

Causes for the Alienation of the Wage Earner from the Church

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In these later days perhaps there is no subject that has so much engaged the attention of Church conferences, and ministerial associations, as the question "How to reach the masses." The very fact that it is asked, implies that the masses are already away, or drifting from the church. Now, undoubtedly, the question will be raised right here, is it true that the wage earner is to any extent alienated from the Church? Is it true, that men and women living in a Christian country, and enjoying all the blessings of a Christian civilization and who for general purposes are designated Christians, are yet completely outside the organization of the Christian Church, go to no place of worship, and have no professed religious beliefs? Alas it is even so. And the most discouraging part of it seems to be, their numbers are rapidly growing; and in many places the church seems to be losing whatever little hold she ever had. In speaking as I do I have reference exclusively to cities and towns, not to country places. In order to prove to you that my contention is correct let me give you a few authentic statistics. Some time ago 45 large cities in the United States were canvassed, to discover the number of church goers, and only 44 per cent. even professed to attend church at all, and it was afterwards discovered that 50 per cent. of this number scarcely ever darkened a church door. In the United States alone it is estimated that over half of the population, or nearly 40,000,000 people never enter the precincts of a place of worship. The State of Maine alone, has 70 towns, where once service was held, and today there is not even a semblance of worship. The work died for lack of support. Michigan has 250 towns destitute of all religious ordinances, and so I might continue. Even in old church going Scotland, I heard Lord Overton make the statement at a very large meeting in Glasgow, that there were 400,000 people in the city of Glasgow, who never attended any place of worship.

When we come to Canada we are not so well supplied with statistics, but we have every reason to believe that there is but little difference. In Montreal we have sitting accommodation in our Presbyterian Churches for about 10,000 to 12,000 people, but there are nearly double that number of professed Presbyterians in Montreal. Supposing the churches were all full every Sunday, what becomes of the remaining number. And when we say the churches full, what a stretch of the imagination. Many of our large churches, where from 700 to 1,000 can be accommodated, have but usual congregations of 200 and 300 every Sunday. Where are the others going? Echo answers, where? When we consider these things, the inadequate seating accommodation as compared with the Presbyterian population, the empty pews on the Sunday, the number of good sermons that, comparatively speaking, waste their sweetness on the desert air, we begin to realize the tremendous problem that is

facing the church of Jesus Christ at the dawning of this 20th century. "The alienation of the masses from the church," in the face of these statistics, is a subject that may well for a few minutes engage our most serious attention.

Now there are two theories advanced to account for the absence of the masses from the church. One explanation is volunteered by the non church goer. He declares, that the total blame lies on the churches themselves. He asserts that the church has become but a sort of mutual congratulation society, in which Christianity according to Christ is extinct; where the poor are not wanted, and the man with the poor garment is either placed right at the door, or elbowed out altogether. According to this man, the Parson is a sort of Theological snob, who reads unpractical essays to his self-satisfied congregation on the Sabbath, and draws his salary during the week. He caters to the rich, and despises the poor, he preaches sermons that do not touch men's every day life, and are highly theoretical, and gives to men but little real assistance in fighting the battle of life. The fact of the matter is, he is after the fleece and cares not at all for the flock. Thus this censorious critic throws all the blame on the churches, and the church people, and the ministers, and goes his way, perfectly satisfied, that no blame rests upon himself or the masses. All the trouble lies with the hypocritical church attenders, and the Pharisaic ministers.

Then we have another view point from which the situation is regarded, viz., that of the minister and the church people. By them you will frequently hear the blame thrown entirely upon the masses, themselves. They are such a miserable, useless, drunken, cantankerous, unreasonable lot of people, that even if the Master himself were here he could do nothing with them. They will make all sorts of ridiculous excuses for not coming to Church, and would much prefer going away picnicing, on the Sunday to attending any place of worship. The only time they want the church, or have any use for the minister is when they expect to eat something or advance their own material interests. The fault of the non church going then lies, not at the door of the minister, not at the door of the church people, but simply at the door of the unreasonable, godless masses themselves.

Now, undoubtedly, there is truth in both of these theories, but neither of them contains the whole truth. When one is advanced as the sole, and only cause of non church going, it becomes a falsehood, and wrongs the other class. I believe there are faults on both sides; and when a critical examination is entered into it will be found that neither part is wholly to blame, nor yet is either wholly blameless. Let us for a moment endeavor to get at the causes from the people's side,

WHY SO MANY NEVER ENTER A CHURCH.

There is no doubt but that poverty

makes some people stay away from church. There are good people, who would really be glad to attend the services of the sanctuary, but they have not clothes with which to dress as respectably as do other people, and hence they remain away. Many a poor mother, who has once seen better days, has a large family of children, and nothing but her husband's small pittance to support and clothe all, would rather than see her children inferior in appearance to others, keep them at home and stay there herself. Oftentimes my heart has gone out in deepest sympathy to such a person thus kept away from the church. The minister is not to blame here, nor the church people, nor yet the poor people themselves, but hard unchangeable circumstances, induced by an unrighteous social environment. Another cause of non church going, in the case of some, is Sunday employment. In their awful lust for gold, great corporations are willing to drive whole trains through the Lord's day, and compel men who would go to church to run them. Money-grabbing bosses, will order the men under them to work all Sunday, and if they dare to refuse, they will be dismissed the very first opportunity that presents itself. Through this devil's own curse, there are many men, and families kept from attending the Lord's house on the Sabbath.

While undoubtedly both of these causes keep some from church, still the number when compared with the great countless army of non church goers is small. The great reason of non church going from the side of the masses, it seems to me, is the absolute indifference to all religion that prevails. The great majority of non church goers that I meet, do not want the church, and have no desire, not even a curiosity about religion. They treat it with absolute indifference. They are quite content to live without God, and without hope in the world. They are willing to have their little world bounded on the one side by the workshop, in which they grind out their living; on the other by the home in which they dwell, or rather exist; on the other by the few friends and boon companions that they can pick up by the way; and on the other by whatever little pleasure or amusement they can snatch from their meager environment. The higher life has for them no meaning whatever. Like the beasts of the field they live, move, and have their being in the little present, and in that alone. And the worst of it is, many of them will resist any intrusion into their world by a servant of Christ as an interference, that should not be tolerated. This man looks upon the church as a place where hypocrites go, and as an institution to draw forth some money from his reluctant purse. It is this dull, dark, damning atheism, that is abroad to day, that is the great reason why men will not attend the church. You ask me why I make such a statement, I answer because of my hard, unsentimental experience in trying to get men there. When a man listens to the excuses given from time to time, why people are not in church, he knows it simply means: "We do not wait for you, or your church." When a woman informs you that she cannot possibly attend church, and there can not be a concert of any kind, but what she is there, will come early, and remain late, one needs no interpretation to understand she simply does not want the church. When a man informs you