

CHURCH DECADENCE.

Dr. Talmage Denies the Accuracy of Church Statistics.

MORE CHURCHES THAN BEFORE

Churches Are Frequently Cleared of Their Audiences by the Attempt to Transplant the Modes of the Past into the Present—The Trouble Lays in the Theological Seminary.

Washington, Sept. 15.—Most encouraging to all Christian workers is this discourse of Dr. Talmage while denying the accuracy of statistics which represent Sunday audiences as diminishing; text, Hebrews x, 25, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together."

Startling statements have been made in many of the pulpits and in some of the religious newspapers. It is heart over and over again that church attendance in America is in decadence. I deny the statements by presenting some hard facts. No one will dispute the fact that there are more churches in America than ever before, one denomination averaging two new churches every day of the year. The law of demand and supply is inexorable in the Kingdom of God as it is in the world. More church supplied argues more church privileges demanded. More banks, more bankers; more factories, more manufacturers; more ships, more importers; more churches, more attendants.

In all our cities within a few years churches have been built large enough to swallow up two or three of the old time churches. I cannot understand with what kind of arithmetic and pencil a man calculates when he comes to the conclusion that church attendance in America is in decadence. Take the aggregate of the number of people who enter the house of God now and compare it with the aggregate of the people who entered the house of God twenty-five years ago, and the present attendance is four to one. The facts are most exhilarating instead of being depressing. That man who presents the opposite statistics must have been most unfortunate in his church acquaintance.

You are not to argue adversely because here and there a church is depleted. Churches have their day. Sometimes merchandise will entirely occupy a neighborhood and crowd out the churches and families ordinarily attendant upon them. Sometimes a church perishes through internecine strife. But there are no facts to overthrow the statement that I have made in regard to the increasing attendance upon the house of God. Now, I am glad to admit, that there are churches which have been depleted, and it is high time that a sermon be preached for the benefit of young men who are just entering the ministry and for the warning of prosperous churches as to what are the causes of decline in any case. If merchandise crowd out a church, that cannot be helped, but under other circumstances decadence in church attendance is the fault either of the church or of the pastor.

Churches are often cleared of their audiences by the attempt to transplant the modes of the past into the present. The modes and methods of fifty years ago are no more appropriate for to-day than the modes and methods of ten years hence. Dr. Kirk, Dr. McElroy, Dr. Mason, Dr. De Witt, Dr. Vermilyea and hundreds of other men just as good as they were never lacked audiences, because they were abreast of the time in which they lived. People will not be interested in what we say unless we understand the spirit of the day in which we live. All the woe-begoneish tendencies are given by those who are trying in our time to work with the worn-out machinery of the past times. Such men might just as well throw the furnace out of our church buildings and substitute the foot stoves which our grandmothers used to carry with them to meeting, and throw out our organs and our cornets, and take the old fashioned tuning fork, striking it on the knee and then lifting it to the ear to catch the pitch of the hymn, and might as well throw out our modern platforms and modern pulpits and substitute the winged pulpit upon which the minister used to climb to the dizzy height of Mont Blanc solitariness and then go in out of sight and shut the door after him. When you can get the great masses of the people to take passage from Albany to Buffalo in stage-coach or canalboat in preference to the lightning express train, which does it in four hours, then you can get the great masses of the people to go to a church half a century behind the time.

The trouble begins away back in the theological seminaries. It is a shame that larger provision is not made for ministers of religion, for the sick and the aged and the infirm who have worn themselves out in the service of God. We have naval asylums and soldiers' asylums for men who fought on land and sea for our country when these men have become aged or crippled, and it is a shame that larger provision is not made for the good soldiers of Jesus Christ who have worn themselves out in battling for the Lord. But lack of provision in that respect makes a tendency to turn our theological seminaries into hospitals for sick and aged and infirm ministers. When a man begins to go down, they give him the title of D. D. by way of resurrection. If that fails, then the tendency is to elect him to a professorate in some theological seminary. There are grand exceptions to the rule, but it is often the case that the professorate in a theological seminary is occupied by some minister of the

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gospel who, not being able to preach, is set to teach others how to preach. In more cases than one the poorest speaker in the faculty is the professor of elocution. We want more wide awake, more able-bodied, more enthusiastic men in our theological seminaries and in the professorates—men like Addison Alexander, who could during the week teach men the theory of preaching and then on Sunday go into the pulpit and with the thunder and lightning of Christian eloquence show them how. What would you think of a faculty of unsuccessful merchants to train young merchants or a faculty of unsuccessful lawyers to train young lawyers? It is often the case that theological seminaries out a man and clip him and square him and mold him and bore him and twist him until all the individual is gone out of him and he is only a poor copy of a man who was elected to a professorate because he could not preach. We want less deadwood in the theological seminaries and more flaming evangelists. I declare that a man who cannot preach himself cannot teach others how to preach.

Young ministers are told they must preach Christ and him crucified. Yes, but not as an abstraction. Many a minister has preached Christ and him crucified in such a way that he preached an audience of five hundred down to two hundred, and from two hundred to one hundred, and from one hundred to fifty, and from fifty to twenty, and on down until there was little left save the sexton, who was paid to stay until the service was over and lock up. There is a great deal of cant about Christ and him crucified. It is not Christ and him crucified as an abstraction, but as an omnipotent sympathy applied to all the wants and woes of our immortal nature—a Christ who will help us in every domestic, social, financial, political, national struggle—a Christ for the parlor, a Christ for the nursery, a Christ for the kitchen, a Christ for the barn, a Christ for the street, a Christ for the store, a Christ for the banking house, a Christ for the factory, a Christ for the congressional assembly, a Christ for the courtroom, a Christ for every trial and every emergency and every perturbation. Ah, my friends, churches will be largely attended just in proportion as we ministers can meet their wants, meet their sufferings, meet their bereavements and meet their sympathies. If there is a church with

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small neep, small audience, meagre help, medium audience; large help, large audience. If there be a famine in a city and three depots of bread and one depot has 100 loaves and another 500 loaves and another depot 10,000 loaves, the depot that has 100 loaves will have applicants, the depot that has 500 loaves will have far more applicants, the depot that has 10,000 loaves will have throngs, throngs, throngs.

Oh, my brethren in the Christian ministry, we must somehow get our shoulder under the burden of the people on the Lord's day and give them a good stout lift, and we can do it. We have it all our own way. It is a great pity if, with the floor clear and no interruption, we cannot during the course of an hour get our hymn or our prayer or our sermon under such momentum we can, by the help of God, lift the people, body, mind and soul, clear out of their sins, temptations and troubles.

I think that ministerial laziness often empties the church of auditors. Hearers, who are intelligent through reading newspapers and by active association in business circles, will not on the Sabbath sit and listen to platitudes. Hearers will not come to sermons which have in them no important facts, no information, no stirring power, no adaptation, no fire. The pew will not listen to the pulpit unless the pulpit knows more than the pew. Ministerial laziness has cleared out many churches. Still ministers saunter around from parlor to parlor under the name of pastoral visitation and go gadding about through the village or the city on errands of complete nothingness and wrap their brains around a cigar and smoke them up, and then on Saturday afternoon put a few crude thoughts together and on Sunday morning wonder that the theme of Christ and him crucified does not bring a large audience, and on Monday sit down and write jeremiads for the religious newspapers about the decadence of church attendance.

People will not go to church merely as a matter of duty. There will not next Sabbath be a thousand people in any city who will get up in the morning and say: "The Bible says I must go to church. It is my duty to go to church, therefore I will go to church." The vast multitude of people who go to church go to church because they like it, and the multitude of people who stay away from church stay away because they do not like it, and not speaking about the way the way ought to be, I am speaking about the way the world is. Taking things as they are, we must make the centripetal force of the church mightier than the centrifugal.

We must make our churches magnets to draw the people thereto, so that a man will feel uneasy if he does not go to church, saying: "I wish I had gone this morning. I wonder if I shall get there in time. It is 11 o'clock; now they are singing. It is half past 11; now they are preaching. I wonder when the folks will be home to tell what was said, what was done, what was going on." When the impression is confirmed that our churches, by architecture, by music, by sociality and by sermon, shall be made the most attractive places in the city, we will have twice as many churches as we have now, twice as large, and then they will not half accommodate the people.

Let the young men who are entering the ministry, we must put on more force, more energy and into our religious services more vivacity if we want the people to come. You look into a church court of any denomination of Christians. First, you will find the men of large common sense and earnest look. The education of their minds, the piety of their hearts, the holiness of their lives, qualify them for their work. Then you will find in every church court of every denomination a group of men who utterly amaze you with the fact that such semi-imbecility can get any pulpits to preach in! These are the men who give forlorn statistics about church decadence. Frogs never croak in running water; always in stagnant. But I can say to all Christian workers, to all Sunday school teachers, to all evangelists, to all ministers of the gospel, if we want our Sunday schools and our prayer meetings and our churches to gather the people we must freshen up. The simple fact is, the people are tired of the humdrum of religionists. Religious humdrum is the worst of all humdrum. You say over and over again, "Come to Jesus," until the phrase means absolutely nothing. Why do you not tell the story which will make them come to Jesus in five minutes?

You say that all Sunday school teachers and all evangelists and all ministers must bring their illustrations from the Bible. Christ did not when he preached. The most of the Bible was written before Christ's time, but where did he get his illustrations? He drew them from the hills, from the ravens, from salt, from a candle, from a bushel, from long faced hypocrites, from gnats, from moths, from large gates and small gates, from a camel, from the need's eye, from mustard seed, from a fishing net, from debtors and creditors. That is the reason multitudes followed Christ. His illustrations were so easy and understandable. Therefore, my brother Christian worker, if you and I find two illustrations for a religious subject and the one is a Bible illustration and the other is outside the Bible I will take the latter, because I want to be like the Master.

O Christian workers, we have got to freshen up. What is the use of our going back to the Bible to find an illustration of the victorious Christian dead when my personal friend, Alfred Cookman, a few years ago went away in an imperial grandeur as did Edward Payson? Is it any less an illustration to me and to you because I met him a few weeks before in front of Trinity church, Broadway, and I said, "Cookman, you look as if you were working too hard?" Where in all the classics is there such a story as that

of Cookman when, if his last moment, he cried, "I am sweeping through the gates washed by the blood of the Lamb!"

What is the use of going away off to get an illustration when in a house on Third Avenue, Brooklyn, I saw a woman dying, and she said, "Mr. Talmage, heaven used to be to me a great way off, but it now is just at the foot of the bed." What is the use of your going away off to get illustrations of a victorious Christian dead when all Wales was filled with the story of the dying experience of Frances Ridley Havergal. She got her feet wet standing on the ground preaching temperance and the gospel to a group of boys and men, went home with a chill, and congestion set in, and they told her she was very dangerously sick. "I thought so," she said, "but it is really too good to be true that I am going. Doctor, do you really think I am going?" "Yes," "To-day?" "Probably," she said, "Beautiful, splendid, to be so near the gate of heaven." Then after a spasm of pain she nestled down in the pillows and said, "There, now, it is all over—blessed rest." Then she tried to sing, and she struck one glad note, high note of praise to Christ, but could sing only one word, "He," and then all was still. She finished it in heaven.

It is high time that the church of God stopped writing apologies for the church. Let the men who are on the outside, who despise religion, write the apologies. If any people do not want the church, they need not have it. It is a free country. If any man does not want the gospel, he need not have it. It is a free country. But you go out, O people of God, and give the gospel to the millions of America who do not want it! It is high time to stop skirmishing and bring on a general engagement. I want to live to see the Armageddon, all the armies of heaven and hell in battle array, for I know our conqueror on the white horse will gain the day. Let the church of God be devoted to nothing else, but go right on to this conquest.

When Moses with his army was trying to conquer the Ethiopians, profane history says, it was expected that he would go in a roundabout way and come by the banks of the river, as other armies had done, because the straight route was infested with snakes, and no army and no man had dared to go across this serpent infested region. But Moses surprised them. He sent his men out to gather up bilbes. The bilbe is a bird celebrated for serpent slaying, and these bilbes were gathered into crates and into baskets, and they were carried at the head of the army of Moses, and, coming up to the serpent infested region, the crates were opened, and the bilbes flew forth, and the way was cleared, and the army of Moses marched right on and came so unexpectedly on the Ethiopians that they fled in wild dismay. O church of God, you are not to march in a roundabout way, but go straight forward, depending upon winged influences to clear the way. Hosts of the living God, march on, march on! Church attendance, large now, is going to be larger yet. The sky is brightening in every direction. I am glad for the boy and girl five years old. I think they may see the millennium. The wheel of Christian progress has never made one revolution backward. The world moves, the kingdom advances. All nations will yet salute the standards of Prince Emmanuel. To him be glory in the church throughout all ages! Amen.

TELEGRAPH

Dr. W. F. Pratt, of Ottawa, is dead.

Forty mounted police will go from Calgary to act as an escort for the Duke of Cornwall in Victoria and Vancouver.

Mr. Brown's defeat in New Westminster has caused a crisis in British Columbia politics, and Premier Dunsinville may resign.

Rev. D. C. Sanderson, of Smith's Falls, has been suspended until conference deals with his alleged unbecoming conduct at Syracuse, N. Y.

R. E. Trux, M.P.P., has been re-nominated by the Liberals of South Bruce, and B. Cannon, the Opposition nominee, has retired from the contest.

ARMY BALLOONS FOR RUSSIA.

London, Sept. 19.—The Odessa correspondent of the Times says the result of the deliberations of military and naval officers at Sebastopol will be the introduction of the military balloon on a large scale. Experiments under a military aeronaut are now going on at Sebastopol.

ONTARIO'S SWEEP IN FRUIT.

Later advices from Buffalo show that the victory of Ontario in the first competition for medals offered by the American Pomological Society was even better than at first reported. Forty entries were received in all, the competition being open to all America. The Ontario Fruit Experiment Station's exhibit won the silver medal for the best exhibit of any society or organization. Mr. Albert Pay, of St. Catharines, and Mr. Murray Peck, of Windsor, won silver medals for the best collection by any individual, and Mr. W. M. Orr, of Fruitland, a bronze medal for his collection. This exhausted the medals awarded, Ontario getting them all, while the exhibits from the various States received only "honorable mention."

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