convinced of the importance of method. And if the disciples of Jesus would render their liberality efficient, they must adopt a system for that also. If we desire to be charitable, let us anxiously inquire—Lord what wilt thou have us to do. "He that soweth bountifully, shall reap also bountifully." "Give alms of such things as ye have, and behold all things are clean unto you." Paul refers to the saying of our Blessed Saviour, "How he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' Would you desire to have your wealth increase? 'Honor the Lord with thy substance, so shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.' 'The liberal soul shall be made fat, and he that watereth shall be watered also himself.' The love of Jesus is the great argument for liberality. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. It ought to be our anxious desire to inquire how much we owe to our Lord? Do we ever attempt to reckon up the vast amount? Let us seek to become acquainted with our obligations to God at the foot of the Cross. Here we shall become in some measure acquainted with the claims the Saviour has upon us. And by contemplating the greatness of that love wherewith he has loved us, we shall be induced to love our fellow-men, and by every means in our power shall we be desirous to extend the glorious Gospel of Christ. If we are in reality the humble followers of Jesus, we shall realize that 'we are not our own but bought with a price.' Therefore we shall be desirous to glorify the Saviour, by contributing of our substance for the advancement of his kingdom in the world. The cause of God calls loudly for it. A number of Agents have gone forth throughout the Province, to present claims of vast importance. The endowment scheme I consider as not second to any one of them. Inasmuch as without men thoroughly qualified for the various important stations in which Providence may place them, but little can be expected. Education for our Pastors and Missionaries is absolutely necessary, and we are all beginning to feel more and more the truth of the saying, 'that knowledge is power.' Our beloved institutions (for which our aged Fathers in the ministry manifested so great an interest) will lay a broad foundation for mighty movements in time to come. From their walls we hope to see a mighty host of young Elishas going forth with the mantle of our fallen Elijahs throughout New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward's Island,