

IS THE INFLUENCE OF THE EPWORTH LEAGUE DECLINING?

BY REV. GEORGE EDWARDS.

THIS question is at once a significant, important, and more or less difficult one. *Significant*, because it implies that in the minds of some at least, there is an impression that the real working power of the League is declining, and that the matter should be looked into and remedied as soon as possible; *important*, because it relates to the young people of our churches and communities, and what affects them more or less affects the church, and what affects the church touches the nation; *difficult*, inasmuch as it is not so easy to get sufficient reliable data on which to form an intelligent and satisfactory positive opinion as one might at first imagine. The subject is not, "Has the League accomplished all that it was expected to do?" nor is it, "Is the League now doing all that she might and ought?" but, "*Is the influence of the League declining?*" that is, has the League less spiritual power as a working, creative, moulding, moral, character-producing agency in the church than it had two or three years ago, and consequently is it doing less to lift up Jesus Christ before the world, and in helping the church in her great mission, especially among young people? That is the question that is fairly before us. How shall we answer it? I find upon careful examination, that the League has steadily increased in all departments from its inception to the present time, with but two exceptions, namely, number of societies and membership. According to the Minutes of a year ago, the returns show a falling off in the societies of seventy-one, and in membership of four thousand and nineteen as compared with the previous year; and according to the returns of last Conference, we find a further falling off in societies of twenty-six, and in membership of two thousand. Now this looks bad, to say the least of it, and I am sure we all regret it much. But are we justified in concluding therefrom that the influence of the League is declining? May not this heavy falling off be accounted for in some other way? In the first place, I am not sure whether we can rely very much on the accuracy of the figures. Then we must not forget that the Epworth League as an organization is only about ten or eleven years old, and to think that in the first seven or eight years, there should be nearly two thousand societies formed, with a membership of over eighty-one thousand is something phenomenal. It has been a veritable boom and, of course, some reaction was inevitable. Every pastor knows that after a great ingathering to the church, there is likely to be some shrinkage for a year or two. Farmers know something like this occurs in the procuring of a harvest. Sometimes for a whole week the growth is very rapid, then suddenly a change comes in the weather, the temperature drops away down, vegetation seems to almost entirely cease, and "the grain rather goes back," as the farmer says; but not so, it is only just gathering strength. The

check to the only too rapid growth was the best thing for the crop. As in nature, so in grace. Doubtless many young people joined the Epworth League at first without any clear idea of what membership meant, and some of them became weary and dropped out. We all know that there are always persons in every

from organizing, led a number to believe that they were doing a good work; but when the question came, "What was the League for?" and "What was it really doing?" I think the society then received a shock, and consequently many who were not living branches of the vine dropped off.

Further, I think the weeding out process has been more carefully done during the last two or three years than before, so that our present membership is a far more correct representation of what the real strength of the League has been than the figures we have had. Then you will notice this important fact, that notwithstanding the reported heavy falling off in societies and membership there has been no falling off in the meetings held, moneys raised, and work done. So that those who have dropped out could not have been a very great source of strength to the League, or those remaining have developed greatly in working power. I am persuaded of this, that the real normal working power of the League never was greater nor even so great as it is today. Heretofore the strength of the society has been more of a social and educational character than spiritual; but for the last year or two the movement has been becoming more spiritual and consequently, the mere entertainment features are becoming less and less prominent. I believe that the great majority of our members seem to be impatient of anything that does not minister to spiritual growth. The General Secretary of the League says that it is impossible to attend the conventions without being impressed with this feature. It is a remarkable fact that in most societies the prayer and consecration meetings are better attended than any other meetings held by the League. But to my mind the surest sign we have of the growing spiritual influence of the League is to be found in its missionary work. If the Epworth League had no real spiritual life and power, it could not do missionary work. As the missionary effort of an individual, a church, or the whole League, increases it is quite safe to say that the individual and League are growing in spiritual influence, because missionary effort is an unselfish work which is made on behalf of others, and which certainly proves that as it increases, the influence of the individual or society increases. Here let me give you a few figures which will indicate the growth in missionary givings during the last few years:

In 1895-6 the givings were.....	\$3,126 00
In 1896-7 the givings were.....	9,427 00
In 1897-8 the givings were.....	14,928 00
In 1898-1899 the givings were.....	16,955 00

Last year the givings reached almost \$20,000, and these amounts have been given on the "pray, study and give," plan of the "Forward Movement" with no falling off in the other objects for which moneys are given. Our Epworth League Reading Circle has been a great success. During the past year fully ten thousand young people have been reached and influenced for good by the two thousand sets of books which have been published by the General Board. Many young people have formed habits of reading and systematic study that will be worth much to them.



YOSEMITE FALLS, YOSEMITE VALLEY.

community who are ready to join any new thing that comes along, with the usual result that as soon as the novelty dies out they die out, too. I believe that when the League was first organized its influence was rather of a weak kind. The novelty of the meeting of young people, and the enthusiasm that comes