

# Messenger and Visitor.

THE CHRISTIAN MESSENGER,  
VOLUME LXI.

{ THE CHRISTIAN VISITOR  
VOLUME L.

Vol. XV.

ST. JOHN, N. B., WEDNESDAY, JULY 12, 1899.

No. 28

## The Purpose of the Covenant Meeting.

BY REV. A. C. CHUTE, B. D.

My earliest recollections of what we are wont to speak of as the "Conference Meeting" are connected with a little white meeting-house in the country of a Saturday afternoon. Words of confession and consecration fell from the lips of young and old. There were subsequent tarryings about the graves of departed friends in the adjoining churchyard. Despite features slow and sombre and hackneyed those seasons were gainful. In the way of holiness some feet were kept the more surely by closing the week and the month after that thoughtful manner. Then I recall the meeting as held during my first pastorate, also on Saturday, but then known as the Covenant Meeting, certainly a better name, because indicative of the object of the service, to wit, the renewal of the covenant. In these few latest years I have known it as a Wednesday evening gathering, which insufficiently retains, perhaps, the distinctive character of the earlier time. In part, it may be, because of having taken in some localities the place of the prayer service for one evening in the month, it has lost to some extent its individuality. While we do not believe that the former days were better than these, we do believe that not all innovations have been improvements. In some respects a return to old-time customs would be an advantage.

There are some, but the number must be few, who object altogether to the use of a "Covenant," fearing that its employment has a Rome-ward trend. But its long-time presence and use seems to give no warrant for the apprehension. Dangers lie alongside even things that are best, but best things are not therefore to be shunned. Church covenants are not creators of obligations but simply reminders of them. They call our attention to what is ever binding upon us, and hence they may well exist and be read and commented upon periodically in the presence of the assembled membership.

But let us pass from the general to the particular, and make as many as seven points in stating the purpose of the covenant meeting—points enough for the old-time preacher, though we promise you an avoidance of old-time elaboration. With that form of covenant in our hands which was prepared by Dr. J. Newton Brown, we shall be guided in our detailed answer to the inquiry: What is the purpose of the Covenant Meeting?

It is its purpose, as indicated by the covenant referred to, to keep us attentive to private devotions. Though knowing well what ought to be done, we require repeated stimulus to performance. Good books and good sermons and good counsels are in considerable degree just a jogging of the memory, a prompting to live up to the knowledge already gained. Failures in the closet foretell the failures under the public eye. Christ-like bearing and achievements have their origin in secret intimacy with the Saviour. Assembled with brethren amid associations that favor review of the trodden way, we discern anew the cause of defeats and omissions as again the words are heard: "We engage to maintain secret devotion." If the heart is at all sincere at such a time, there ensues a renewed watching unto prayer, and more of yearning to know the mind of God as it transpires in the Holy Word and in providential dealing.

The meeting is designed, as a second detail, to produce carefulness in the matter of home religion. A man announces his real self more accurately and more fully under his own roof, than anywhere else. Even though holding himself pretty well in check among those outside, there can be no great helpfulness from his life if he walks unbecomingly in the family relation. Our summary of duty incites to home vigilance. It calls upon us "to maintain family devotion," "to religiously educate our children," and "to seek the salvation of our kindred." It requires that blessed means of grace which should be found in every Christian household—the Family Altar. If the covenant meeting answers its end, it prompts fathers and mothers to sustain Family Worship with utmost care, if a Family Altar has already been erected, and if not, to establish it without delay, and ever after to uphold it at any cost. Where faithfully conducted, this exercise in the home impresses those who there bow the knee with their dependence, with their accountability and inability, and holds ever in view the real business of life and the one all-sufficient

source of strength and enlightenment. Neglect at this point is liable to be accompanied by neglect of all places that keep pushing to the front the demands of a Christian profession.

This meeting spurs to thorough uprightness and consistency in the contact with the world outside. It might seem superfluous to exhort Christians "to be just in their dealings, faithful in their engagements, and exemplary in their deportment." Surely there will be no failure in things so elementary. But there is, to the detriment of the great cause. Doubtful methods are resorted to in business transactions. There is misrepresentation with a view to financial gain. Meanness is exhibited. Employers and employed deal not fairly with one another. Promises are made and broken. Debts are contracted and there is neither payment nor explanation of delay. Money is borrowed and not returned. There is a great deal of conformity with the manners and customs and diversions of the ungodly. Hence the church's influence is seriously impaired. "What care I what you say," remarks Emerson, "when what you do stands over my head and thunders in my ears so loud that I cannot hear what you say." Or as an American humorist has it to the same effect: "There is advice enough lying around loose to run three just such worlds as this: what is wanted is some good examples." It is good examples that the Covenant meeting is adapted to produce, good examples the week through and in all situations. I must not say: "This section of my life is sacred," and here I must demean myself soberly and religiously"; and then a little later: "This section is secular, and here I can do as I please." A "religious" man, according to a pleasing derivation, is one who is bound back to God—bound back to him not in spots only but always. To be irreligious on Saturdays is to be the very same way on Sundays, no matter how correct and seemingly pious the outward demeanor. Christ is owned in our solemn covenant as Master of work-time and play-time, of places and seasons, for buying and selling as surely as those for praying, preaching and singing.

In the fourth place, it is the design of this meeting to increase sympathy and thoughtfulness for brethren in the church. While convened in this family-like relation, and hearing selections from the heart-histories of God's elect, we are drawn out of our narrow circle as the meeting runs on and a better understanding is reached respecting the difficulties others have to face. The selfish aims that are fostered by contact with mammon worshippers are rebuked. Searching examinations are begun. Why have I been so indifferent to that bereaved one? Why have I withheld counsel and encouragement from that oppressed brother or sister? Toward that young man who has just spoken I certainly have not done my duty. More attention should I have shown to that new-comer. Was I not too severe in the judgment I passed upon that brother over yonder? The atmosphere that begets such reflections and questionings is wholesome. It tends to put away complaint and usher in praise, to make us more appreciative of our mercies, to bring an end to selfish thought of what others should do for us, and to produce deep concern as to how we may lighten the loads of neighbors. Then the cry goes up: Lord grant me grace to open a more reputable, a more godly chapter in my history. Make me genial, make me kind, make me truly helpful. Give me the heart of a brother indeed, that I may have the brotherly face and the brotherly hand.

Fifthly, it is the object of the covenant meeting to foster zeal and stability in all our relations with our own particular church. The fervor of early discipleship is apt to wane. The devil is diligent to have it wane. Play-house competes with house of prayer. Lodgment is found for the suggestion that no Saturday or Monday headache is quite so severe as the one that arrives on Sunday. Fresh air, it is whispered, is more needed than Bible school. Literary Club than Young Peoples' Union. Tether not yourself to any one place of worship. Get about and have variety. How elevating is music, therefore go here, go there for something special. Hear the travelling star-preacher in the great auditorium. You are a lover of flowers, God's flowers, the flowers that teach so much about Divine love and care, you know, hence see the unusual display advertised for Easter morning. Forego ordinary for extraordinary. Things are not quite to your mind in your own church anyway. You are not there rated according to your worth. The people do not make enough of

you. They are not very sociable. The parson is at one time too outspoken, and again not enough so. The prayer meetings are dull and not worthy of support. Pulpit calls for money are too numerous and too loud. You are spiritual and want the gospel.

But lay to heart, peregrinating friends, that neglecters of their own church homes are of small account anywhere. The way to go far afield in proper sense is to look well after your own bit of ground. Forget not the lesson of the rolling stone. Betake yourselves, then, to the very next service for renewal of the covenant, and give special heed to the clause, which, if not found exactly in this form, is there in substance: "We engage to strive for the advancement of this church in knowledge, holiness and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline and doctrines; to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, and the relief of the poor." A new reading of the old covenant has brought many a one into line after temporary defection. Having a centre we will have a circumference. Being of worth somewhere in particular we are of worth to the great enterprise in general.

Next it is the purpose of the Covenant Meeting to give quickening in the work of world evangelization. With one point of the compass in the closet of prayer we are to swing a circle to earth's outmost limits. Hard and long is the task of expanding some hearts so widely. God has to put us through a variety of experiences. The Great Commission has to be iterated and reiterated before its claims are rightly comprehended. The covenant voices what was implied in our baptism when it says: "We engage to contribute cheerfully and regularly toward the spread of the gospel through all nations," and "be zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Saviour." Selfishness may display itself in generous giving for local work attended by the doling out of only a pittance for the cause in foreign parts. To be liberal to the local church and stingy to missions is a marked improvement upon spending all for one's own family. Nevertheless in such a case much mountain climbing remains to be done before the wasteful valley of self-interest lies well behind. A man long connected with a Baptist church once said to me: "I favor all objects mentioned on this card except foreign missions. I do not believe in giving one cent toward sending missionaries to the heathen." And he was a Christian of perhaps twenty-five years standing—verily standing instead of going. I felt like asking him if he ever saw the inside of a Bible. He is ignorant of what the Christian profession involves. He came up out of the baptismal waters without understanding his calling and has not since cared for instruction. None will wonder at the statement that he does not attend covenant meeting, and that he has no concern for the salvation of his next door neighbor. Shedding no rays of light afar he gives no spiritual light under his own roof. A suitably conducted and thoughtfully attended covenant meeting produces a deepening impression that there is but one work on hand for Christians, though there be an unlimited number of spheres for service, and shown an inspiring connection between nursery, workshop and office, and the enthronement of the Lord Jesus in human breasts.

Finally, the Covenant Meeting, as declared by the time of its holding, is designed to produce greater fitness for partaking of the Lord's Supper. In my memory are seen, among things lying farthest back, lines of carriages converging to the old-fashioned Presbyterian church on certain Fridays and Saturdays of the year. Why this coming together? We were told that these were "sacrament" seasons, and that the meetings were preparatory to the Lord's Supper. There was something fitting about this. To go to the Supper without reconsideration of what has been done for us and in us, and what Christ's sacrificial death exacts of the purchased, is to proceed unwisely, and to turn from commemoration of the greatest of events in human history, a commemoration which should take every participant a new step God-ward, without that high gain which was within reach. As for the covenant meeting it has a place in turning our minds to Calvary, and begetting that reflective mood which enables us more distinctly to hear the voice of the Spirit as he speaks in the emblems of the broken body and shed blood. If in this particular the importance of the gathering were more generally urged, there would not only be more in attendance thereupon, and more of the professed disciples at the celebration of the Supper, but larger advantage would accrue from the Supper to the communicants, and through the enriched communicants to the needy world.

And now to sum up what we have been saying: In general it is the purpose of the covenant meeting to furnish church members, assembled in intimate fellowship, with oft-repeated impulses along the path of their Christian profession—the path of strict conformity with God's plan respecting them. In particular it is meant (1) to move us, by the reading of the covenant, and the reading of brief selections from the heart-histories of

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