

Moral and Religious Miscellany.

From the Oberlin Evangelist.

CHURCH VITALITY.

Organized bodies of men may be spoken of as having a *soul*. They associate for a common object; else what is the use of associating at all? The love they bear to the common object, gives the body its inspiration—breathes into it its vitality—becomes its living *soul*.

When men associate to make money, or to bring into being some work of common utility, we see this doctrine exemplified. Their interest in the common object gives life to their organization—becomes the vital spark of their body. If this interest flags, the body languishes; when it ceases, the body dies.—When Free Masonry loses its charm, and when its machinery of forms becomes a stale mummery, nobody frequents its lodges, and the body becomes defunct. The spirit leaves the body; why should not death supervene and dissolution follow?

A Christian Church is an organized body of professed friends of Christ. They associate for definite objects. These objects are more than house-building, or keeping up a Sabbath Congregation, or paying and hearing a minister. All these should be only *means* for yet higher ends. These ends are briefly—to honor and serve Christ by doing his work among men; to diffuse his gospel; to press men everywhere to embrace it; and to aid each other in their spiritual life.

Now, obviously, each church will have vitality according to its measures of hearty interest in these objects. This interest constitutes a *church-feeling*—a *church-soul*, it breathes life and animation into the organized body. The members will love each other, and take delight in gatherings for prayer and Christian communion. A deep and earnest interest in the great common objects will beget a demand for religious meetings, for seasons of mutual prayer and exhortation—for plans and methods looking towards the consummation of desired objects. How can it be otherwise? Human nature works thus in every other case, in all other organizations for a common object; why should it not work so in the church?

Now, the thing which we like to urge on our Christian readers is, the *cultivation* of this church-feeling. You can remember when it was a conscious reality. Perhaps it was in the youth of your Christian life, in the "time of your espousals," while your first love was yet warm. Then you thought more of your church relations than of all your other social relations. Then no secret lodge came for a moment into competition with the church and its gatherings.—Then the brethren in Christ were real brethren to your heart, and you loved them with tenderest affection. It was only needful that they should reveal their hearty interest in Christ's cause, and your soul was on fire with sympathy and love towards such manifestations.

Hence, you know what the thing is. Experience has given you ideas and impressions which no language of ours can improve.

Do you not also know to cultivate this church-feeling—this love for all the common objects which constitute the living soul of the church? It must be that you appreciate the necessity, for this end, of being *with* and *in* Christ yourself—of having your heart filled with ardent love to his name, so that you shall deeply love all his people for his sake. Then you will delight in every manifestation of his Spirit which you may discern among his professed people.

You will love Christ's followers with more than a merely social interest—with other affection than what is begotten among friends not Christians. You love them because you love holiness, and because you love Jesus whom they love.

But there is a special demand for care and effort in the culture of this church-feeling. It grows out of the defects of character and manners which even the grace of conversion and of sanctification does not at once and entirely remove. Happy for the church and her interests, if it did! But it does not and we must expect to meet with unpleasant, and perhaps even repulsive things in those whom God has really converted to himself, and whom he is fitting to dwell with himself in heaven. God does not scorn them because they are ill-bred—does not withhold from them his Spirit because they lack refinement of mind or of manners. Religion has a natural sympathy with all true refinement—loves it—nurtures it—blends most readily with it; but does not repel from its bosom those who lack it. Neither should you as one of Christ's children.

Your fellow-members may have sad moral defects of character. Wayward appetites, or ill-governed temper may make them infinite trouble, and may give occasion for painful discipline in the church.—Unless you are aware of this danger, you may fall before the temptation to feel that these things are so unlovely that you cannot have Christian fellowship anyhow with their authors. And it may, even despite your best intentions and efforts, cost you the utmost care to keep up such a practical distinction that you can love them as Christians, while yet you utterly dislike and disapprove these unchristian things in their temper and life. If all Christians were spotless, the discipline of brotherly love would be a far different matter from what it is.

You may find a special form of trial in the peculiarities of your Christian brother, considered as an *associate-laborer*. He may be assuming or dogmatic, or harsh in tone and bearing, so that something within you wants to say, "I cannot work with that brother."

But do you pray for him? and do you carefully study how you can show him the more excellent way? If your love for the great common objects of the church were stronger than death, it would put you upon effort to correct the defective things, and nurture the good. And this very effort would draw out your heart towards these brethren in unwonted interest, and do you inexpressible good—how much or how little soever you might succeed in improving them. Do not fail to try it and see.

Observation, during many years, has pressed on our mind the conviction that, in the respects now referred to, the church of our times has greatly fallen from the standard of the church as it came fresh from the Saviour's hands. Then the brethren and sisters "were of one heart and one soul." The common cause held them with a power stronger than any repulency;—paramount to all counter attractions.

Now, it would seem that the union is often little more than a juxtaposition of names on the church-records, and, perhaps, a proximity of seats at the communion table. Heart-union is scarcely known! Alas, that the love of Christ and the power of interest in a common cause should leave the bonds of church connexion so weak! Alas, that the manifestations of sincere love to the brethren and to the interests of the *church* should be so rare, and, where apparent at all, so feeble! This is a lamentation and shall be for a lamentation! "By whom shall Jacob