

THE
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THE GREAT QUESTION.

UNDER the above heading, one of our Methodist contemporaries recently published an editorial article of so extraordinary a character, theologically considered, as to prompt the inquiry whether *that* can be the teaching of John Wesley to whom all good Methodists are required to swear allegiance?

The writer of the article to which we refer sets out to expounding this question of questions, asked by the multitudes on the day of Pentecost—"What shall we do?"—laying special emphasis upon the word "do" which he says, truly enough, was the burden of the cry of the young ruler and of the Philippian jailor. But upon this consentaneous use of the word he founds the curious argument that it is the teaching of the Holy Ghost, and therefore, that the sinner has something to "do" to obtain eternal life.

"No other language," he says, "is appropriate, and it must be extreme folly to attempt to improve on the Holy Spirit's own methods, or to originate words more becoming. Putting language in the lips of inquirers, differing from, and designed to supersede what grace teaches them to employ, is to divert their attention from the great object desired, and to inflict injury instead of good, as though the Holy Spirit was not competent to accomplish His own work aright."

Now, in our judgment, the *form* of the question, instead of being the prompting of the Holy Spirit, is rather the suggestion of man's evil and unbelieving heart, as is proved by the reply given by our Lord to the young ruler, "answering a fool according to his folly," that he might show him the utter futility of his "doing." Every one who has had any experience in attempting to direct anxious inquirers into the way of life, knows that the universal tendency, in such a condition of mind, is to "do" something—to think of obtaining salvation, not of the mere mercy of God through faith in Jesus Christ, but by some "work of righteousness" which *we* are to do.

The answer of Paul to the question of the Philippian jailor the writer thinks "is a good one"—we are thankful that so far he agrees with Paul!—but qualifies his opinion by adding that it is "doubtless appropriate *in many cases!*" But as Paul said nothing about "doing" but only, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved"—he thinks "many need fuller instruction, a clearer insight into their own hearts, and the plan of salvation. Some have not a sufficient supply of the grace of repentance, and do not sincerely and fully renounce their sin * * * Others "are in danger of confounding a single act of the mind with entire dedication of heart and life to God. While others still "are liable to substitute a mere assent of their intelligence for a wholesome reliance of all their powers on Jesus." The "fuller instruction" he proposes is to show to inquirers what they "must do," as John taught the publicans and the

soldiers, and as Peter exhorted the awakened, at the Pentecost, to "repent," and "save themselves from this untoward generation." "After all this, he concludes, to denounce "working out our salvation" as wrong, and "doing" as "deadly," cannot be consistent, Scriptural, or right—it is to teach a way unknown to Scripture, and contrary to that taught us of God.

To us, at least, all this is "darkening counsel with words without knowledge." The awakened sinner is nowhere in the Bible exhorted to seek a "clearer insight into his own heart," or "a sufficient supply of the grace of repentance," or "fuller instruction" than Paul gave the stricken jailor. And Paul himself never exhorted such a soul to "work out his salvation," or to "do" anything before believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. *That* counsel he reserved for *renewed souls*. And as for urging sinners "without strength" to "a wholesome reliance of all their powers on Jesus"—the muddle is too distressing for comment! How simple and beautiful in comparison is the teaching of Christ and His apostles! "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." "He that heareth my word, and believeth on Him that sent me, hath everlasting life; and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life." "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us." There, my soul, forever be thy trust!

TAKING A BACK SEAT.

THIS is to be commended sometimes. Our Saviour teaches us that in one of His parables. He warns His hearers not to sit down in the highest rooms when they are bidden to a wedding. He counsels them to choose the lowest room. His meaning is that they are to be humble, not lofty-minded and aspiring.

We are sure, however, that He would severely condemn what is often seen in these days. Taking a back seat is not always praiseworthy. It is not everywhere a sign of extraordinary grace.

We at one time wondered if humility made people rush for the seats nearest the door on prayer-meeting night. We have ceased to wonder long ago. You see a man come in at the door, and it looks as if his feet, having carried him so far, were not able to carry him much farther, and he sets himself down where he can first find space enough. And so, generally, you will find this result: The minister or the leader sits or stands in solitude at his end of the apartment, and then there is a large vacant space before the congregation begins to be. We fancy that most of the brethren are afraid to be called on to pray. Or it may be that the moments are so precious to them that they want to get out at the door as soon as possible when all is done. Whatever may be the reason for it, we cannot but

believe that this taking a back seat is a bad sign. It seems as if there was not much interest in the design of the meeting, nor much desire to help to further that design.

When there is any special work to do—and it is doubly true if the work be hard and trying—there is a great deal of demand for back seats. Artemus Ward was quite willing to sacrifice his wife's relations years ago during the American civil war. There are people in the church always who much prefer that others should take the lead, and bear all the responsibility, and win all the honour in difficult and arduous undertakings. There must be something wrong there. The devoted soul does not lag in the rear. It does not fear heavy burdens. It does not shrink from self-denial. Such a soul wants to press to the front in every holy endeavour.

Will men be content with back seats in heaven? Well, it will be a good thing to be anywhere there. But it must put some drop of bitterness in our cup of sweetness to see and know that our position and rank there might have been better and higher. Usefulness here decides glory hereafter. Every man goes into his own place there. Take a back seat here in humility and you reach a front seat there in dignity. But take a back seat here in spiritual character, in Christian service, in charity, in purity, in earnestness, in fidelity, and a back seat must be yours forever.

Correspondence.

To the Editor of the CANADIAN INDEPENDENT.

There is no publication which comes to my hands that I read with greater pleasure than the INDEPENDENT. Canada is my native place. Many of the older and some of the younger clergymen of our denomination in Canada remember with affection my father, the pioneer Vermonter, who spent his days in loving and earnest labours for the Master at Danville, P.Q. Naturally then I come by the love I have for Canada and for Congregationalism. I have watched the course of our denominational ship in the Dominion, and when favourable breezes have speeded her, my heart has rejoiced; when the sky has lowered and storms have impeded her, sympathy has saddened me. There is much in the history of Congregationalism in Canada to cheer one that loves our polity and to give hope for the future. Though it is small, counting adherents, in comparison with some other denominations, yet I venture to say none have done more for the highest and holiest welfare of the Dominion than she has. Education, moral reform, and a high standard of Christian belief and living have been strenuously insisted upon by Congregationalists, and Canada will one day bless the churches that have done so much for her permanent prosperity. A Canada Presbyterian said to me not long ago, "The Congregationalists have always been friends of the temperance cause and an advanced system of education, and their influence has extended far beyond their own denominational limits. So it is the world over. Other churches have received rich gifts from our liberality; and reform, the world over, has received impetus and strength by the warm sympathy and help of our churches. The Liberal party of Britain and the Dominion, and the Republican party of the United States hold politically the great bulk of the Congregationalists. The temperance reform is backed by our churches. Dr. Reynolds, the Red Ribbon Apostle, said to me, "your denomination has always been found by me on the right side of the temperance question."

Our schools, academies, colleges and seminaries,