

REPORT ON THE STATE OF RELIGION, BRUCE PRESBYTERY.

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REPORTS have been received from the following congregations: (1) Hanover and North Normanby; (2) St. Paul's, Walkerton; (3) Riversdale and Kinlough; (4) Knox Church, Paisley; (5) Pinkerton and West Brant; (6) Tara; (7) Westminster Church, Teeswater; (8) Allenford and Elsinore; (9) Port Elgin and Dumbfries; (10) Zion Church, Teeswater; (11) Balaklava, and (12) Geneva Church, Chesley.

I. ATTENDANCE AT CHURCH.

On this subject the majority of reports speak favourably. From the reports received I culled the following specimens. One says, "The attendance is good, as congregations go; but I do not say it is good." Another says: "The attendance at preaching services is good." A third remarks: "The gospel is faithfully preached, and the attendance on the means of grace is good." A fourth replies: "The gospel is faithfully preached, and the stated ordinances are regularly and well attended."

There is no indication, so far as we can see, that the gospel is losing its hold upon the great bulk of our people. On the contrary, it may be questioned whether there ever was a time when greater numbers attended the house of God than at the present time. There may be a great deal of deadness and coldness in many respects in our religious life, but so long as the people attend the means of grace on the Lord's Day, so long is there hope for the future of our Church and country. There is no other subject known to man that would draw such vast numbers of people together, from week to week, as the gospel of the grace of God. It still proves attractive, when rightly presented, because it is after all, though an "old story," "good news," the best news which has ever fallen on human ears; and though the carnal mind is enmity against God, yet there is a conscience in man to which the sublime truths of revelation make not appeal in vain. Men do feel that these truths have for them a meaning and a reality which none others have, and hence they come to hear them, because some dare not and others would not stay away.

II. One of the most hopeful signs of Church life in the present day is the marvellous energy which is being displayed in

SABBATH SCHOOL WORK.

The children of the present day are having much greater advantages in Sabbath School training than their fathers had. Will they prove brighter and better Christians as the result? It is to be feared that what they are gaining in Sabbath School advantages they are losing in family training, and as the latter is earlier and more continuously applied than the former, it is to be feared that instead of proving a godlier generation they may fall behind those who are now upon the stage of action. The reports indicate that this feature of Church work is receiving due attention. One report says: "The Sabbath School is in a good condition, being equipped with a good staff of earnest and active teachers, and is one of the most promising features of the Church in this place." Another one states that "The Sabbath School is in a prosperous condition. The work is most inviting." A third takes a less hopeful view, but at the same time shows that the writer keeps a high standard before the teacher, which all who engage in this great work should ever keep in mind. This report says: "The Sabbath School, I think, is doing fairly well. No room for boasting. My own fear is that the teachers do not press 'immediate acceptance' as they might do. I see a great lack of that nearly everywhere. The longer I live the more does my conscience condemn me if I do not press 'immediate acceptance' at all times and in all places."

Without enlarging on this subject, which will be better attended to in another report, we must not lose sight of the fact that the "State of Religion" cannot be hopeful if this important department of Church work is neglected or ignored. So far as I can gather from the reports, it is being attended to faithfully and well.

III. In regard to the training of the young in

BIBLE CLASSES,

so little is said in the reports on this subject that it is plain that the great problem, "How to retain our elder pupils in the Sabbath School and Bible Class," has not yet been satisfactorily solved. Whenever the ideal Sabbath School comes, viz., the whole congregation met together for the study of God's word—then young men and young women will not think it beneath them to attend the Sabbath School. So long as the idea is kept up that the Sabbath School is only for children, so long will it be difficult to keep young men and young women in the Sabbath School and Bible Class.

Two reports, however, speak favourably on this subject. One says: "The Monday evening Bible Class is increasing in interest and attendance. It is attended by all ages and both sexes. 'Hodge's Outlines of Theology' is used as a text-book. The doctrines, principles and polity of Presbyterianism are explained and proved from the Word of God. Almost every communion there are some from this class entering into full communion with the congregation." Another report makes the following encouraging statement: "The number attending Sabbath School is on the increase, and we are glad to be able to note a very gratifying improvement in the attendance of perhaps one of the most important classes of our people, viz., young men and women."

IV. When we come to consider the state of

THE PRAYER MEETING,

we come very closely to the subject of this report, viz., the "State of Religion." The prayer meeting may be looked on as the very lungs of the Church. If the Church is sound here there is hope for her; if she is not sound here there is great danger, unless the remedy be soon applied, that consumption will set in.

One report says: "Attendance at prayer meeting shows a small decrease." That I think is the least hopeful report on the subject. Another one says: "The prayer meeting has many signs of bright and hopeful promise. The attendance is large. . . . A warm sympathetic interest is manifested there in spiritual things." Another speaks of cottage prayer meetings being started in the congregation. Here the problem of getting young men into active work has been solved. The report goes on as follows: "Several young men now conduct meetings who a short time since would not lead in prayer. One thing in this pleases me. It is not a sport. I think it has come to stay." That is the kind of religion we want—the religion

that has come to stay. We have too much of the merely emotional type, and not enough of the steady, persevering kind that can withstand temptation, be faithful to duty, and make willing sacrifices for truth and principle in the hour of need.

V.—FAMILY WORSHIP AND TRAINING OF THE CHILDREN AT HOME.

This subject lies at the root of all Church life and work. There is, we fear, degeneracy here. There is not the training in the Bible and the Shorter Catechism, which formerly characterized so many Presbyterian homes. Presbyterianism can only be grown by training; for it is not natural to the depraved human heart. You will find that the children who grow up in worldly, prayerless, catechismless Presbyterian homes will naturally degenerate to some lower type of religious life, where they will be more at home, than under Presbyterian teaching—if not go to swell the great army of the unwashed, unchurch-going that abound throughout our land, and especially in the great centres of civilization. As a church, we must either train or die. If we have not religion in the home we will never have it in the pew.

This is how one report puts it. "Family worship is not observed in half of these homes. Many have an altar in their homes, but many have not." Another one puts it thus: "There is still room for improvement in family worship and instruction of the children in the home." A third declares: "Family worship is conducted in most of the homes, but I fear there are a few who do not have family worship." In one congregation we find the marvellous anomaly that "family worship is pretty generally observed," and yet "the spiritual atmosphere of the congregation" is said to be in a "low condition." We trust the principle of cause and effect does not come into play here, else I had better have left some of my remarks on this subject unsaid.

One report calls attention to the great and alas! too common evil of Presbyterians sending their children to convent schools. This trucking to Rome, for the sake of policy and gain, should be frowned down by all Protestants and especially by all Presbyterians. The principles of our Church utterly and entirely condemn such a course. Our people contribute with one hand to pull down Rome, and with the other many contribute to build it up. More and more this money-loving, policy-seeking age requires to be taught, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." On this subject, however, the report referred to speaks hopefully. I quote *verbatim* the language used: "Our children have all been taken away from the Papist school and there are indications that the people are beginning to see the sin of patronizing or having fellowship with Rome."

VI.—INCREASE OF MEMBERSHIP.

Nearly all the reports speak favourably on this point. It is very evident, that, notwithstanding our defects, we are making substantial progress as a Church. This is perhaps the most hopeful feature of the whole report. In one case, which deserves special mention, 110 have been added to the communion roll during the year—25 were removed, leaving a net gain of 85. This same congregation stood last year also at the top of the list, in this respect, and others though falling far behind have added considerably to their respective communion rolls, showing that so far as this is a criterion satisfactory progress is being made.

There has been more or less of a leakage in the past in our Presbyterian system. A considerable number of the young and of the less intelligent annually drifted away from us owing to long continued vacancies and to the fact that certain other denominations seemed to present something more attractive to that class of people, who desire "to make a fair show in the flesh." The statistical reports presented from year to year in our church courts are beginning to show that that leakage has been discovered and is being rapidly overcome, but will hardly ever be finally and completely overcome, until we adopt some better system of supplying vacancies and of keeping them more permanently supplied, than we have at present—if the present can be called a system at all, whereby a considerable proportion of our churches are turned over as preserves for a certain length of time to the other denominations, until those who are left in the congregation in despair at the leakage finally trying to stop it, by inserting a ministerial plug, only to find that they have inserted a square man in a round hole, and for a time partially stop the leakage, only to pull him out again, after a time, in order, if possible, to get a round man, and when they get a round man perhaps, they find that the hole has turned square, and so the trouble goes on. Nevertheless, as a Church, we are making progress, for which we have reason to thank God, and take courage. Whatever little progress we make we hold on to it with tenacity, until we are ready to take another step. Although we do not profess to place any dependence in our own "holding on," by the help of God we hold on nevertheless, remembering the blessed promise: "The righteous also shall hold on his way, and he that hath clean hands shall be stronger and stronger." (Job 17:9)

VII.—FINANCES (ORDINARY).

Some people of the sentimental and selfish type may imagine that finances have nothing to do with the "State of Religion"; but the most of sensible people have a different opinion. The Gospel takes possession of a man's head, then his heart, then his pocket and, until it has captured all three, it can hardly be said to have captured the man. A Christian first receives, then gives and then comes to realize the meaning of those marvellous words of Christ, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." On this subject the reports generally speak hopefully. This is a good sign, because it is upon this rock, perhaps, more than any other, that many a fair congregational bark splits and goes down a shattered wreck. If we had a little more of the Presbyterian and a little less of the Congregational principle, applied to the subject of financing, it would be a great deal better if us as a church. We would not have so many long vacancies and so many short pastorates as we have. There is too much restlessness in the ecclesiastical atmosphere. It seems charged with electricity, ready to burst at a moment's notice in peals of thunder over the minister's head. Restlessness, engendered by democratic institutions, which calls for a continual change of rulers and the same instability manifested in other forms of church polity, developing themselves side by side with us, tend to engender the same spirit among ourselves, which is entirely contrary to the genius of our system. The remedy for this evil is the grace and a more thorough carrying out of our own principles.

As a Presbytery, we manage to keep our heads above the financial waves tolerably well. Long may it be so. May the experience of one congrega-

tion be the experience of us all, and more abundantly, which declares: "There is an increase compared with previous years—this year, the contributions to all purposes being about double of any previous year."

VIII. CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SCHEMES OF THE CHURCH.

There is great room for improvement in this important department. The silence of the reports generally on this subject speaks louder than words. This Presbytery does not take the stand it ought to take in comparison with other Presbyteries. There is a sad streak of meanness somewhere. As somebody has said, we want "more means and less meanness" devoted to this matter, and then shall we take the place that the developed and undeveloped resources of the territory covered by the Presbytery of Bruce entitle us to take as compared with the other Presbyteries of the Church. This is how one of the most liberal congregations in the Presbytery to the schemes of the Church speaks on the subject, showing what it is to have a high ideal: "We do fairly well for the three Mission Schemes, but the others are neglected." Another report merely mentions "an increase in contributions for Missions." But on this subject, with regard to the majority of the reports, we might take up the language of Joseph to his brethren, and say to these reports: "Ye are spies, to see the nakedness of the land ye are come." The remedy is "educate," "educate," "educate," until our congregations hear the command of God and obey it, "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it." (Mal. iii., 10.)

IX. On the subject of PASTORAL VISITATION

very little is said in the reports. One speaks of visiting the families of the congregation twice during the year, which is certainly very good, as pastoral visitation goes. This is one of the most difficult departments of a minister's work. He who can attend to this part of the work, so as to keep down "growing" on the part of the people deserves credit indeed. And better still is he who finds it a delight and a joy to meet with people in their own homes, and with tact and knowledge of human nature, brings the truth to bear personally upon human souls. This is following in the footsteps of the Apostles, which after all is the best kind of "Apostolical succession." This is to be Pauline, if not in Theology, at least in Pastoral Theology, for does he not declare in his charge to the elders or bishops of the congregation of Ephesus, "How I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have showed you and have taught you publicly, and from house to house." (Acts xx., 20) No doubt what one report says is true of most, if not all, "The work has been going on steadily and quietly, and we hope not unsuccessfully." No, not all—there are still "troubles in Israel," and will be as long as human nature is depraved and fallen and lost, and Christians are weak and erring and imperfect. Hence we cannot but sympathize with the brother who is Pauline in experience in having "a thorn in the flesh," if not literally, at least ecclesiastically, when he writes, "We are greatly troubled in some parts by petty jealousies and spites." Notwithstanding this, most hopeful is the report from another part of the same field which declares, over another signature, that "the Gospel is faithfully preached"—showing that faithful preaching and troubles may be found together.

X. SPIRITUAL LIFE.

On this subject let some of the reports speak for themselves. One says: "There is, however, a great want of true vital godliness in our congregations, yet by a diligent use of the ministry of the word we expect to enjoy much spiritual improvement. . . . We have very great need of an earnest prayerfulness of spirit, in order to draw down the promised blessing God is willing to bestow. May He grant us willingness to pray for it." From one who always sends in an extra good report I glean the following: "I am working harder this winter than ever I did before. The machinery is going, but we greatly need the 'oil.' But we get that for the asking." Another says: "The spiritual life of the congregation is improving, but still there is great need for improvement. The business and pleasures of the world have a strong grip on many." One report declares, "There is not much desire to talk about Christ or to confess Him." In another report we find the following extraordinary yet most encouraging statement: "We have no tipping church members." We must say, "Happy is that congregation that is in such a case, yes, happy is that people whose God is the Lord." The tipping Church member is found in too many congregations. O that the time may come, and that soon, when he shall take his place with the fossil mastodon and the extinct dodo, and no longer disgrace our Christianity! He is, we believe, rapidly passing away. "The old order changeth and giveth place to the new" in this as in many other things. On the whole, during the past year, "The Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad." It has been a year of blessing and of substantial growth. Hard times in the commercial world are generally good times in the religious world, and I question whether this year is any exception to that rule. Let us look on the bright side of things. The promises of God enjoin us so to do. "Let us not be weary in well doing; for in due season we shall reap if we faint not." "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt." May the Lord "hasten it in His time."

March 10, 1886.

There is a great deal of aspiration towards the peace and blessedness of Heaven which ought not to be interpreted too literally. The squire of an English hamlet had just bestowed an alms upon the village mendicant. "May the Lord give your soul a place in Heaven!" exclaimed the grateful beggar. "Thank ye, Thomas, thank ye," said the squire. Encouraged by this appreciation, the beggar went on fervently, "May he give it a place in Heaven—ay, this very night." "Hold! Thomas," said the alarmed squire; "you needn't be so particular to name the date." When a whole Christian congregation, in doleful harmony, expresses its unanimous desire to lay "this aching head" and "weary breast" "low in the ground," it may be safely assumed that the congregation has no such unanimous desire to name the date—at least, not an early date.—S. S. Times.

Sabbath School Work.

LESSON HELPS.

SECOND QUARTER.

SOWING AND REAPING.

LESSON VI., May 9th, John iv., 27-42; memorize verses —.

GOLDEN TEXT.—"One soweth and another reapeth."—John 17, 37.

TIME.—December, A D 27. The same day with the last lesson.

PLACE.—Jacob's well, half a mile from Sychar in Samaria.

CIRCUMSTANCES.—To-day's lesson follows close upon our last. On his way to Galilee Jesus passed through Samaria, and resting at Jacob's well while his disciples went on to Sychar to buy some food, he had a conversation on the living water with a Samaritan woman, who had come to the well for water. Just as he had announced himself as the Messiah his disciples returned with the food from the city, and our lesson for to-day begins.

HELPS OVER HARD PLACES.—27. *Marvelled*, because Rabbis were not accustomed to give their learning in public to women, because she was a Samaritan, and because of the evident interest the Lord took in her welfare. 28. *Waterpot*: the same word as is used for the waterpots at the marriage in Cana (2:7). 32. *That ye know not of*: the spiritual life God gave him in his work, and the refreshment that came from helping the needy and serving God. 35. *Say ye, not four months, etc.* four months from that time. The harvest was in April. This time was therefore December; the sowing was a month or two earlier. *Lift up your eyes*: doubtless pointing to the Samaritans who were approaching from Sychar to learn from him. 36. *Fruit unto life eternal*. the result was the eternal salvation of others, and nobler and better life for themselves. This was their wages. 38. *I sent you, etc.*: Jesus had sown in their absence, now they were to reap. So it would be all through their lives. Prophets of old, John the Baptist, and Jesus himself, sowed the seed that grew into the church of God.

SUBJECTS FOR SPECIAL REPORTS.—Review of last lesson.—Faith through the testimony of others.—Faith through our own experience of the truth (v. 34).—The spiritual harvest.—Sowers and reapers rejoicing together.—Fruit unto eternal life.

LEARN BY HEART the memory verses 35, 36. Ps. 126: 5, 6; Gal. 6: 7, 8.

QUESTIONS.

INTRODUCTORY.—Where was Jesus going in our last lesson? At what season of the year? Where did he rest? With whom did he have a long conversation? On what subject?

SUBJECT: SOWING AND REAPING.

I. FIRST SOWING.—*Personal Invitations to Christ* (vs. 27-29).—Where were Jesus' disciples during his conversation? At what did they marvel on their return? Why? What did the Samaritan woman now do? What did she tell her fellow-townsmen? Why these rather than strangers? What can you do in inviting men to Jesus?

FIRST REAPING.—What was the effect of her invitation? Were they wise in going to Jesus to learn more? What does Paul say about sowing and reaping? (Gal. 6: 7, 8; 2 Cor. 9: 6) What is said in the Psalms? (Ps. 126: 5, 6.) Is some good effect sure to follow from inviting others to Christ? Can we have the harvest unless we do the sowing?

II. SECOND SOWING.—*Working for Christ* (vs. 31-34).—What did Jesus reply when asked to eat the bread brought by his disciples? What was the food "that they knew not"? Can we have that food? Does working for Christ refresh our bodies?

SECOND REAPING (vs. 35-38).—How long was it before the harvest? How near was the spiritual harvest? What were the "fields white to the harvest"? What are the "wages" of those that reap? What is "the fruit unto eternal life"? Who had sown the harvest the disciples were to reap? What is life eternal? Was this harvest eternal life in themselves or in others? Do the unknown sowers of good seed have as much to do with the harvest as the reapers? What comfort for many in this? Why is the harvest a time of rejoicing?

III. THIRD SOWING.—*Faith* (39, 40).—Why did the Samaritans believe on Jesus? Was this a good foundation for faith? What two things did it lead them to do? (vs. 39, 40)

THIRD REAPING (vs. 41, 42).—How long did Jesus remain at Sychar? What was he probably doing during this time? What two results of their faith do we see? (vs. 40, 41.) Why did they believe now? What did they believe? Was this a better foundation than the other? Is there anything so helpful to faith as a personal acquaintance with Jesus and experience of his salvation? Is Jesus a better Saviour to us because he is the Saviour of the world?

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS.

- I. Those that sow shall reap what they sow.
II. Only by sowing good seed can there be a harvest of good.
III. Invite all you can, especially those nearest you, to come to Christ.
IV. God feeds our spirits through work for him and our fellow-men.
V. The harvest of souls is always ready to be gathered.
VI. A little faith well used leads to greater faith and brings us into communion with Jesus.
VII. Let us place our faith more and more on the foundation of personal acquaintance with Jesus and his Gospel.

REVIEW EXERCISE.—(For the whole school in concert.) 5. What did the Samaritan woman do when she had found the Saviour? Ans. She went to her townsmen and invited them to go to Jesus. 6. What does Jesus say was his food? Ans. (Repeat v. 34.) 7. When is the spiritual harvest? Ans. (Repeat v. 35.) 8. What is the reward of those who sow and reap this harvest? Ans. (Repeat v. 36.) 9. What harvest was gathered during the two days at Sychar? Ans. Many of the Samaritans became Christians.

PHOTOGRAPHS are taken in Cape Town, Africa, of all persons twice convicted of drunkenness, which are sent to all saloon keepers, with orders not to sell these persons any more liquor.—The Watchman.