

Our Contributors.

* Why not More Conversions in our Churches?

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Dr. John Watson of Liverpool, England, spoke thus before the students of Bristol College, the other day: "No serious person, whether he be religious, or non-religious can look out upon society in our day without being depressed and alarmed. There is a general unsettlement both of belief and of instruction—a weariness of the present, and uncertainty of the future, a lowering of ideals and slackening of energy—an exhausted atmosphere, in which it is difficult to breathe, and which is apt to be charged with noxious germs." Dr. Watson but voices the sentiments of many other religious writers of today all over Christendom, who are carefully scanning the horizon of religious truth and experience. It seems to be the very general consensus of opinion, that attendance at public worship in general is steadily decreasing, that real definite clear cut conversions in our churches are becoming less frequent, "that the grasp of spiritual realities is consciously relaxing, that the cross is gradually fading from the Church's vision, and that the light of hope and triumph is dying from the brow of faith." Many there are who feel as did Arnold when he wrote, "Your creeds are dead, your rites are dead. Your social order too. Where tarrys He, the power who said, See I make all things new."

This general deadness of the churches to things spiritual for some time has been clearly recognized by our brethren of the United States. Dr. Strong in his latest book "The next great Awakening" recognizes this fact, and makes mention of it. Dr. Herrick Johnston, writing lately bewails the terrible death of spiritual life, and the absence of real conversions from the churches. From time to time, we read in the papers, when the yearly summing-up time comes around, that a denomination has made no progress whatever during the year. In fact we sometimes learn that they have retrograded. In our own land, and in our denomination, we have gone forward but slowly, when we consider the opportunities we have had. During 1903, we added by Profession of Faith, but 166 more than we did the previous year, although our church was some 11,000 larger than before.

Now and then the ministers seem to grow desperate over the situation, and a sort of spasmodic effort is made to reach and convert souls, then it seems to die away, and church matters fall into the old rut again, and we proceed as usual. In Glasgow some time ago, a gigantic effort was put forth, and special services were held for a whole winter but without any marked effect. The Free Church Council of England made a Herculean struggle to waken the slumbering masses of the old land, but it was without any national result. In the United States, the Presbyterian Church, has roused herself to new exertions and is doing a good work, but there is no denying that it seems to be artificial, rather than spontaneous, and in some respects is disappointing. In our own country, Canada, the Presbyterian Church seems not yet to be aroused to the fact that our churches are not meeting the Apostolic ideal, and are woefully inadequate

to crying needs around us. There is no getting away from the truth, that our churches are NOT reaching and converting men as the churches did in the apostolic days. We are not winning the triumphs now, that were once won by the gospel of Christ. When we think how, on the day of Pentecost, this Gospel reached and saved 3000 men and women, how it found and converted the persecuting Pharisee of Tarsus, and through him blossomed out into the splendid epistles of the New Testament, how it found Lydia and through her entered into Oriental commerce, how it found and subdued Cornelius, and through him entered into the Roman army, how through the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch it was carried away and planted in the far off land of the Upper Nile; when we look at all these mighty achievements of the early days, and turn and behold the poor humdrum lives many of our churches, of the present many of them just standing where they were 20 years ago, well pleased if they have not gone backward, hundreds of unsaved people around not even touched by us, is it any wonder, if we feel that it must be some other Gospel we have from that preached by the Apostles, in the victorious days of yore. I have talked with men who have frankly told me, that for ten years they have been preaching the Gospel, and during that time, they have never known of one soul led to Christ under their ministry. Is this not a somewhat common experience? How many ministers are there who could place their hands upon a hundred who have been led to Christ through their preaching during the last year? How many could say I know of at least a dozen who have decided for Christ under my ministry during the year that is gone? Well I know many will reply: "It is not necessary to know of conversions. That is not our business. It is unwise to count heads in the matter of salvation. Sow the seed and leave the result with God, and don't be over anxious about the harvest." Such talk sounds fairly well, and there may be some truth in it, but it is very often used to cover up a weak ministry. In Apostolic days, they looked for and expected to see results. On the day of Pentecost 3000 were added to the church. Describing another increase we read "Howbeit many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the men were about 5000. Now it seems to me, that we should each be willing, as candid men, to face this question fearlessly and frankly and ask ourselves the question, "why are there not more conversions in our churches?" Are ministers used of God to save men as were the Apostles in the early days of Christianity? If not, where does the trouble lie? This is the enquiry I make in this lecture, and that I endeavor in a degree at least to answer. Before however coming to the subject proper there are a few things we are safe in postulating. In the first place, the fault does not LIE WITH GOD, if there are no conversions in our churches. He is just as lovingly and anxiously yearning over lost sinners as in the days when thou sands were brought to a knowledge of salvation. His declaration to the world is still the same. He willeth not that any should perish, but that all should come to Him and live. The fault does not lie there. In the second place, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday,

today and forever," and he is just as eagerly anxious for the salvation of men, as he was the day that he wept over doomed Jerusalem. Thirdly The Holy Spirit is just as willing to do his work of convicting, and convincing men of sin, as he was on the day of Pentecost.

In the fourth place, the conditions of society are not one whit worse today than they were in the days of the early Gospel victories. Here perhaps some men will take issue with me. We sometimes hear men lamenting the removal of good men from their churches and complaining of their congregations going down, because there are none to take their places, and all around are godless men to be saved. Is the Gospel of Christ not strong enough to reach and save the very worst of men? Are the conditions of society such that the Gospel must retreat baffled and defeated? A thousand times no. Concede all that may be said about the evils of our time, the insane race for riches, the modern hells that are open mouthed and defiant, the confederated iniquity that stalks abroad in our land, the subtle, insidious worldly-mindedness that in many cases seems to be eating the spirituality out of our churches, concede all this, and then ask, Is Christ dead? Has the Holy Spirit been shorn of his strength? No, I do not for one moment believe the conditions are as bad to-day as they were in the days of the Apostles. If the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not strong enough to meet and conquer any individual or any combination of society, that men or devils can invent then we had better give it up. The fault lies, not in God, not in Jesus Christ, not in the Holy Ghost, but in ourselves. If there are not the number of conversions in our churches that there should be, the reason is the conditions of the apostolic days are not the conditions of today. Bring back apostolic conditions and I am convinced you will bring back apostolic results. In apostolic days, there was tremendous earnestness in soul seeking; there was absolute acceptance of the book of God as man's guide, there was the faithful preaching of Jesus Christ and him crucified as the only Saviour of men; there were pure, holy personalities filled with Christ, and a continual looking for immediate result. Let these conditions be brought back, and we will have apostolic conversions. We Christians are the converting agents through which God must work, and we are not such that God can use us. It is wise for us to own this fact once and for all, and place the blame upon the proper shoulders. "We are not straightened in God, but God is straightened in us." If there are no conversions in my church, there is no one to blame but myself and my people. Having cleared the ground thus far let us notice.

(1) There are not more conversions in our churches, because the individual member as a converting agent, is not what he ought to be.

Many there are to-day, who sit in our churches and imagine that they are fairly good Christians, and yet have the idea that leading men to Jesus Christ is solely the work of the minister. They feel that they have no more business to interfere with the matter, than they have to meddle in their neighbor's household affairs. The minister is paid for that, it is his business, let him do it. I will stick to my business let him do the same. As long as the people who sit in our pews have that notion about the spreading of the gospel, we will have nothing like the conversions in our churches that we should have. In the apostolic days, no sooner was a man converted, than he felt it his bounden duty, to go out, and convert

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