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VITA EST POTENTIA.

Declension in spiritual life is a sad experience—one over which angels might justly mourn. And yet what is more common? Many once zealous for Christ, become icy cold and stone dead. When their tears were fresh they ran; while their joys were new they sang; so long as the novelty of their experience charmed, their spirits glowed, and their piety ascended to heaven in fragrant clouds of praise and prayer, and shot forth its rays in benevolent endeavour. But from some cause or other, the flash of their first love gradually became dim, and at last quite extinct. And now what a change is manifest! Former clouds of a prayer-laden devotion now distill in tears; the soul is flooded with sorrow, instead of songs of joy; "the spirit of heaviness" has descended into impotence; murmuring parts the lips, and breaks the silence of submission. The soul is the sepulchre of dead affections—a shore on which lie stranded the wreck of christian excellencies.

It is easy to find the cause of this sad and common experience. Grace is a tender plant. It may be crushed by violence, or it may be crumpled by neglect. The heart is a garden, and so in order to fruitfulness, it must be fenced and cultivated. Watchfulness is both a fence and a tower of strength. The want of it has resulted in the ruin of thousands. Many have imagined themselves proof against every unfriendly approach, and confident in their security, they have ceased to watch, and so, like Samson, they have suddenly found themselves shorn of their strength. When they thought themselves far out at sea their bark has been broken by the breakers, and cast a wreck on the shore. A want of watchfulness is one cause of spiritual declension.

Culture, too, is needed. The holy flame of love must be fed day by day, or else it will flicker and fade. It is well to defend the heart against foreign invasion, but it is equally necessary to keep it from crumbling into decay. Then prayer and communion are the appointed means of moral culture. The nearest way to poverty of soul is the neglect of prayer, and the surest way to weakness is to scorn communion.

But the great want of the Church, in order to power and progression, is divine quickening. Life is power. Evidence of this are its almost universal and convincing. Nature will supply an illustration. What is the secret of those almost daily transformations which we see taking place around us? Why does the tiny seed reproduce itself in the sturdy plant? What is it that paints the flower with its lovely crimson hues? And what is it that develops the clustering fruit? All is owing to the power of life.

And as in nature so in religion. Vitality is the germ of its power and the pledge of its fruitfulness. Take for instance the development of individual character. Not more truly does the pine owe its stately and verdant life to life than does the character its strength and comeliness to the quickening of God. Fidelity in that term called grace, are all the elements of a power that shall transform a world, and stamp its impress on eternity. The history of the Church, which is at once the creation of divine life, and its nursery too, is an earnest of its universal domination. Time was when the mustard-seed—the least of all seeds—was insignificant, but how soon it assumes commanding proportions. At the Pentecost the fire falls and the flame spreads. The Church's life is quickened, and its power is felt. With Jerusalem for its centre, the circle of its influence widens. From Judea it floods Samaria. Soon it encircles Asia Minor like a belt. It sweeps the temples of the gods—the shrines of a hoary superstition, and of a sensual unbridled licentiousness. Onward the torrent rolls in the face of rack and dragon, roareth and death. The tide of life gushes into Italy, until Rome herself, proud and imperial, feels a new vitality, and the echo of its gospel is heard within her walls.

Coming down to later times, what but the power of life could have survived the repeated attacks of a blind bigotry and a sensual superstition? Though simple in itself, and unpromising by thought power, yet in its rise it battled successfully with Roman rule; and in the development it trampled on the pride of science and the tyranny of power.

Then what is the Church without life? Why, a Samson shorn of his strength, a painted fire, pretty but chill; a machine, perfect in its construction, but clogged in its movements. Indeed it is dead—chilled in its affections, lopped in its aspirations, silent in its senses, feeble in its efforts; to man unmeaning, and to God repulsive. There may be all the outward forms of life, such as a stated ministry, weekly prayers, the appointed sacraments, &c., but what then? No souls are converted. The tear of penitence is never seen, the cry for mercy is never heard. Sinners are hardened, crime increases, hell reaps an abundant harvest, and the Saviour, robbed of his right, bleeds and dies in vain!

It is a pity when the Church becomes an enemy to itself. What with a world unfriendly in its spirit, and opposed in its purposes; what with an army of diabolical adversaries, terrible in their strength, and wild in their acts, the Church has quite enough to do without engaging a viper in its bosom, or suffering an enemy in its camp in the form of spiritual lifelessness! Its life is its only hope. Give up this, and you give up the key that shall unlock its treasures to the foe. Its life lost, and nothing is left to charm the sorrow of earth. Better far put out the sun than give up the Church's life, for then you would quench the only light of hope, to founder in darkness, and to die in despair. We have need, therefore, to reiterate the prophet Habakkuk's pious prayer: "O Lord, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid: O Lord, revive thy work in the midst of the years; in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy."

S. DUNN.

EXTRACT FROM ENGLISH CONFERENCE PASTORAL ADDRESS.

In endeavouring to indicate the spiritual condition of the societies, we thank God for that universal peace which makes the Communion "a quiet habitation;" we rejoice to know that many of you are standing "fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel." Methodist teaching and influence are diffused over a wide area, embracing an ever increasing number of congregations. Its ministry holds the attention of the people of this country to an extent unknown elsewhere. God has set before us "an open door" of opportunity, if we are wise and bold to speak. He will cause us "to triumph in Christ" and make "manifest the savour of his knowledge to us in every place."

We must ever bear in mind that Methodism is a system that exists for *purposely ends*. We have nothing to do but to save souls. Our chapels are to be "Bethels"—Houses of God, filled with his presence; "Bethelds"—Houses of Mercy, where sin-sick souls are healed; "Bethelds"—Houses of Bread, where hungry souls are fed; houses in which is exercised a ministry of power, convincing all who come under it that "God is in us a truth."

Our numerical returns show a decrease of the year; a fact that provokes great searchings of heart. Not in any impatient or vain-glorious spirit would we number the people. No doubt many have been converted whom we have not registered. The Lord knoweth them that are his, and, "when He writeth up the people's records every name." We would remember, too, that the strength of a Church lies not in its numbers, but in its holiness—"The best of all is, God is with us." But while numbers do not necessarily bring life vigorous life, always brings numbers. The living Church grows as surely as the leaven spreads, and any Church that stands at the numerical level, from year to year, must need look for the cause. The collective force of the Church is the sum-total of its individual life, and if the tone of the members be low, the strength of the body will be small, and Christ will not honour us with power to do those "greater works" which were wrought at Pentecost and in the days of our foreign Missions; but that good news suggests the painful contrast of our own "lean-ness" at home. We watch for your souls, and we must deliver our own. Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are *helpers* and assistants, to the work of God's heritage; but as pastors of the flock, do you use his plainness of speech; "and for you it is said" to be put in remembrance of privileges, duties, and dangers, which there are so many temptations to overlook.

Has not an influx of wealth brought with it the spirit of the world, paralysing the energies of the Church? Have not numbers of our people conformed to the world, and become the victims of its social ambitions and the dupes of its vain show? Has not christian strictness in the ordering of our own families been relaxed, in some instances, to the damage of parental authority? Where is the eager longing for the House of God, for social prayer, and for the communion of saints which marked bygone days? "Where is then the blessed-spoke of?"

All labours of love are born of the life of God within. The concern we feel for our own souls is the treasure of our effort for others. In our fathers, zeal for God and love for souls were dominant passions. The motive was not to make a proselyte but to save a soul—"Come thou with us, and we will do thee good;" and the Churches, to the shame of the age, will draw all men unto us. "New converts must be 'baptized for the dead,' or we shall soon cease to exist. We need accessions to cover the figures which reveal the sad total of our lapsed members. Above all we need accessions, not merely to swell our numbers, but that we may win souls for Christ. And for this we must consecrate ourselves afresh to God. A Church of "Believers Working" and "Believers Interceding," we must use our old and well-tried methods in a more aggressive evangelism; "we shall shall the earth yield her increase; and God, even our own God, shall bless us."

Above all other Churches in this country we possess a rich heritage of social means of grace. The natural yearning of the new life for Christian fellowship is anticipated; and as living experience first called it into existence, so it still makes the class-meeting a means of edification to thousands. We are concerned for the continuance of the race of competent leaders, who by their devotion, their fidelity, and their general character, shall attract the attachment of the people, and live in the affection of the members of whom they have the oversight. In many circuits the want of suitable leaders seriously cramps the work, and is one of the indirect causes of our numerical decrease. Some of our brethren, whom God indicates for this office both by their gifts and their graces, and whom the responsible pastor has called to his help, have refused to undertake it. This reluctance on the part of duly qualified men to become class leaders is greatly regretted. And we remind these brethren that the Head of the Church claims all the talent, the experience, and the influence of all his servants. To Him "every one of us shall give an account of himself." We beseech you, therefore, first to give "your own selves to the Lord," and then "unto us by the will of God." We would also affectionately impress upon you the abiding privilege and duty of regular attendance at the table of the Lord, and of habitual attention to all those points of Christian life and practice which we are taught by God to observe, and which are comprised in our rules.

While the increase in the number of our places of worship extends our responsibility as a Church, involving, as it does, the necessity of a constant accession to our ministerial strength, and of the careful formation of Christian Societies. The times demand a thoroughly-furnished ministry—men who have themselves been soundly converted; men who have graduated in the school of our manifold agency and are in entire sympathy with our work; men who are rich in gifts and culture, "and full of zeal, under whose ministry 'such people' shall be 'added unto the Lord.'" For ourselves we have this Gospel-treasure in "earthen vessels," and before God have nothing to glory of. On the contrary, as preachers and pastors we humbly say, "We are unprofitable servants." But it pleases Him to continue us in "this ministry;" and, "as we have received mercy, we faint not."

Our work lies before us. The ominous attitude of indifference to public worship presented by large numbers of the working classes; our manifest national sin; the general prevalence of luxury in living and in thought; the diffusion of a literature written with subtle and fascinating art, and destructive of the religious sympathies of our youth; the revived pretensions of Popery, and the spread of ungodly imitations of that corrupt system; and the vast multitudes of our fellow-countrymen, still unconverted, show with only too overwhelming force, that the mission of Methodism is not over. And while we do not forget that the Gospel is the main instrument in the repression of vice and the spiritual elevation of the people, we rejoice in all philanthropic movements, and warmly do we sympathize with Christian legislation which seeks to remove temptations to drunkenness, to protect the purity of society, and to maintain the sacred privilege of the Lord's day. Scepticism is a life among the public teachers, and the age, generally, is significantly deficient in religious conviction. Attempts are made to obliterate the ancient landmarks by a leveling latitudinarianism. The person and work of our Lord, and the personality and divine offices of the Holy Ghost, are the rocks upon which the waves of modern heresy are breaking. God has given us a banner which we will display "because of the truth;" maintaining a public ministry that gives prominence to all the vital doctrines of the Gospel and applies them to the consciences of all classes of our hearers. The "burden of the Lord" in the ministry of our fathers was repentance, faith and holiness. These doctrines must be our "burden." Nor may we suppress the tremendous alternatives which the Gospel sets before impotent, unbelieving, and unrepentant men—"Still it is, and ever must be, Repentance, or perdition; Faith or condemnation;" "The New Birth, or eternal exclusion from the kingdom of God." God hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation, and we would fulfil it with tender affection, beseeching men; but we must refuse the careless, and warn them to "flee from the wrath to come." The Lord will work with us and confirm his word with signs following. Then, as at the beginning, sinners will be "pricked" in their hearts; "Is not My word like a fire?" saith the Lord, and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" "Still it is, and ever must be, Repentance, or perdition; Faith or condemnation;" "The New Birth, or eternal exclusion from the kingdom of God." God hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation, and we would fulfil it with tender affection, beseeching men; but we must refuse the careless, and warn them to "flee from the wrath to come." The Lord will work with us and confirm his word with signs following. 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