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The DEARTH .
. . . OF . . .
CONVERSIONS



BY
Rev. ANDREW MURRAY,

Author of "Abide in Christ,"
"Absolute Surrender,"
"The Holiest of All,"
"Humility,"
&c.

LONDON:
Marshall Brothers, Keswick House, Paternoster Row.
EDINBURGH:
The Christian Literature Co., 108 Lothian Road.

1419 f. 704 (9) Google

I am sorry to believe that our nineteenth century Christianity, with its bloodshot eyes and its fevered pulse, has lost the art of contemplation. We need to re-learn it. It is perhaps the most difficult of all exercises—meditation upon the Lord Jesus Christ. We need sometimes to come into His presence and say, "Lord, I come not to-day to ask; I come not to-day to give; I come simply to look upon Thy face, to gaze into Thy glorified countenance, if perchance I may be permitted to catch and reproduce some of the lineaments of Thy face."—A. J. Gordon, D.D.

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THE DEARTH OF CONVERSIONS.*

I.—THE EVIL.

THE *British Weekly* of 10th December had a leading article with the title, "Mark Rutherford on the Dearth of Modern Conversions."

After quoting from the novelist, the writer endorses his opinion that conversions of the old-fashioned type are becoming rarer: "In churches that are both prosperous and enterprising, and whose praise is in all the land, conversions, of the old order at least, are unknown."

In answer to the question, "Can any explanation be rendered of the fact?" he reminds us of the influence of the Christian home, as leading men into the Christian life without any abrupt transition. He speaks of the shadow of Darwin resting upon the messenger of peace, and leading

* These chapters are reprinted from *The Life of Faith*.

men to expect more from slow evolution than from a sudden change. "The spiritual expectations of the Christian Church are restrained by the accepted idea, or at least the expectations, of those who give the keynote to the temper and religious enterprise of our times." Materialistic views of sin have a share in hindering both effort and expectation.

Above all, the questions of the hour, and the desire to be perfectly fair in his statement of the old doctrines, paralyse many a preacher. "The result is that he is often found carrying upon his aching heart problems in criticism and theology, rather than what his forefathers called the burden of souls. There is scarcely any place left in his thoughts for the growth of that faith which realised those frequent and striking conversions which were the glory of the last generation. The very soul of the present-day teacher seems to evaporate in the attempt to present candid, painfully balanced, delicately conceived statements of the truth. And such statements, however necessary, never seem to stir profoundly the hearts of their hearers." "The zeal, self-denial, straining expectation which have been the co-operant human factors in that great evangelical movement, do seem to have exhausted themselves for the time."

The writer concludes: "If the modern dearth of conversions is to be arrested, the revival

movements of the past will need a fresh replenishment from the Divine spring which gave them birth."

A week later there appeared in *The Christian* a letter from Mr Moody to *The New York Independent* on the same subject, though from a very different standpoint. It is a reference to a statement in a previous issue of that paper, "that there were over three thousand churches in the Congregational and Presbyterian bodies in the United States that did not report a single member added by profession of faith during the year." Mr Moody writes: "Can this be true? The thought has taken such hold of me that I cannot get it out of my mind. *It is enough almost to send a thrill of horror through the soul of every true Christian.* Are we all going to sit still and let this thing continue? Should we not lift up our voice like a trumpet about this matter? WHAT MUST THE SON OF GOD THINK OF SUCH A RESULT OF OUR LABOUR AS THIS?"

In a leader on Mr Moody's communication, *The Independent* explains that some allowance must be made for the new churches founded within the year, from which no report could be expected, for small churches without a pastorate, and for those that have failed to send up any report. It expresses its disagreement with what Mr Moody had said in his letter about the

modern criticism, the labour talks, and the politics that have found their way into the pulpit. It does not believe that these are the causes. And then it proceeds: "But with all this true, . . . Mr Moody does well to be astonished and pained at the thousands of churches which reported not a single member added by profession of faith last year. *It is enough to send a thrill of pain through the soul of every true Christian.*"

On this there followed *A Call to Prayer and Work*, by Mr Moody. After referring to what has been stated above, he writes: "During the remaining days of the year, let us all wait upon our Master for a special preparation for the coming winter; and when the New Year comes, why should not every Christian Church in America and England begin the season with a thirty-days' series of Gospel meetings? . . . If every church will but answer to this appeal with open doors and hearty response; if every pastor will exert himself to spend and be spent in the Master's service at this special season; if every officer will give his sympathy and co-operation to the work, the Church will have cause to remember January 1897, both in time and through eternity."

I have been surprised that these papers have not met with more response. In *The British Weekly* of 24th December there appeared two letters, with a short sub-leader on the subject. In

the following number of *The Christian* there were four or five letters. I know not what may have followed; but one would have thought that the terrible revelation would have roused many to lift up their voice. The matter appears to me to be one of such *vital* and *tremendous* interest, that I feel urged to take up my pen and ask my fellow-believers to join me in considering what these statements mean, and how they are to be dealt with, if any deliverance is to be expected.

Let me begin with

A WORD OF CAUTION.

One great danger appears to me to be, that *we do not take time to realise the extent and the depth of the evil*. Unless we wait upon God to show us its terrible meaning, and are brought to the full conviction that nothing but a mighty interposition of God can restore to the Church what is her chief glory—the privilege, in the power of her Lord, of seeking and saving the lost—we shall each of us be ready with our different reason for the lack of converting power, and our prescription for its recovery; and the whole discussion may very possibly end in new controversy as to the best methods of healing the disease. It is only when we begin to see how deep-rooted and widespread the disease is, that we shall go in our helplessness to the Great Physician—to Him who

alone is able to restore to the Church what she has lost.

Difference as to both cause and cure has already manifested itself. Mr Moody, and with him the editor of *The Christian*, and one of its correspondents, thinks that the Higher Criticism is one of the great causes of much of the evil. In substance the editor of *The British Weekly* has said the same thing. The editor of *The Independent* is sure that this is not the case. A correspondent in *The British Weekly* of 24th December goes further, and thinks that the acceptance the Higher Criticism has met with in the Church is just one of the great reasons why conversions should be looked for: "The religious atmosphere is altered. There is less sulphur in it, and there is more light. The grosser forms, at least, of extreme Calvinism are extinct, science is accepted, evolution is assimilated, criticism has infused more oxygen; *and yet* we are confronted with the fact of 'no conversions' in our churches. The old Gospel is preached with a lucidity that has never been surpassed. Good men and true, penetrated with the love of Christ, and full of ardour, spend their days in proclaiming eternal life by Jesus Christ: and yet, and yet——"

There are evidently two currents in the Church: the literary culture, which some regard as the great cause of the evil, is the very thing others

look to with hope. Were the dearth of conversions only to be found in churches where

THE HIGHER CRITICISM

is accepted, we might be able to connect cause and effect. But how about the churches where the Higher Criticism has never entered? And the churches of thirty years ago, before its name was heard? The cause must be sought for deeper: it may prove that the spirit of modern criticism is as much an effect as a cause, an indication of an evil that had entered even where all was sound and orthodox; for it was within the Evangelical Church it had its birth. The root of the mischief, of which the dearth of conversions is a symptom, may be found among the most conservative as well as the more advanced schools of thought.

The other danger is *the thought that new efforts or new methods will help us*. Mr Moody proposes in his letter that all the churches should be opened on Sunday night for *the preaching of the Gospel*. The editor of *The British Weekly* strongly supports the proposal, though not entirely on the same grounds. "The time is past for two regular sermons on Sunday. Ministers cannot prepare such sermons as are demanded now to this extent."

Mr Moody does well in summoning all churches

at once to set to work and seek conversions. But the ministers, and the office-bearers, and the congregations have in many cases got so accustomed to the state in which conversions are the exception, that in many cases they may be unwilling, or afraid, or unfit, to respond to the call. For evangelistic efforts to be successful we need ministers and Christians who believe so in conversion that they will sacrifice everything for it. It is not more work or different work that will bring the cure. It is only a Church converted from her present state of conformity to the world that will either seek or have true conversions—that will receive from God the power to turn men from the world to Christ.

Let all who pray for the quickening of God's Church pray earnestly that He would show us these three things with regard to the evil we are speaking of—*its real significance; its hidden causes; its Divine remedy.* If we meditate and pray earnestly to look at this trouble in the light of God, the sense of helplessness may indeed come upon us, but there will be given to us, too, to see that deliverance is possible and certain to those who will listen to God's voice.

II.—WHAT THE EVIL MEANS.

WHEN a physician takes charge of a patient, the first thing he seeks to know is the nature and extent of the evil he has to deal with. Hence the time and thought spent on the careful observation of the symptoms. The success of the treatment depends entirely on the accuracy of the diagnosis.

Even so, in dealing with the great question of the lack of conversions in the Church of Christ, it is not enough that we admit the truth of what is said, or set ourselves in earnest to prescribe what we think the best means for effecting a change. If the Church is fully to realise what is wrong in her state, and to find the path in which God alone can lead her out of it, believers and ministers must be brought low before the Lord, for Him, the Great Physician, to discover and remove the evil, and to restore that conversion power which comes from Him alone.

Let us, in the spirit of humiliation before God, and in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, ask God to show us what the indictment implies: the

Church of Christ is losing the power of conversion—of bringing sinners to the Saviour.

Just think what that must mean to the Son of God! He counts this work His chief glory. He left the heavens to seek and save the lost. He died that He might have the power "to bless men in turning away every one of them from their iniquities." He was exalted to God's throne "to give repentance and remission of sins." The conversion of sinners is the one object of His death on Calvary and His life in glory. It is the object for which His Church was constituted His body, that it might continue and carry out the work He had begun on earth, and now prosecutes in heaven. It is the object for which the Holy Ghost was given, that the disciples and the Church might be "endued with power" to accomplish the work. It is the one object for the Church's existence and continuance here on earth.

See how in the portraiture which the Holy Spirit gives us of the Church at Pentecost, this is the outstanding feature, as it goes from strength to strength. "The same day there were added about three thousand souls" (Acts ii. 41). "And the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved" (ii. 47). "Many of them which heard believed, and the number of the men was about five thousand" (iv. 4). "And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men

and women" (v. 14). "And the Word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith" (vi. 7). Samaria—"And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake" (viii. 6). Joppa—"And many believed in the Lord" (ix. 42). Cesarea—"While Peter spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word" (x. 44). Antioch—"And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord" (xi. 21). "And much people was added unto the Lord" (xi. 24). "And they so spake, that a great multitude believed" (xiv. 1).

One cannot read these expressions without feeling that in a church born of the Holy Ghost, and with preaching in His power, conversion must be expected.

WHAT A TERRIBLE CONTRAST!

In America three thousand churches without one convert during the year! And of Great Britain one, who would judge neither ignorantly nor harshly (Ed., *British Weekly*), testifies: "In churches that are both prosperous and enterprising, and *whose praise is in all the land*, conversions, of the old order at least, are unknown"! And then, how many churches, where conversions,

if still found, are but rare! And how many where, when they are found in times of special effort, the complaint is heard, that the converts do not stand. The agent in conversions has been more the wisdom of man than the power of God. How many thousands of ministers, and missionaries, and workers of many names, who will all confess that the hopes with which they began their work have been bitterly disappointed, and that there is not a question to which they would more long to have a direct answer from heaven than this: What is needed that the power of the exalted Lord, in giving repentance, may be seen?

What can be the meaning of this? Is it some inscrutable appointment of God, under which we must even be content to labour on without success?

Or is it that, as in the waves of the sea, there is an ebb and a flow, as in the changes of season and climate there are cycles of drought and rain, of storm and fair weather, which we cannot avert or escape; so if our lot fall upon a time of spiritual barrenness, we must quickly submit and suffer?

Or is it really true that the Lord does indeed mean and expect us to have conversions all along, and that their dearth is simply the indication of some terrible wrong that makes it impossible for Him to give them?

If the owner of a vineyard finds that his vines,

though he has carefully tended them, do not yield the quantity or quality of fruit he has a just reason to expect, does he not at once regard it as the proof of some hidden evil? He knows that the vine listens implicitly to the law of nature, and that there must be perfect correspondence between its inner state and the fruit it shows. The measure of conversions God bestows upon His Church is the exact index of His estimate of its spiritual health. Were He to bestow conversions out of proportion to its spiritual fitness, He would be confirming it in its self-contentment, and making the discovery of its disease impossible: just as pain in the body is a merciful provision to direct attention to some lurking danger in the system. The dearth of conversions is

GOD'S VOICE OF WARNING.

It is an infallible witness to the Church, that its state is not pleasing to Him, that it is not answering its destiny, that it is on a downward path, from which nothing can restore it but a full return to a life in His will.

The Church consists of members; *its restoration must begin with that of individual members, who take up and bear the burden of the whole.* Let all who are willing to bear the burden take up the position Joshua and the elders of Israel did, when Israel was defeated before Ai: "They fell upon

their faces before the Lord." And Joshua cried with them: "O Lord, *what shall I say*, when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies? And *what wilt Thou do* unto Thy great Name?" Israel had been brought into Canaan with God's assurance that it could conquer and cast out its enemies. It had entered the country solely on the faith of the promise and the power of God. At Jericho it had received more than its brightest hopes ever could ask as a pledge of sure and universal victory. And what is this? A sudden and terrible defeat. What can it mean? Nothing less than the destruction of Israel, and the dishonour of God's holy Name! No wonder that they took refuge in the only thing they could do—"They fell upon their faces before the Lord." Defeat must mean God's displeasure, it must mean some terrible hidden cause.

And there come from New York and London the terrible tidings of defeat, not in one spot, but confessedly throughout the ranks of the army of the living God. The Church has lost its hold on the masses. The Church does not hold the young people passing out of its Sunday schools. The Church has failed in meeting the increase of population. The Church has large and flourishing congregations without a conversion. And in its struggle with heathenism the most earnest of the servants of Christ are the first everywhere to

express their faith that they have a right to expect mightier displays of Christ's power than they usually see.

Surely there is reason for the whole Church to fall on its face and cry as with one voice: "O Lord God, what shall I say, when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies? And what wilt Thou do unto Thy great Name?" The Church, with its King exalted of God to give conversions, with the Holy Spirit given as the power of God to ensure conversions, is with one consent confessing to the dearth of conversions. It fails in the one object for which it exists. With all its learning, and influence, and work, it lacks in large measure the one thing that God asks, the one thing that can make it a real blessing to the world—there is a dearth of conversions.

When Israel was defeated, Joshua and the people at once knew it. There was no hiding it. Alas! the Church has so much to occupy it, so much to boast of, so many external tokens of success and blessing, that its terrible defeats are hardly felt. If they were, how everything would be cast aside to cry to God to show what it means, and how defeat may once again be changed into victory!

No wonder Mr Moody cries out: "*What must the Son of God think of such a result of our labour as this?*" Let each one of us take that question,

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and find time to meditate quietly upon it, until we begin to feel how grieving and dishonouring to Him the condition of His Church is. Let us think, and pray, and wait until He shows us how we have, in this dearth of conversions, the infallible proof that there is something radically wrong, and how nothing but a new reformation, given as former reformations from heaven, by Himself from heaven, in answer to the confession and the cry of His people, can restore the glory that has departed.

III.—THE CAUSE.

EVERY effect must have a cause, proportionate in extent and power to the result that has been produced. For this evil—the Church of Christ failing in the very thing for which it exists—there must be some cause found, sufficient to account for its terrible and universal prevalence. If it be true that Christ is willing and longing to give conversions, that the Holy Spirit is in the Church with the very object of working them, there must be something that grieves and dishonours Him, that He thus refuses to fulfil His promise. Until the cause be found, and confessed and removed, it is vain to expect any change.

That the dearth of conversions is borne so easily, that its evil is but little mourned, is a proof that there is a veil upon the heart. Some diseases render the patient unconscious of his danger. Unless the Church acknowledge that she has not realised what this dearth of conversions means—and for that an interposition of God is needed to discover its secret origin—all our discussion will profit little.

To the question, Whence this dearth of *conversions*? many answers may be given. And yet they may not reach to the root of the evil. We do not only need to have single branches removed; the axe must be laid to the root of the tree. The disease is of long standing and deep-seated. The hidden sin in the Church, that has robbed her of the power from on high with which she was endued—

IT IS THIS WE NEED TO KNOW,

it is this which God can and will discover as we wait on Him.

And even though, when we seek to search out that first source of the evil, very different answers may be given, God's Spirit can, through such diversity of insight, lead us to find what, in His light, is the real truth He would have us know. There would, in fact, be no more profitable exercise for every child of God who reads this, than to think and put down on paper what he really considers to be the explanation of the lack, in every country and every church throughout the world, of this, the sign of true spiritual life and vigour. The effort would help to fix the attention, would discover the difficulty of the problem, would lead to a sense of ignorance, and so urge us to cry to God for His teaching.

The simplest answer to which perhaps universal

assent will be given by all evangelical Christians, is this: *the lack of conversions can be owing to nothing but the lack of the power of the Holy Spirit.* The lack of fruit in the vine is owing to the lack of a plentiful flow of healthy sap; the lack of fruit in the Church can only be explained by the lack of a healthy spiritual life. The Spirit of God is not allowed to have the place and the power that belong to Him.

This answer, however, only leads to a new question: *What is it that keeps the Church from recognising and accepting her high privilege of having the Spirit of God as her life and power?*

To this question, too, the answer is very simple. There are but two powers or spirits by which men are ruled, and by whose action everything on earth is wrought—the Spirit of God, and the spirit of the world. Whatsoever is not of the Spirit of God is of the spirit of the world. This rule admits of no exception. Wherever in the Church there is a lack of God's Spirit, there the spirit of the world rules and acts. And wherever the actings of the Spirit of God are partial and feeble, there can be no possible reason but that the spirit of the world, the spirit of our natural life, has usurped the place of the Spirit of God. And that not only in the way of doing the things which are manifestly sinful and ungodly, but much more, *in counterfeiting the work of the Spirit, and in doing*

all that belongs to and looks like the worship and service of God, in a disposition which is of this world and not from above.

When the sons of Sceva sought to cast out an evil spirit in the name of Jesus, the possessed man prevailed against them. They had the form but not the power; they called in the name of Jesus, but it was the spirit of this world and not of God that was in them. The lack of power in the Church in casting out evil spirits, in making men bow to Christ, in securing conversions, can be owing to nothing but this: *she is working in the natural power of this world and its spirit, more than in the supernatural power of God's Spirit.*

The external

PROOFS OF THE PRESENCE OF A WORLDLY SPIRIT

can easily be named. Some will point at once to the methods resorted to for getting money for God's work. All the arts and devices adopted to secure subscriptions, to get help from bazaars and entertainments, to play upon the lower motives of pride or rivalry, of display or pleasure, are simply manifestations of the spirit of the world. If men say they can see no harm in them, they simply prove how little they expect the true motives of Christian liberality—love to Christ, faithful stewardship, love to souls—to animate the members of the Church.

Others will speak of the way in which the pursuit of place or of pleasure, of riches and luxury, prevails throughout the Church, obliterating all distinction between those who profess to be living for eternity, and those who admit that they seek their portion in this world.

Still others will point to the lack of holiness and love, of humility and obedience, as the sure index of a life conformed to the world.

But there is one sphere in which the spirit of the world may be least expected or noticed, and yet its power be far more present and hurtful than in those already mentioned. It may indeed be that, just because its presence there is least suspected or feared, this may be the door through which it finds access, and what was meant by God to be the great power to fight and keep or cast out of His Church the spirit of the world, may become the world's strongest ally. I allude to THE PULPIT. Of the place of influence God meant it to have, and that it does sometimes hold, as the channel for God's power in conversion, and drawing men out of the world, it is impossible to speak too highly. Of the influence it actually does exert in multiplying or diminishing conversions, in fostering or conquering the spirit of the world, it needs Divine light and guidance to speak aright. The pulpit is God's chosen channel for conversions: any inquiry as to the dearth of conversions must lead to it.

Against the danger of the spirit of the world in preaching, God's Word has warned us very clearly. Paul writes to the Corinthians of two styles of preaching, and the two styles of religion which they produced: "I came unto you *not with excellency of speech or of wisdom*; and my preaching was *not with enticing words of man's wisdom*, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should stand *not in the wisdom of men*, but in the power of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of this world, but the Spirit which is of God."

There is such a preaching of the Cross, of Bible truth and sound doctrine, with enticing words of man's wisdom, as robs it of its power. Its effect is—the faith of the hearers standing in the wisdom of men; a faith and a religion that is feeble and shortlived.

And there is a preaching, not with excellency of speech or wisdom, but, in the absence of what can attract and gratify the natural man, in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. Its fruit is—a faith that stands in the power of God, a religion that can stand and last, because it has its root in the personal experience of the working of God Himself through the Holy Spirit. That which marks the preacher becomes the mark of his hearers: the demonstration of the Spirit and power in him—

MAKES STRONG CHRISTIANS.

The exhibition of human wisdom cannot but result, both in number and character, in poverty of conversions. The spirit of the ministry reproduces itself in the Church.

Let us pause and ask the question : Have we not here the explanation of the dearth of conversions ? In our churches we boast of the wonderful combination of literary culture and evangelical fervour. May it not be that the evangelical fervour is what we have inherited from our fathers, while the literary culture is what we, in the first place, study, and delight in, and offer to our hearers ? No wonder that conversions are scanty !

It is not difficult to see why the danger of the spirit of the world entering here is specially great. There is no way for God to communicate the knowledge of Himself or His grace, but through the mind, in thoughts and words. God's Word comes to us with argument and appeal—but argument and appeal such as appear foolishness to the natural man, and have no power except as they are inspired by the Holy Ghost. How near and how great the temptation to trust to the power of reasoning, or to the attraction of eloquence, while the demonstration of the Spirit and His power is wanting !

And then, with the very source of the channel of converting grace weakened and poisoned in the pulpit, what wonder that it has no power to expose and condemn and conquer the worldliness in the

Church! Conversions are the work of Divine love wrestling with sinners through the medium of its messengers, breathing its spirit and receiving its strength into them. The dearth of conversions where the Gospel is preached, can mean nothing else than that the weapons of carnal and worldly wisdom have been substituted for those of the Spirit, which are mighty, through God, to the pulling down of strongholds.

The editor of *The British Weekly* writes: "The present writer has listened during the present year to perhaps twelve sermons by very young preachers, and in not one of them has he heard *the faintest approximation to saving truth, the faintest indication* of how a sinner might find the Saviour."

A statement like this points us to one of the chief proofs and causes of the existing evil. These young men were trained in the theological halls of our evangelical—probably Presbyterian—churches; their literary taste was cultivated with zealous care; they were taught that men who are to be leaders of the people must be abreast of all our modern thought; they were trained to study and think, and so produce what would secure a thoughtful hearing. The editor of *The British Weekly* strongly approves of the proposal to have only one sermon a Sunday, and speaks of "an evangelistic service in the evening, with plenty of brightness and *direct fervent Gospel preaching*, conducted in an

informal way, with three or four to take part." He then adds: "Ministers cannot prepare two such sermons as are demanded now. . . . The great difficulty with many is that they have *no real Evangel to preach*, and even among really evangelical ministers the tendencies of the times have been so far obviated (?) that *they continually address their congregations as if all of them were Christians!*"

Is it not evident that ministers are not being trained to preach conversion sermons, and that many are unfit to do so? They can preach a well-prepared morning sermon; the direct Gospel preaching must be relegated to the evening service, and the three or four lay helpers who are to take part. It is surely time that the Evangelical Church awoke to the consciousness that it is

NOT TRAINING MEN FOR DIRECT GOSPEL
PREACHING,

or for being the instruments of the Holy Spirit in conversion. "Excellency of speech" and "words of man's wisdom," depth of thought and beauty of illustration, and the stirring of pleasing emotion, are taking the place of "the demonstration of the Spirit and of power." Surely we need not wonder at the dearth of conversions when the Church, in the training of its ministry, does not make their preparation for "direct Gospel preaching" its first aim!

Need we hesitate any longer in saying what is the cause of this terrible evil—a Church constituted by God, and provided with the needful power for securing conversions, failing to such a large extent of its object? There can be but one answer: *Something has taken the place the Spirit of God was meant to have.* That something can be nothing but the spirit of the world, in some shape or other.

And the one shape in which it has entered and got possession of the pulpit—meant to be the channel of the converting power—is the spirit of this world's wisdom. *It is by the wisdom of words the preaching of the Cross is made of none effect.*

Nor is this an evil of yesterday's growth. Long before the modern criticism was heard of, when all apparently was sound and orthodox, away up to Reformation time, its beginnings can be traced. Wherever God's truth is received into the mind, is studied, or expounded, or held, or contended for, in any power but the power of God's Spirit, wherever our natural faculties are trusted to do the work of God's Spirit, there you have that very spirit of the world which rejected Christ. While affirming its faith in His truth most confidently, it refuses that absolute submission to His Cross and dependence on His Spirit which He claims. The Church of to-day is the child of the Church of fifty years ago: its feebleness to-day is only the manifestation of seeds of disease that then were present.

When Joshua cried to God in the agony of the defeat at Ai, God showed him its cause in something that he had not the remotest conception of. If the Church is to find out what is really the origin of its failure, God may show to us what many of us never dreamt of. Let us beware of being too ready or too confident with our answers. I feel deeply how defective my own insight is into the disease of which we are discussing the symptoms. It is at moments as if, beyond what I have tried to express, there is still a deeper answer.

If the question be asked: "But how is it that the spirit of the world has got such entrance into a Church which was so wondrously born and led of the Spirit?" we shall, I think, be led to the Cross of Christ. The Cross, its spirit and its fellowship, is too little known or accepted: the Cross, as the crucifixion of self and the world, is not preached, is not practised, is not witnessed to in word and deed. But on this I cannot enter now.

Let us plead, for ourselves and others, that God would show us whether, in spite of all its external prosperity, or perhaps on account of it, it be true that the dearth of conversions is nothing but the simple, legitimate result of the spirit of the world taking the place of the Spirit of God.

IV.—THE CURE.

WHEN a patient suffers from weakness owing to some external cause, sufficient fresh air, or exercise, or rest, or food is all that is needed. But when there is disease, there must be some definite change effected, ere health and strength are restored. I think we must all admit that the dearth of conversions is not merely a sign of weakness, to be removed by turning to new purpose or effort. There is disease in the system, which nothing but a direct healing interposition of God can cast out.

Our question is now: How can the cure be effected, and what is the part each of us has to take in seeking it? May God the Holy Spirit give us the answer.

1. I think that where we shall have to begin is this: *To realise our unity with the whole body of Christ, and take up its need as our own, and bear the burden of it before the Lord.*

An intellectual acknowledgment of what is wrong will not suffice; it must become to us a continual sorrow and heaviness of heart.

In many a prayer-meeting, and conference, and convention, the lack of fruitfulness has been felt and mourned; the cause of the evil has been sought out and confessed; in renewed consecration and faith men have turned to God for the converting power, and have found it.

But in all this, blessed as the results may have been, there was one thing still lacking. The confession of sin and the laying hold of the promise and the experience of the blessing, was *very much an individual thing*, or with reference to those souls who might be more directly influenced by the recipient of the new gift. Something more is needed. We must learn to realise

THE SOLIDARITY OF THE BODY ;

to confess the sickness or sin of the Church as a whole, as definitely as our own; to wait and pray and seek the faith to claim for the church we belong to, or the Church of Christ around us, the same blessing and power we have received or seek for ourselves.

As this is done, as the vicarious spirit of Christ's sacrifice lives in us, we shall get free from ourselves, and the work for our prayer and faith to aim at will become larger and higher. May I beg every one who reads this to remember that as every true man in England, even though he could never go and fight, would feel an unexpected national

defeat in war, even so there ought not to be one of us who thinks that the question of the dearth of conversions is no special concern of ours. If we love Christ and His honour, if we love God's Church and a perishing world, do let us take upon us the burden of this unspeakable shame and sorrow—a Church powerless to bless, a Church led more by the spirit of the world than of Christ!

As the matter becomes the subject of thought and prayer, of preaching and discussion in ever-widening circles of earnest Christians, the first step towards a change will have been taken. When God sees His children jealous for His honour, not judging, but bearing the burden of the weak or erring, He will assuredly look down in compassion and listen to our cry.

2. Then there must follow *the conviction and confession of sin.*

In all our teaching on holiness the truth is continually insisted on that new and deeper conviction, with fuller confession, is the only way to larger blessing. What has been true of the individual is true of the body.

In the discussion on the dearth of conversions, there will be danger of our regarding it as a strange, unaccountable lack of power, or as caused by a slight deviation from the right path, or as attributable to the errors of certain schools of thought. We shall need to be brought to see

that it is simply and terribly true, that it is because we have forsaken Him that He hath forsaken us. God says: "Hast thou not procured this unto thyself, in that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God?" Nothing in earth or hell could hinder conversion in a church walking in God's will, and wholly given up to His Spirit.

I fear that when this matter of sin and guilt is pressed home, not all will be found to agree. There will be explanations and arguments to prove that the evil is not so terrible as is alleged. We shall be reminded of how much there is of good and of cause for thanksgiving. True conviction of sin is at all times not easy, and only the work of God's Spirit: in God's Church, when it is strong in its outward religiousness and good works, it is often hardest of all. Let all who believe it is sin that is the cause of the lack of conversions, hear God's voice to Joshua: "Neither will I be any more with you, except ye destroy the accursed from among you." Before God's presence in converting power can be restored, the accursed thing must be put away.

Let those who believe this give themselves to be possessed by it. Conversions are the one desire of the Son of God on earth: ought not the dearth of conversions in Christian churches to become

THE ONE GREAT SORROW OF HIS PEOPLE?

C

Those with whom it does so, will get emboldened to lift up their voice and cry aloud, until their voice be heard where now they have no access. Their testimony may be rejected by some ; some it will awaken. It may prepare the way for some prophet whom God may send to rouse His sleeping Church, and work humiliation and repentance. Or it may begin to burn like fire in some of the leaders of the churches, and compel them to gather their church in solemn council to ask the question before God : Is it true that there is this dearth of conversions? And is it true that it is because the spirit of the world is more enthroned in our churches than the Spirit of God? Come, and let us return to the Lord our God, and He will have mercy upon us.

3. *When confession of sin has been made, then comes the solemn time when the decision has to be taken whether in God's strength it shall be put away.*

Many a sin is confessed and mourned while the penitent feels as in chains. Questions will arise like these : Are we able to change our style of preaching and worship? Is there any hope of getting this terrible power of the world cast out of pulpit and pew? Is a return possible to that Pentecostal stage when the preaching was not in enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power?

The more we think, the more impossible the change appears to be. Nothing less than a revolution is needed. Nothing less than an interposition of Divine Omnipotence will suffice. In bearing the burden of the sin of the Church, believers will have to be brought to the same point as when they were personally led out of their life of worldliness and unspirituality. They had to cast themselves on the power of their ascended Lord to find courage for a full consecration, and for the assurance that it would be accepted of God and made true in their experience. As we feel how impossible it is with men to convince the Church of its danger or to effect a change, we shall be thrown upon God's power, in Him to find the grace and strength for a testimony to what He has shown us, and a hope that it will not be in vain.

All discussions on the dearth of conversions will be profitless unless they lead to action. As we pray, we must offer ourselves to God to receive, and bear about, and act out the answer. When we have confessed our sin and the sin of our people, we must rise up to destroy the Achan. We must yield ourselves to be taught and stirred and used of God to waken His Church. Our conscious feebleness, our limited influence, need be no hindrance. A little match, or the smallest faggots, may light the largest fire. God can use

us to touch some one of wider influence. Let us but honestly give ourselves to bear the burden and to sound the cry: This cannot continue; a change must come; the dearth of conversions must cease. If we put away the evil, God will arise, and His enemies will be scattered. If we are faithful ourselves and in our circle of work, and, with that, take a share in bearing the need of the Church and the world, God will in His time hear and help.

4. Above all, let us remember that *in this matter there must be no compromise.*

God will only be found where He is sought with the whole heart. Of the work of conversion the Church will have to say, if the converting Spirit is to return to her in power: This one thing I do. If conversion be the one thing God seeks in His plan of redemption to bring men back to Himself; if it be the one thing the Son of God lived and died for—to draw all men out of this evil world to Himself; if it be the one thing the Holy Spirit seeks to work through the Church—then surely nothing less is needed than that the Church make this, in all its breadth of meaning, her one supreme aim—the conversion of sinners. The Church that puts this first, that in apostolic fashion separates itself from the world, and forsakes all trust in its

own goodness or wisdom, to wait on the power from heaven—

THAT CHURCH WILL HAVE CONVERSIONS.

We may be sure there will be many attempts at compromise. Men may turn to evangelistic agencies and special missions, while the state of the Church as a whole is left unchanged. God has in times past given us evangelists to fill up what was lacking in the ministry. If He finds the Church and the ministry profit by it in learning from them the secret of conversion preaching, He may continue and increase this much-needed gift. But if its effect be to strengthen the tendency for the ordinary ministry to devote itself to what is not direct conversion preaching, we dare not expect Him to give us what would become a curse to the Church. Plans will be prepared and carried out for having the morning service with its literary culture to gratify the more intellectual, and giving the evening to Gospel preaching. It cannot succeed permanently. Such a church will be as the woman before King Solomon, who was willing to have the living child divided. She proved that she was not the mother. Such a church is not the true mother, with her whole-hearted devotion to the living child, in which the children of the living God are begotten. It will only be the story over again of Isaac and Ishmael in Abraham's home. "What

saith the Scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman."

Each church must make conversions its one object so definitely that, even where the morning service is devoted to the building-up of believers, it must be felt that it is converted men who are being led on to all to which conversion gave the blessed entrance. When the preaching to God's people is a prophesying in the power of the Spirit, it will still be as of old: "If there come in one that believeth not, the secrets of his heart will be made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth." A believers' morning service is, as a permanency, the only true preparation for an evening evangelistic service.

If ever the Church, or any number of churches, or one church, make conversions the one thing they desire of God, *and yield to Him to search out and remove every cause of defeat*, He will assuredly give it them.

The Church in the mission-field is dependent on the Church at home. When the problem of the dearth of conversions is solved in the mother churches, the effect will be immediately apparent there. To pray for Spirit-filled missionaries abroad, while our trust is in a cultured ministry at home, will not do. We must learn that the

ministry within the Church needs the baptism of the Spirit as indispensably as the beloved brethren who go to fight the darkness of heathenism. The battle at home with infidelity, and worldliness, and Gospel-hardened formality, is not one whit easier, perhaps harder, than that with heathendom. Here, as there, nothing can help us but God's presence and power.

Beloved brethren! the evil is greater than any of us can conceive: and the work we have to do in seeking and preparing the way for deliverance more difficult than we can think. If we ourselves are to carry this burden as we should, if we are to help in wakening the Church to insight, and confession, and repentance, and the casting-out of what has made this dearth of conversions a Divine necessity, we shall need much waiting on God for His Spirit to teach and strengthen us.

I pray that even these feeble utterances may be used of Him to reach some hearts, and increase the number who with Joshua fall on their faces and cry, "O Lord! what shall I say when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies?" May we be found there, till He say to us, "Get thee up: Israel hath sinned; ye cannot stand before your enemies till ye take away the accursed thing from among you."

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