

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

PRESENT STATE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE AMONG US, AND THE INFLUENCES BY WHICH IT IS UNFAVOURABLY AFFECTED.

PAPER READ AT THE CONFERENCE OF THE TORONTO PRESBYTERY ON THE 11TH OF FEBRUARY, BY REV. JOHN M. AINSIE, A.M., TORONTO.

Religion, as a personal attainment, is communion with God. Its state at any given time is dependent on the sense which the soul has of God's presence, and on the measure in which this presence is at once a source of enjoyment and an inspiration to holiness. Its vigour is determined by the closeness and the constancy with which fellowship with God is maintained, and by the degree in which God is served in the life, and the ends are sought which are dear and sacred to Him. From the nature of the case, it is obvious that it must be extremely difficult to determine, with any degree of exactness and certainty, its state at a given period in any community, or in any branch of the Church of Christ. It has its seat, the sphere of its most vital movements, in a region which the human eye cannot penetrate. "The kingdom of God," said the Saviour, "is within you, and cometh not with observation." And yet the attempt must be made from time to time to ascertain the form and dimensions which the kingdom is assuming, its advancement or its retrogression, and this, not simply as a matter of intense human interest, but as determining to some extent the duty of the hour.

While the state of religious life in a community is, for the reason stated, not ascertainable by direct observation, there are several tolerably exact indications of the condition of strength or of weakness, of growth or of decline, in which it exists. Among others there may be mentioned, the attendance on the public worship of God; the measure of liberality in the support of the ordinances of religion and in the propagation of the Gospel; the number of accessions to the full communion of the Church; the way in which the Lord's day is observed; the moral tone of the community as reflected in the integrity with which business is conducted, in the purity of private, domestic and public life, in the consideration shewn towards the poor and the suffering; and, very specially, the personal efforts put forth by members of the Church to instruct the ignorant and reclaim the fallen, to arouse the careless, and to bring the indifferent and unbelieving to the acknowledgment of the truth and of the Saviour.

It will be the aim of this paper in the first place to apply these tests with the view of ascertaining the state of religious life among ourselves at the present time. My remarks will have reference mainly to the city, as by previous arrangement the brother who is to follow me will deal more particularly with the rural districts embraced within the Presbytery; and while in these statements I have chiefly in view the Presbyterian Church, they will probably be found to be not inapplicable to the condition of things in other branches of the Church of Christ. It may fall in with the ecclesiastical theories of some among us, to isolate themselves from the great majority of Christian people, appropriating as their exclusive possession the great catholic name, the Church, in which all true believers have a share, in a spirit, which it is better not to characterize; but the Head of the Church in sustaining its life utterly disregards these human walls of separation. His grace does not flow exclusively either through Episcopal or Presbyterian channels. The members of His body have vital connections not only with Him, but in Him with one another, and no theory of the Church, however firmly and conscientiously maintained, can either alter or obscure the obvious fact that the various branches of the Church of Christ share to a large extent, each of them, in the strength and in the weakness, in the quickened life and in the impaired life, of the other.

Proceeding with the application of the test above mentioned, it is pleasant to have to state that the attendance on the public worship of God is very general on the part of nearly all classes of citizens. There are few cities in Christendom, if there is indeed one, which has a larger amount of church accommodation in proportion to the number of the inhabitants, than that in which we are met, and most of the churches, of our own and of other denominations, are well filled. Again, the contributions of the people for religious purposes, including the erection of churches, the sup-

port of ordinances, Home and Foreign Missions, the education of the ministry, are large; very greatly in advance of what they were some years ago, though it is not to be forgotten that the wealth in Christian hands has also greatly increased. It is, no doubt, true that there are instances probably in all our congregations in which the amount given by professedly Christian men for the maintenance and extension of that Gospel to which they owe all that is best in this life and their only hope for another, is sadly, not to say ludicrously, disproportionate to their personal expenditure and even to their givings for objects of confessedly smaller moment; but that there is among us a great amount of most generous and self-sacrificing giving for religious and charitable objects, it were a sin against truth and against the Christian people to call in question. Then, the number is very considerable who are entering the full communion of the Church by public personal acknowledgment of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is, so far as I have been able to learn, none of our fourteen congregations in the city and its suburbs which has not had the privilege of welcoming several such at each observance of the communion during the year, while in some instances these accessions have been gratifyingly large. With regard to the observance of the Lord's day, it is, in respect of cessation from labour and business, of outward quiet and decorum, very general, much in advance of what it is believed to be in many cities, whether of the new world or the old. For the present at least, we have neither open stores, nor Sunday newspapers, nor street-cars running. It is more difficult to speak with certainty respecting the moral tone of the community. We are safe in saying that very many of our Church members compel the respect and confidence of those about them by their business integrity, by their truthfulness and high sense of honour, and by the sobriety and purity of their lives, and that in a good measure these give tone to the moral sentiment of numerous circles. It is easier to speak with confidence respecting another of the indications of religious life to which reference has been made, the consideration shewn for the destitute and suffering. In few places of the same size are more thought and time, not to mention money, given to the care of the orphaned, to the relief of the needy, to the comfort of the sick poor, and to the restoration of the fallen, than in this city. And coming to interests which lie more directly within the sphere of Church life, it can be affirmed that there are very many patient, prayerful workers in all the churches for the instruction of the young, and not a few who are seeking directly the conversion of the unregenerate and sinful.

Taking all these facts into account, we would be led to form a favourable estimate on the whole of the present state of religious life among us. I am safe in saying that, while it is far enough from the state in which all earnest Christians would desire to see it, there is still in connection with it very much to call for profound gratitude to the God of all grace.

But the truth compels us to add that in respect to almost all the particulars mentioned above, there are painful qualifications to be made. While attendance on the public worship of God is very general, the number of professing Christians who restrict this attendance to a single service on the Lord's day is considerable, while not a few of all classes rarely find themselves in the sanctuary. This is true, especially of that part of the population, probably not fewer than five or six thousand, who live in boarding-houses, a very large proportion of whom are known either to absent themselves entirely from the public worship of God, or to be infrequent and irregular attendants on it. Again, while accessions to the full communion of the Church are happily numerous, there are very many young people of both sexes, but especially young men, many of them reared in Christian homes, who allow year after year to pass without making any personal profession of faith in the Saviour. While the moral tone of the community is, on the whole, high, the existence of a large amount of dishonesty, intemperance, and impurity, is too patent to be denied, and it is a thing to be desired, rather than to be claimed, that church members have no share in these blots on our Christian civilization. And finally, while there are numerous bands of patient and zealous Sabbath school teachers, one has to lament the smallness of earnest individual effort to bring the openly godless and unbelieving to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. While such admissions have to be made, it

were sad indeed if we could be satisfied with the existing condition of things, if our prayer were not, "O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years; in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy."

Moreover, in endeavouring to estimate the state and prospects of religious life in a community, it is not enough to ascertain as nearly as possible at what point it stands at any given time; it is almost more important to determine whether it is in a condition of advance or of retrogression; whether the influences affecting it unfavourably are gaining or losing strength; to what extent what is gratifying in the situation is due to the movements of the past, and to what extent it is the result of forces at present in full and vigorous operation. I content myself with stating this very important aspect of the question before us, and trust it may receive the attention of some who are to follow me in the consideration of the subject. No treatment of the subject of the state of religion which overlooks this point can be satisfactory; it may possibly be extremely misleading, as much so as an individual's congratulation of himself on the temperature of his chamber when the fire in the furnace room was fast going out.

I now proceed to deal with the second part of the topic assigned to me, the influences by which religious life among us is unfavourably affected. Any statement on this point must be necessarily brief, and therefore inadequate.

The natural depravity of the human heart, with its ignorance of divine things, its aversion to God, and its proneness to sin, only partially overcome in regeneration, is of course pre-supposed here as that through which these adverse influences acquire their power to lower the tone of religious life and to mar its beauty. This is a constant factor in the matter in hand, and would be one to fill us with despondency, or rather to awaken a feeling of hopelessness, but for the promise of the Holy Ghost, the Sanctifier.

In taking account of the influences which are at work among us to depress and injure religious life, it is impossible to overlook the still very general practice of using intoxicating liquors. It goes without saying that whether used at public entertainments, or at the private table, or partaken of in the saloon, or anywhere else, these intoxicants are full of danger to the moral and religious, as to the material well-being of those who have recourse to them. It is safe to say that there is none of our congregations which within a few years has not lost more than one of its members through this dangerous indulgence; persons taken from the communion table either through the discipline of the Church or through their own sense of what is right and becoming; while it is to be feared that in most congregations, if not all, some remain on the communion roll with doubtful benefit to themselves and with little credit to religion through their unchristian excess. It is an undeniable fact that the same cause keeps many more from embracing the Saviour and professing faith on His name. Moreover, in multitudes of cases in which the use of intoxicants scarcely amounts to excess, or what is usually reckoned such, its effect is to lower sensibly the religious life. The evil is probably not greater than it was, perhaps it is even not so great. But it is still such as to make it needful to say in the ear of the professing Church, "Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit."

In former days, the love of the world in the form of wealth, the desire of accumulating property, with the opportunities and inducements to it supplied by a new country, used to be spoken of as one of the main hindrances to religious life. We know that it was a hindrance in the days of Christ; that He had to say over one otherwise hopeful inquirer, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of heaven." It continues to be a hindrance, and will continue while wealth brings with it influence, social consideration, and external comforts, and the truth has not been learned that "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." But it appears to me that in this city we have reached a stage when the love of pleasure, with its late hours, its dissipating tendencies, its frequent interruptions to family worship if not to private devotions, its sometimes doubtful or more than doubtful forms, is as widely injurious to growth in grace as the love of money, if not more widely. Let us not be misunderstood. Religion has no quarrel with pleasure; piety has nothing to fear from it, when it is pursued in mod-