

The Professing Church Waxing and Waning

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FROM the dawn of its history in this world the professing Church of Christ has, like the moon, been periodically waxing and waning. At one period the Church has been outstandingly spiritually fruitful, while at another period, in the same place, or country, it degenerated into lamentable barrenness. "He turneth rivers into a wilderness, and the water springs into dry ground; a fruitful land into barrenness, for the wickedness of them that dwell therein. He turneth the wilderness into a standing water, and dry ground into water springs" (Psalm cvil. 33-35). This waxing and waning has especially characterised the history of the professing Church in our native land. There were times, for instance, in both Scotland and England when the spiritual desert actually blossomed as the rose.

Kirkton, for example, a minister who lived at the time of the Second Reformation in Scotland, and afterwards suffered in the persecution, gives the following account, which is confirmed by other historians: - "Now the ministry was notably purified, the magistracy altered, and the people strangely refined. Scotland has been even by emulous foreigners, called Philadelphia, and now she seems to be in her flower. I verily believe, there were more souls converted to Christ in that short period of time than in any other season since the Reformation, though of treble its duration; nor was there ever greater purity and plenty of the means of grace than was in that time. Every parish had a minister; every village had a school; every family almost had a Bible; yea, in most of the country, all the children of age could read the Scriptures, and were provided with Bibles either by their parents or their ministers. I have lived many years in a parish where I never heard an oath, and you might have rode many miles before you had heard any. Also, you would not, for a great part of the country, have lodged in a family where the Lord was not worshipped by reading, singing, and prayer. Nobody complained more of our Church government than our taverners, whose ordinary lamentation was, their trade was broke, the people were become so sober." (History of the Church of Scotland, p. 54-64.)

Much the same is the account given of England: - "The Lord's Day was observed with unusual reverence. The Churches were crowded with numerous

and attentive worshippers three' or four times in the day. There was no travelling. Religious exercises were set up in private families, as reading the Scriptures, family prayers, repeating sermons and the singing of psalms. This was so general a custom that we are told a person might walk through the city of London on the evening of the Lord's Day without seeing an idle person, or hearing anything but the voice of prayer or praise from Churches and private houses. It is also said that there was hardly a single bankruptcy to be heard of in a year, and that even in such a case the bankrupt had a mark of infamy set upon him that he could never wipe off. (Life and Times of Bishop Hall, by Jones, pp. 455-6.)

Where is the genuine believer and sincerely exercised Christian who does not sigh, and would seek to pray, for a return of such a God-honouring blessed state of society in our native land, and throughout the world? Is this a thing of the past, never to return, and what was the cause of it? If we are believers in a millennium, when Satan shall be bound a thousand years, then certainly we shall anticipate that such blessed days will not only return, but will be excelled in purity and godliness, and shall be co-extensive, with the globe. On the other hand, if we have no such faith in a future millennial reign in our world, then we shall be ready to adopt such a modern popular cliché, regarding prevailing evils, as "they have come to stay." In this connection, we were recently amazed to read in a Scottish periodical, the official organ of the Free Church of Scotland, that the cinema had come to stay; and thus it seems that the Church, in order to vie with the world, must adopt the film for church services. It was the same specious argument which led the larger Scottish Presbyterian denominations to convert its church halls from their original spiritual purposes and services to be the centres of dancing, concerts, and whist drives. "When these carnal, worldly activities come in by the door of the Church, or church-hall, spirituality and vital godliness fly out of the window. "The wisdom of this world is earthly, sensual, and devilish," whereas "the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy." (James iii. 17.) "Do ye thus requite the Lord, O foolish people and unwise?" (Deuteronomy xxxii. 6.)

As to the cause of the blessed state of society above referred to, it was doubtless due to the observance of the principle, savingly acknowledged by the Holy Spirit, that nothing was admitted into the constitution of the Church that was not divinely prescribed. This principle lies at the foundation of true

religion. "What thing soever I command you, observe to do it; thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it." If the Church is God's building, her form, and beauty, must be perfect. Everything that pertains to her must be enjoined by Him, and His will must therefore be her alone rule. Accordingly, at the Reformation it was upon this principle that the Church of Scotland was established. "All worship, honouring, or service, invented by the brain of man, in the religion of God, without His express commandment, is idolatry." This was the principle laid down by John Knox, and, at the Second Reformation, the Church of Scotland declared: - "that the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures. "(Confession of Faith, chapter xxi. 1). Such was the ground taken by the Reformed Church. She made the Word of God her will in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, and the high degree of purity which she attained was the result. Many daughters had done virtuously, but she excelled them all, and she has left us an example that we should follow in her steps, in so far as she followed the rule of the Word of God, and the perfect infallible example of her divine Saviour. Every believer in Presbyterian Church government is under obligation to his God and his conscience to observe uncompromisingly the foregoing principle. Thus only have we any right to expect the supernatural quickening and reviving influences and operations of the Holy Ghost. Let us, therefore, ceaselessly aim, with undeviating consistency, to render one hundred per cent loyalty to this fundamental principle of true religion.