

teaching is forgotten—the Divine inscription effaced. How soon did the knowledge of God pass from the souls of men, and the whole earth become covered with corruption! How soon did the world forget the tremendous visitation of the flood, and again, by unholy ambition, bid defiance to the will of Heaven! How often did the Jews, so highly favoured and so constantly taught by resplendent signs, forget God and abandon His worship for idolatry! Human nature is still the same—prone to depart from the living God—prone to let go that which He gives us sacredly to keep and maintain.

There are three causes operating constantly in this direction,—the world, the flesh, and the Devil,—tending to the deterioration and deadening of the Divine life in man. These causes have operated from the first, and are operating now. Let not the trite character of the statement diminish the force of the fact. It is true that human nature is degenerate and unfriendly to the service of God; it is true that the influence of the world is as opposed as ever to the life of faith: it is true, still, that the wiles of the Devil are many and mighty against the highest interests of the soul.

But these are general causes of religious declension. Under them, as subordinate manifestations, there have been particular causes, different, more or less, in different ages, and eminently hostile to elevated and progressive godliness. Now and then we have to do with our own age, and, in casting our eye over the aspects of the Christian Church, can we see any causes operating to the decline of true religion, and especially rendering a revival of God's work necessary? What bearing has the sensuous spirit of the age on vital piety? Can we doubt that the lust of the eye and the pride of life, as well as the lust of the flesh, are unfriendly to eminent godliness? "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." These principles of character are not compatible. Yet what do we see around us? A fondness for pleasure and gaiety, for dress and show, for æsthetics and gymnastics, amidst which religion is often left to struggle for a dwarfish and stunted existence. In many cases you look in vain for the line of demarcation between the Church and the world; and the dust of the one has settled in the sacred places of the other. "The chains, and the bracelets, and the mufflers," and "the round tires like the moon"—"the bonnets, and the changeable suits of apparel, and the mantles," were hurtful to piety of old, and they may not be favourable to eminent piety now. (Isaiah iii. 16.) It may be right enough to please the eye and charm the ear, to gratify the taste and adorn the body, but the excessive regard to these pursuits or pleasures which is prevalent cannot be otherwise than injurious to the claims of the spiritual life and the highest forms of devotedness to God.

What bearing has the commercial spirit of the age on vital piety? Christian men are required to buy as though they possessed not, and to use this world as not abusing it. (1 Cor. vii. 30, 31.) But is it generally so? The pursuits of commerce are honourable and necessary; and "merchant princes" may, in the highest sense, be princely men, having power with God and with their fellow-men. But are not "the cares of the world," in the absorption of time and thought with business, too generally hostile to the cultivation of the heart and its growth in grace? The fierce competitions of trade, the constant and absorbing interests of the counting-house, the shop, and the factory, the struggle in many a case to keep up an appearance, and to stand well on the Exchange, are assuredly unfriendly to the purity and progress of religion in the soul, so that men often take their business into their religion, instead of taking their religion into their business.