

am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," and another, just as bitter and as bad as either, but claiming great superiority to both, "I am of Christ." Hence we make the most of the virtues of our sect, and excuse the vices of men because they are of our way of thinking. And so it comes to pass that the standard of piety is lowered: a debased public opinion is formed; the love of the brethren dies out, and the love of God waxes feeble.

The lighter interests of life occupy us unduly, and so promote declension. Especially is this the case in cities, where the ever-changing, ever-moving, panorama of interesting events fixes the attention. The universal circulation of newspapers extends this interest over the country, for city and country are being rapidly made alike. Multitudes of ceremonies, visits, and entertainments, shows, and amusements—"diversions" as they are often, and properly called, leave few of us able to say, "this one thing I do." They render impossible concentration of purpose, preclude retirement, and the means and exercises of family piety. They produce a light, superficial character, without solidity and without force. It is not meant that all or most of these are demonstrably sinful. There are many degrees of unwholesomeness on this side of poison; and so there are many things opposed to spiritual health without being definitely vicious.

Even the operations of our religious "societies" "and benevolent institutions" threaten to work the same result. It should not be so; but it is: and the mischief is promoted by the tone and style of addresses frequently adopted in urging their movements forward. Jokes, compliments, lean wit, and facetious allusions to the virtues and capabilities of the gentler sex are considered the life of many meetings, and aptly enough where "ladies and gentlemen" are making God's work one of their amusements, but most inappropriately where earnest people are solemnly contending in Christ's name with the powers of darkness, and intently striving for the salvation of souls. There are devils that go out by prayer and fasting, but none that we know of that flee before drollery and laughter.

Pastoral inefficiency—including elders with ministers—is in part to blame for declension. We do not aim enough, perhaps, at building up and feeding God's children. We are too unwilling to hurt and wound. Our caution borders on the fear of man. We do not enough point out dangers in detail. We approach too near too prophesying smooth things. A luxurious age demands Elijahs to sound notes of warning, and sinners in a "superior station" in life require men of the type of Nathan to say, "Thou art the man."

These are types of special causes of declension at work among us. It may be asked, what are the signs of such decay? Only specimens of these can be given. We are easily diverted from religious observances. Little things keep us from assembling ourselves together as worshippers of God. Loose opinions are taken up easily, and without conscientious or prayerful examination, and bear their natural fruit in loose practices. We are self-sufficient and impatient of reproof—all too like that Church that said "I am rich, and increased in goods, and have need of nothing." We are emulating the world in its luxuriousness of living, and think something is wanting if we be not on a level with all its braveries. We are more anxious to be thought cultivated and influential than to be thought spiritual and prayerful. We revere rich men, and respect able men, and make little account of merely holy men. Of course, at one time we did not mean to come to this. When the Jewish people chanted their hymn of victory by the Red Sea with the joyous refrain of woman's voices, "Sing ye to the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the Sea," they did not mean to murmur and rebel. But they did murmur and rebel. So with us. Let us not copy Ephraim, as described by the prophet Hosea (vii. 8, 9), "Ephraim, he hath mixed himself among the people: Ephraim is a cake not turned"—one side