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THE DECLINE OF CHURCHES.

WHEN, a little more than ten years ago, a law was passed suppressing all monasteries in the Kingdom of Italy, the very shadow of the Papacy fell on a typical case of that modern decline of churches at which all persons are wondering, rejoicing, or grieving, according to their interests, opinions, or feelings. There, in the seat of a historic hierarchy nearly nineteen centuries old, the change was more impressive than in new places, and seemed equally inevitable. And when two only were spared among the monasteries, — the Benedictine Monte Casino for its venerable historic interest, and San Marco at Florence for its associations with Savonarola and for the pictures of Fra Angelico, — these were types of the chief influences that preserve the churches in their slow decay. First of all, the venerableness and sacredness of the past; this is the element which is preservative of form. But, at the same time, the immobility of the past as crystallized in form, by reason of which it refuses to adjust itself to the constant movement of the human mind, is a cause of that same decay which its strong hold on affection and reverence retards. Secondly, the personal element, which is illustrated by the sparing of San Marco for Savonarola's sake. A Catholic people spares an institution distasteful and foreign to its

present civilization for the sake of a man who was condemned as a heretic by their fathers. So a man full of life and faith will take hold of a declining form and make it the vehicle of power, because any thing would serve him for a means of expression. The Church every now and then is rescued from stagnation for a time by such a man, and the infused life remains a longer or shorter time after his departure.

But the important point to be held in mind is the destruction of all the monasteries but two, not the saving of those two; not the fact that men part with the churches slowly for old association's sake, and perhaps because they see nothing better coming, but that, whether they see any thing better or not, they appear to be parting with them.

There is a way in vogue of blinding the eyes to the present drift of events, and of maintaining the undiminished, or even enlarging, importance of the pulpit by enumerating the preachers and their sermons, as a farmer counts his sheep. Then the theory is that each one is a genuine mutton (frequently a very serious fact), available for nutritive purposes and capable of a bleat which is as good as any other bleat. Thus Dean Ramsay, mistaking magnitude for importance, enters into an arithmetical calculation. The clergy list of England for 1864, he finds, fills two hundred and sixty pages, with an average of seventy churches and chapels to a page, a total of eighteen thousand two hundred. Assuming the dissenters to have perhaps two thousand less, he adds sixteen thousand two hundred for their ecclesiastical institutions. Then, from the Edinboro' Almanac and other authorities, he concludes that the established church and other communities in Scotland have a total of three thousand one hundred and twenty churches. These altogether make a total of thirty-seven thousand five hundred and twenty churches in Great Britain. Assuming that two sermons weekly are preached in each church (a low estimate he thinks), the Dean is triumphant over the result that the "Sabbath" air vibrates each week with seventy-five thousand and forty sermons, — nearly four millions a year! Under the circumstances, one is astonished at the extraordinary tenacity of life manifested by piety, which still lives. And remembering the effect of one harangue of Peter the Hermit, or Bernardine of Sienna, or Antony of Padua, what manner of ser-

mon is this, that the life of one little insular kingdom can swallow up four millions *per annum* without a ruffle upon the surface? The difficulty with all such calculations is that the number of sermons is the most alarming symptom of ecclesiastical dissolution. Robertson, it is said, complained of the burden of so much talking. Until such an expenditure can be justified by adequate results, this prodigious flood of preaching must be held to be a morbid symptom. The great Church, in her days of great power, never developed such a tide of preaching as rolled in with Protestantism. She was obliged to increase her preaching energetically, as a weapon against the preachers of the Reformation. Her scanty supply of the spoken word was one advantage which John Huss had over her. When Schiller said, "Herder's sermon pleased me better than any other I have ever heard; but I must honestly confess that no sermon pleases me," he was the æsthetic and critical mouthpiece of a feeling very widely spread among the lettered and unlettered. "I dislike good sermons just as much as bad," says a writer in "The Spectator" (the present weekly journal); and another says: "I admit for myself that the one great take-off in going to church is the sermon; . . . the parson so enrages my wife, that she says she is always wrestling all sermon-time with a morbid desire to throw a prayer-book at his head." High-Churchmen are sometimes even more unceremonious. "Why this preaching?" says one; "why does this man talk to us? Who is he that he should talk? Why not be content to worship only, when we go to church? Besides, ministers are simply nuisances." Coleridge, it is said, remarked "that he found, on inquiry, that four-fifths of the people who attended his preaching, attended from a sense of duty to the other fifth." Mill has a note in his work on "Liberty" which is illustrative; wishing to show that persecution is by no means extinct, the philosopher says:—

"Ample warning may be drawn from the large infusion of the passions of a persecutor which mingled with the general display of the worst parts of our national character on the occasion of the Sepoy insurrection. The ravings of fanatics or charlatans from the pulpit may be unworthy of notice; but the heads of the evangelical party have announced as their principle for the government of Hindoos and Mahometans, that no schools be supported by public money in which the Bible is not taught, and, by necessary consequence, that no public employment be given to any but real or pretended Christians. An Under-Secretary of State, in a speech delivered to his con-

stituents on the twelfth of November, 1857, is reported to have said: 'Toleration of their faith [the faith of a hundred millions of British subjects], the superstition which they called religion, by the British Government, had had the effect of retarding the ascendancy of the British name and preventing the salutary growth of Christianity.'"

This is a noteworthy passage as indicative of the decline of pulpit influence. The calm and coldly observing Mill, looking at the popular indications of the present vitality of a persecuting spirit in religion, treats the pulpit as of no consequence,—that is, as worth very little, either as moving the people or as indicating the popular feeling; if it oppose religious liberty, its words are only "the ravings of fanatics and charlatans," but the opinion of an Under-Secretary is of the highest importance. Wendell Phillips says the ministers are puppets. A churchman says the great Episcopalian need is "churchmanship which shall recognize the nineteenth century." Not very long ago a conference was held in London with the workingmen to ascertain why they did not go to church, and it was found they professed to feel little need for ministers, and still less regard for them. "I sometimes wonder," says a writer from the West, "whether the minister whom I hear knows that this is the nineteenth century. . . . If the ministers are incapable of leading, let them report in the rear, or go to the plow or some other honorable employment. . . . Is there to be no end of droning over Adam and his apple?" Speaking of some important critical questions, Froude says: "We desire to know what those of the clergy think whose love of truth is unconnected with their prospects in life. We desire to know what the educated laymen, the lawyers, the historians, the men of science, the statesmen, think; and these are for the most part silent, or confess themselves modestly uncertain. The professional theologians alone are loud and confident. But they speak in the old angry tone, which rarely accompanies deep and wise convictions." It is the same on all sides; in some way or other, by derision or rudeness or the better way of manly reproach, as well as by neglect and abandonment, popular distrust and dislike have singled out the pulpit conspicuously for their mark. Twenty-five years ago, Theodore Parker mentioned the "common clerical complaint of a certain thinness in the churches;" and now we have statistics prepared to show that possibly not more than a third, and certainly not a

half, of the population attend church. Decline in support; decline in numbers; decline in respect and influence, — is what is written plainly over the porch of the present church system.

It is not to be supposed, however, that we monopolize this trouble. Probably we may safely claim preëminence in it; but other times have had a share. It is a question whether it is better to remain away from church, or to attend and go to sleep, for which latter plan a Waterbury genius prepared by inventing a "head-rest attachment for pews." We adopt the former method; our ancestors, it is to be feared, cannot altogether clear their skirts of the charge that they were prone to the latter. Dr. Increase Mather berated his congregation for sleepiness, telling them that the "conscience will roar for it upon a death bed," and that Satan undoubtedly causes it, for he would "rather have men wakeful at any time than at sermon time." The anecdote of South is familiar, that he awoke a nobleman in church, begging him from the pulpit not to breathe so loud, lest he should wake up the king. Dean Swift took for a text the accident to the drowsy Eutychus, and remarked: "I have chosen these words with design, if possible, to disturb some part in this audience of half an hour's sleep, for the convenience and exercise whereof this place, at this season of the day, is very much celebrated. The preachers now in the world, however they may exceed St. Paul in the art of setting men to sleep, do extremely fall short of him in the power of working miracles; therefore, hearers are become more cautious, so as to choose more safe and convenient stations and postures for their repose, without hazard of their persons, and upon the whole matter choose rather to trust their destruction to a miracle than their safety." Dean Ramsay describes the blunt method of James Bonar, a Scotch clergyman. He introduced in his sermon the word *hyperbolical*, then paused, and said: "Now, my friends, some of you may not understand this word, hyperbolical. I'll explain it. Suppose I were to say that this congregation were *all* asleep in this church at the present time, I would be speaking hyperbolically, because [looking around] I do not believe many more than half of you are sleeping."

There is much suggestion also in the ancient expedients to attract attention. Ministers now advertise their topics each

week; ingenuity is taxed to invent taking titles, and some give their sermons two names with an *or* between, like the old novels; every current topic is twisted into fit matter for a sermon; discourse is interlarded with bold, flippant, "sensational" remarks to gratify some popular prejudice or excite a smile; congregations vie with each other in brilliant music, and seek halls instead of churches. But all this is tame compared with things told of the old preachers. A bishop of the eighth century used to compose his sermons in ballads to attract the people, and the eccentric Maillard, in the fifteenth century, improved upon this by singing in the pulpit the popular songs of the day. Fra Rocco, a mediæval preacher, commanded all the penitent to hold up their hands, and every man's hand was raised: then Fra Rocco cried aloud: "O holy Archangel Michael! thou who with adamant sword standest at the judgment seat of God! cut me off every hand that has been held up hypocritically," and each man dropped his hand in haste. Probably the most inveterate modern "sensationalist" would not venture upon these extravagances, or upon such as the following from John Simple, a Presbyterian minister of zealous fame, who was accustomed to copy the monkish style in the pulpit. Preaching on "Justification by Faith? or by Works?," he proceeded thus: "Sirs, this is a very great debate. But who is that looking in at the door with his red cap? Follow your look, sir, it is very ill manners to be looking in. But what's your name? Robert Bellarmine. Bellarmine, whether is a man justified by faith or works? He is justified by works. Stand thou there, man. But what is he, that honest-like man standing in the floor, with a long beard and Geneva cow? A very honest-like man! Draw near; what's your name, sir? My name is John Calvin. Calvin, honest Calvin, whether is a man justified by faith or works? He is justified by faith. Very well, John, thy leg to my leg, and we shall hough [trip] down Bellarmine even now."

These illustrations, and hundreds of similar ones that are encountered by every student of old pulpit lore, indicate that popular indifference is no new problem to the pulpit; that appeals to other motives than the sober realities of religion are quite ancient and more or less constant; and that the very inadequate manufacture for so much machinery attracted the attention of ecclesiastics

long ago. Here I recur to the excessive flood of preaching as a morbid symptom. The trouble admits of two very different explanations. The preachers, like Dr. Increase Mather, say the human heart is desperately wicked; but the human heart says the preachers are desperately dull. Now, if the popular theory should happen to be the true one, and the chief cause of the trouble is that sermons as a whole are essentially narcotic, how alarming is it to think of four million of them *per annum*!

But after due import is allowed to drowsiness at church and pulpit "sensationalism" in old times, it still must be admitted that the pulpit has been in the past a power which now it is not. There has been a great decline in its influence. Its most strenuous advocates, among whom I would rank myself, must perceive that it has failed to *grow* according to the need of the times, and that many other means of imparting popular instruction or moving popular enthusiasm have far outstripped it. As to visible results, one sermon would reach farther in a past day not very remote, possibly not more distant even than Wesley or Whitefield, than the whole dense mass of four millions now. It is true, our fathers slept at church, but they called it the devil's malice: we stay at home altogether, and call it common sense. What would our Protestant people say now to an Antony of Padua, preaching to thirty thousand people in the open air; or to Whitefield, the central object that all Moorfields sought, sparkling with the lanterns needful to find the way of a winter's morning to the great preacher's five o'clock sermons? We should think it a strange thing, if some preacher on a Sunday should clear out by his words all gambling shops and secret stalls of infected and vicious books, so that Monday should behold the city made a valley of Hinnom with purifying fires. Yet even so did Bernardine and Antony and Savonarola, to such good purpose that the people burned their tools of gambling and magic, and their licentious playthings, in the public squares, and made bonfires of Ovid, Martial, and Boccaccio. An old writer tells of more than a hundred of these penitential fires burning in the streets of Paris in obedience to a sermon of a gray-friar; and the practical nature of the test may be inferred from the writer's addition that the ladies threw into the flames their head-dresses and other ornaments. What a boon to Ireland a preacher would

have been who could send all the absentee landlords of that wretched country hurrying back to their oppressed tenantry!—as Balzac relates that a Capuchin, one Jerome Narni, preached with such power against the lazy absentee bishops at Rome that thirty of them started the next morning for their dioceses.

So remarkable a social fact as the ascendancy of any great means of popular influence is not to be ascribed to any one cause; but it is impossible not to advert here to the greatness of many of the old preachers, and especially their moral greatness and extraordinary devotion to their mission. Take the old heroes of Methodism, who set out on their circuits with a spade strapped to the saddle to dig their way through snow-drifts. When one considers their labors and hardships, one thinks they deserved their influence: it was no greater than their devotion, and not so profound as their humility. Hear one of them speak of himself: "I am but a brown-bread preacher; I have nothing of politeness in my language or address; but I help all I can to heaven in the best way I can. I have been in danger by snow-drifts and land-floods; by falls from my horse; by persecution, cold, pain, weakness, and weariness; trials of heart and understanding and judgment; and various reasonings with friends and foes, men and devils, and most with myself." From some out-of-the-way backwoods settlement they wrote for a preacher, and added: "Be sure and send us a good swimmer,"—a clerical qualification which became intelligible when it was learned that the last minister had been drowned in trying to swim across a stream unprovided with bridge or ford. These "great unknown," as they have been called, were ubiquitous in the wilderness; they often died in wilds so remote that no one knew their fate for many months or years. "My friend," said Richard Nolly to an ungracious emigrant whose track he had followed, and who complained that, after emigrating to get rid of the preachers, he was discovered by one before he had unloaded his wagon,— "my friend, if you go to heaven, you'll find Methodist preachers there; and if you go to hell, I'm afraid you'll find some there; and you see how it is in this world. I'd advise you to come to terms with God, and then you'll be at peace with us." It was not inapt when these men were called Graduates of Brush College and Fellows of Swamp University. They were sturdy men, who stood without being

shored up. "How is it you have no Doctors of Divinity?" was asked of Jacob Kruber, an old Revolutionary Methodist hero, who prayed that the Lord would bless all the crowned heads of Europe, "give them short lives and peaceful deaths, take them to heaven, and let us have no more of them;" and he answered, "Our Divinity is not sick, and does not need doctoring."¹

It is no part of my purpose at this time to discuss the causes of the decline of churches. These are many and varied, and involve the discussion of very wide-spread social movements, as well as changes in mental and moral tendency. Neither would it be possible here, even if desirable, to trace out in full the process by which the change has come about. But I will, in a few words, outline the latter, especially as it will serve to introduce a distinction to which I wish to call attention more at length.

The process starts first of all from the mighty historical Church, — an all but universal institution, which preserved a central authority while it spread out over all peoples, rooted itself organically in every country and every civilization, inspected all kingdoms and even assumed their government, and was as the firmament spanning the earth. The emphasis is on the institution. Other things are universal, but the Church has been the first and the last *institution* universal, binding nations together into a body corporate; and it will enjoy this distinction alone, until we have the Congress of Nations which shall legislate war, by a happy interpretation of the popular conscience, into the list of barbarous expedients now outgrown. The ministers of this Church were only so many representatives or embodiments of its power and authority, having no individual or personal value. Their importance inhered in their miraculous functions, issuing from their vital union with the institution. At the Reformation, this institution was broken up. Companies and nations seceded from her, mocked at her power, derided her glories, and set up churches for themselves. This we may roughly call the second stage in the process, — a change from a *church* to *churches*, from one all-embracing institution to many local institutions, like the English church and the churches of the American Colonies. Beyond doubt this was a gain in liberty, a step in local self-

¹ "Lamps, Pitchers, and Trumpets."

government. The ecclesiastical power was held to be centred in the people, and in many cases the priestly power, or faculty of ordination, was also reposed there. The change was a rise in the importance of the personal element in the ministrations, of the minister as a man, because the people selected him. As the institution declined, man ascended. Still, the emphasis, on the whole, was upon the institution; it was considered in some sense supernatural, and was, moreover, instituted and protected by connection with the State.

What we may roughly call the third and last stage of the process in this community was introduced in Massachusetts, in 1833, by an amendment to the Bill of Rights. This provided that the support of the church should be no longer a matter of legal obligation, but entirely voluntary. Any member of a society or parish could withdraw at will, and be thereafter not liable for any society or parish expenses. By this step it is manifest that churches ceased to be institutions at all. They became merely societies of individuals, with no different sort of legal relations from those pertaining to any other incorporated company or club. Each man is made the supreme arbiter for himself as to religious associations. He can attend or not, and pay or not, as he pleases.¹ Obviously, this was a step in liberty; or if that be doubted, say a decline in legal restraint, and another rise in the importance of the personal element. Immediately appeared a tendency to make the minister every thing, the organization and its duties nothing. Men claim to choose their own ways of doing good, and are continually becoming slower to believe that they ought to go to church if they do not like the minister. The church has disappeared, and left simply the preacher, who competes with other preachers by his powers of thought or rhetoric, and whom men follow or leave according to whim, sentiment, or appreciation, just as they do other lecturers.

The effect of this state of things upon pulpit supply, and the reaction of this again upon the character of the pulpit, are very obvious. Owing to the importance of the minister, his popularity being the society's chief capital and maintenance; owing

¹ For a masterly elucidation of this matter, the reader is referred to an article by Rev. Joseph H. Allen, of Cambridge, upon "Some Results of the Voluntary System, especially in our Country Parishes," in the "Christian Examiner," for March, 1868.

also to a nobler cause, the increase of education and the elevation of intellectual standing in all matters; and, furthermore, because of the greater power and influence, to say nothing of gain, now held out to talent in many other walks of life, — a power and character are demanded for really noble and effective work in the pulpit which are becoming continually harder to supply. The necessity of popularity to a preacher may or may not be an ill. It depends upon the sort of thing that is popular in his community. Unfortunately, the demand upon the pulpit is not always — I fear it must be conceded at present not often — noble and righteous, worthy both of the teacher and the taught. Ability may be in demand without nobility. I have been assured by a shrewd observer of much experience that, in his judgment, no one can do any thing more unpopular than to require men to think, or, by consequence, to think himself. I hear of a parish, not a thousand miles from our Athens, writing to the Denominational Association for a minister “who will not move for fifteen hundred years.” A minister who left the pulpit and went to farming, said to me, after a short trial of his new life: “You cannot imagine, my dear friend, the relief it is to be free from the necessity of pleasing.” Another assured me lately that there was only one clerical qualification worth mentioning, — to wit, *tact*; he said: “Piety, morality, learning, eloquence, are of no account; *tact* is every thing.” It has been remarked, and is probably true, that any one man in a congregation, even if comparatively insignificant in parts or possessions, can turn away the minister if he deliberately set about it, and that, too, without resorting to slander. When it is considered to what different dispositions the minister must preach; what ignorance, misapprehension, opinionatedness, bigotry, rashness, crudeness, he is sure to encounter in an average congregation; and amid what social envyings, jealousies, heart-burnings, and vulgarities he must move equably and as a harmonizing presence, — it is not surprising that many ministers find the “necessity of pleasing” a perilous strain upon the conscience. One, a very noble man, who abandoned the pulpit and devoted himself to the law, said to me: “I told my people in my farewell discourse that I had tried to tell the truth in the pulpit, and believed I had been tolerably successful. Indeed, I could not remember having lied at all, but of that I would

not be too positive.” “But,” I answered, “equivocation is commonly said to be a lawyer’s weapon; can you be absolutely truthful before a jury?” “Well,” said he, “I have not lied much — not at all that I remember — in the pulpit; and if a man can speak the truth and be a minister, he can speak the truth in any other circumstances that I know of.”

We have to thank this “necessity of pleasing” for the prevalent “sensationalism” in the pulpit, and indeed upon the secular lecture platform. It is the bid of weak men for a hearing, and is successful with the large class that follows entertainment, or the excitement of hearing their own rashness and half-thought expressed and asserted with bold or insolent flippancy. Many men, who shrink from deliberately compromising the truth, will resort to low devices to win attention, utter crude extravagances or sorry jokes, and bedizen their mother tongue with tawdry attire; so sacrificing that dignity, loftiness, and temperance of speech which seems to me hardly less important than ingenuousness, and is the certain result of patience and care in thought. It is permitted to a teacher to think so far as to discover new ways to defend old beliefs; or possibly he may venture on a gentle heresy or two, if he dexterously put the new wine into old bottles familiarly labeled, so that it may pass current for something else until people get used to it: but if he ponder long and wisely over a difficulty, until he clears it up by detecting an error in the old belief and offers plainly a better way of thinking, being at the same time careful to say nothing wildly or in excess, he may borrow of the flowers their beauty and of the stars their majesty, but he will speak to a handful in an upper chamber. I do not suppose that any great and wise teacher bemoans his small audience. One, whose affluent genius and insight have often failed to attract the hearing they ought to command, writes me, adverting to the fact: “I would always speak without price to as many people as chose to hear, if it were in my power to do so.” Neither is the crowd that sits grinning and ogling under common haranguing to be despised. I say only that weak men, who know better, follow the fashion and don the “motley,” seeing it to be “the only wear;” and that the “necessity of pleasing,” to which our present system chains the minister, inevitably tends to drag the pulpit to a lower level rather than to lift men to a higher, — has, indeed, actually done so.

But here an important distinction is to be made. The decline of churches and the diminished power of the pulpit are to be conceived simply as the eclipse of an institution. Not by any means are they to be held synonymous with decline of social respect or regard for the minister; not even with diminished intellectual consideration, when the office is worthily filled. Probably there never has been a time among English-speaking peoples when the minister has enjoyed a higher social standing than now. This is a point bearing directly upon the phenomena of the decline of churches, and is worthy of historical illustration at some length. For a long period in England, the ordinary parish minister was not only held in little social regard, but was an object of positive contempt. Eachard's "Causes of the Contempt of the Clergy and Religion," published in 1670, mentions the "ignorance and poverty" of the clergy as among the chief causes. He complains that the pay of chaplains in great houses was little better than a cook's or butler's wages; and, referring to the custom of dismissing the clergyman from the dinner table before the last course (which appears also in the novelists and other writers of the eighteenth century), he describes the parson as "sent from a table, picking his teeth, with his hat under his arm, while the knight and my lady eat up the tarts and chickens." Herbert is careful to give his "Country Parson" full rules for rebuking and putting down contempt, or, failing in that, for enduring it with dignity; since he "knows well that both for the general ignominy that is cast upon the profession, and much more for those rules which, out of his choicest judgment, he hath resolved to observe, he must be despised." Therefore he must "endeavor that none shall despise him; especially in his own parish he suffers it not to his utmost power; for that where contempt is, there is no room for instruction." He must be at pains to rebuke contempt "by his holy and unblamable life," "by a courteous carriage and winning behavior," "by a bold and impartial reproof, even of the best in the parish, when occasion requires," and even by the exaction of legal penalties when the contempt is obstinate and goes "so far as to do any thing punishable by law." But if it be impossible to avoid the contempt, or inexpedient to punish it, then the parson must bear it in a "humble way," "or else in a slighting way," "or in a sad way," "or else

in a doctrinal way," "or lastly in a triumphant way," — these being "the five shields wherewith the godly receive the darts of the wicked." In another chapter, Herbert addresses himself especially to private chaplains, whom he counsels "not to be over-submissive and base, but to keep up with the lord and lady of the house, and to preserve a boldness with them and all, even so far as reproof to their very face when occasion calls, but seasonably and discreetly." When Herbert, who was a courtier and of noble birth, resolved to devote himself to the Church, — a thing very unusual at that time, even the bishops of Elizabeth's reign bearing neither famous nor influential names, — "he did," says Walton, "at his return to London, acquaint a court friend with his resolution, who persuaded him to alter it as too mean an employment, and too much below his birth and the excellent abilities and endowments of his mind. To whom he replied: 'It hath been formerly judged that the domestic servants of the King of Heaven should be of the noblest families on earth. And though the iniquity of the late times have made clergymen meanly valued, and the sacred name of priest contemptible, yet I will labor to make it honorable by consecrating all my learning and all my poor abilities to advance the glory of that God that gave them; knowing that I can never do too much for him that hath done so much for me as to make me a Christian. . . .'"

Many historical circumstances combine both to illustrate and to explain the low social estimation in which clerical persons were held. Political considerations account for some of it. The English Reformation and the constantly varying and shifting religious policy of the government brought the clergy into unfavorable relations with the State. During the continual veering of the wind around all the disputed points of doctrine and polity which preceded and followed the Revolution, the clergy as a whole displayed a pliability which, though it admitted of much extenuation, was nevertheless to a certain degree ridiculous. In its extreme examples, it tumbled quite over into servility and sycophancy, and was made the object of satire by contemporary wits. Elizabeth, throughout her reign, regarded her clergy with great suspicion so far as their preaching was concerned. She even restrained it, declaring that three or four preachers were enough for a county; and in the general drift of this judgment

I must say that I agree with that far-sighted woman. Besides these collateral circumstances, the English Reformation had a very direct effect upon the social rank of the clergy. In the Catholic hierarchy, the regular or monastic clergy were the aristocratic class, while the secular clergy, or parish priests, were regarded as comparatively plebeian. When the Reformation overthrew the colleges and monastic houses of the regulars, and turned them adrift, the reformed clergy took the place of the Roman Seculars, and appeared like the dregs of a profession which had lost its patrician class. The Catholic nobles hated them as heretics; the reformed nobles despised them, and rejoiced to be rid of the powerful social rivalry of the old ecclesiastical aristocracy. They were abased and impoverished. Poverty was afterwards very extreme among the poorer of the beneficed clergy, and still more oppressive in the miserable class of the stipendiary curates, performing for the smallest pittance the duties of absentee incumbents.

The undesirableness of the clergy as suitors in marriage was a well-defined and obstinate feature of their social inferiority. Originally the whole order shared in the proscription. The ban was lifted first, though slowly, from the lower grades, and "long after a country rector was looked upon as a fit mate for the daughter of a gentle yeoman or small squire, his bishop would have been thought guilty of presumption in aspiring to the hand of a baron's, or even a baronet's, daughter." How entirely different a spirit has come over society, and particularly over its gentler half, it is needless to remark. Jæffreson gravely discusses the causes of the change, and of the undeniable inclination on the part of women, even of the highest rank, towards marriage with clerical persons. But in elder days, Margaret Charlton was thought by her kindred and friends to have lowered herself socially by becoming the wife of Richard Baxter; although that intrepid woman was so far from sharing their notions that she herself first besought the privilege, and only by eloquent and zealous pleading, it is related, barely escaped the mortification of a refusal. Her husband made it up to her afterwards by enshrining her virtues with his pen in a "Breviate" of her life. George Herbert married the gentle Jane Danvers, a modest and tender-hearted girl of a wealthy and ancient lineage. At their first meeting, writes Wal-

ton, "a mutual affection entered into both their hearts, as a conqueror enters into a surprised city; and love, having got such possession, governed and made them such laws and resolutions as neither party was able to resist; insomuch that she changed her name into Herbert the third day after this first interview." Although, it is true, the parties had been very warmly recommended to each other by their friends, it is impossible not to suspect that the serious Walton unjustifiably romances in this description of the sudden ardor and impatience of their love. Herbert himself, writing afterward in his "Priest to the Temple," says: "If he [the parson] be married, the choice of his wife was made rather by his ear than by his eye; his judgment, not his affection, found out a fit wife for him, whose humble and liberal disposition he preferred before beauty, riches, or honor:" and he proceeds with a curious justification of the value of a humble disposition in a woman, in that a wise and loving husband — whom he does not scruple to call "*the good instrument of God to bring woman to heaven,*" reversing the theory of the relation now in vogue — could produce, out of humility, any special grace of faith, patience, meekness, love, obedience, etc. This theory he proceeded to put in practice when, about three months after marriage, he informed his submissive bride of his presentation to be Rector of Bemerton. Thinking of the aristocratic birth and education of his wife in contrast with that contempt of the clergy which he afterwards commented upon in the "Country Parson," he said to her, after kissing her with grave courtesy: "You are now a minister's wife, and must now so far forget your father's house as not to claim a precedence of any of your parishioners; for you are to know that a priest's wife can challenge no precedence or place, but that which she purchases by her obliging humility; and I am sure places so purchased do best become them. And let me tell you that I am so good a herald as to assure you that this is truth." This advice of Herbert literally reflects the social opinion of his day. A clerical wife was placed in theory, though not rigidly in practice, in point of social precedence, below even very humble persons among her husband's parishioners. Moreover, the differences of rank which obtained in the ecclesiastical order did not extend their privileges and honors to the wives as well as to the clergymen themselves, in such manner

as the ladies of noble houses partake of their husband's rank. "The bishop," says Jæffreson, "was a lord of Parliament, but his wife was plain 'Mistress,' and to this day is styled less honorably than the dame of any tradesman who has been knighted. In the eye of social law and etiquette, a primate's wife was no higher personage than the wife of a country attorney." Herbert's maxims in regard to the coolness and prudence to be observed by clergymen in selecting a wife express faithfully the current opinion. It was the common view that a priest should have no regard to his personal inclinations in his choice. The gratification of preference was reserved for less sanctified Benedicts. The marrying rector must use his judgment to discover and wed a woman acceptable and serviceable to his parish, or must even, as in the case of Richard Hooker, acquiesce submissively in a selection made for him by others, — a principle which sometimes had sad results.

To the above considerations historical candor will compel us to add that some, if not much, of this contempt of the clergy was deserved and caused by opprobrious clerical character. When we call to mind the kind of clergyman known as a "buck-parson" in the eighteenth century, and remember the testimony of essayist and novelist to the no great rarity of this "fox-hunting" ecclesiastic, to whom Sunday is as dull "as to any fine lady in town," and who "leaps from his horse at the church door after following a pack of hounds, huddles on his surplice, and gabbles over the service with the most indecent mockery of religion," we must at least agree with the doubt of one writer "whether the contempt in which the clergy were held ought to be considered as the cause or the effect of such habits." No doubt there was a mutual action and reaction, contempt and ill-desert feeding each other. Chaucer's description of the monk among his Canterbury pilgrims proves that the sporting ecclesiastic of the last century descended lineally from the gay and active monkish Don of the fourteenth century, who was "an out-riider that loved venerie;" and

"Ful many a deinte hors hadde he in stable:
And whan he rode, men mighte his bridel here
Gingeling in a whistling wind as clere,
And eke as loude, as doth the chapell belle.

Greihoundes he hadde as swift as foul of flight:
Of pricking and of hunting for the hare
Was all his lust, for no cost wolde he spare."

The difference was one of moral estimation. The "buck" of Miss Edgeworth's time figures in her stories to be reproached; or, if endured, was by no means admired. But in citing this passage of Chaucer as authority for a portrait of the affluent, sport-loving class among the monks of Wycliffe's England, Jæffreson remarks upon the pains the poet is at "to show that the ecclesiastic was in thorough accord with the prevailing opinion of his time." "Nor may it be supposed," he says, "that the costume, appointments, and venatory taste of his hunting clergymen, were at variance with the social opinion of ordinary gentle folk, at a time when field sports were the universal and most eagerly followed of aristocratic diversions, and when the superior nuns of the country were remarkable for the richness of their jewelry and the fastidious daintiness of their costume, and ordinarily went on journeys with small greyhounds at their heels." Our own times have not entirely escaped the "buck," and he seems to thrive in many different zones of culture and civilization. A recent traveler in Siberia describes the clergyman at Oudskoi as so devoted to gambling that it was necessary more than once during the writer's short stay in the place "to ring the church-bells the second and even the third time to call him from his game in order to conduct the services;" and adds: "They have a saying in this country that 'he is so great a rascal they will not even make a priest of him.' I have known some "bucks" more or less full-grown, and have seen modest ministers listen with mortification while laymen expressed the disgust with which they have heard coarse jests and stories from a clergyman of this sort.

But there can be little doubt that clerical turpitude is much rarer now, all things considered, than ever before. To recur to a previous remark, the value and regard which in elder days attached to the institution of the Church has transferred itself to the minister as a man, and made a moral demand upon the profession, to which it has responded well. The moral quality of the religious teacher, whether only a minister or making the more august not to say presumptuous, professions of a clergyman, is a matter

to be treated delicately, in respect both of its importance and of its fair fame. Every one feels the justice and necessity of the rule of Paul: "I keep under my body and bring it into subjection; lest that, by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a cast-away." But the moral qualification has always been the most difficult to estimate and procure, as is very natural on many accounts; and hardly ever have the ministers of religion been dealt justly with in this regard. By one class they are too much praised; by another, too much decried; and neither take into account, or even understand, the dangers and difficulties of the position. A celebrated minister, whose pronounced heresies never called into dispute the spontaneous elevation of his piety, used to say that he had found ministers, as a class, no better than any other class. This dictum, often denied, if not denounced, I must candidly admit, falls in very nearly, if not quite, with my own experience. Taking all things together, and after sharing in both clerical and lay callings, I cannot say that I have found a purer moral atmosphere among ministers than exists among business men, especially among intelligent mechanics. Indeed, moral agitations transpire in recesses so personal and private that I suspect no occupation could be much better off than another in this respect. Different kinds of faults there are, but differences in degree are not so obvious. So much should be allowed; but if it be then said that this argues special discredit to ministers, since, owing to their comparative withdrawal from the turmoil of life, their elevation above social ambition, and other advantages tending to refine and elevate character, they ought to be better than their fellows, it is sufficient to answer that such a remark never could be made by any one who had experienced for an hour in his own person the equally severe and peculiar temptations of this walk in life. No one who has known them will be likely to think that greater seductions beset the conscience in any lot, and many deem them peculiarly insidious. A minister, whose fame is as white in morals as it is enviable in literature, said he hoped his son would not incline to his profession, on account of its temptations. Moreover, as a wise and good man said when he heard of a married couple who were unhappy, "Peradventure they were unhappy before," so when clerical misdemeanors are too much empha-

sized, it is pertinent to ask whether the same evils did not exist before in the secular world out of which the minister must come.

In a comparative view of the moral quality of ministers and of other classes of men, it is important to keep in mind two considerations. If, in the first place, ministers are really no more admirable in point of morals than other men, it is not so much because they are worse than they appear as because other classes are better than they seem to be. And this involves no hypocrisy or pretension on one side or the other. The occupation of the minister is such as necessarily to set him up for inspection from a moral point of view, so that his virtues have the advantage of conspicuous publicity and high appreciation, while his faults appear, from the same cause, in unenviable contrast and prominence. On the other hand, men in any other private walk are not, as it were, officially invested with virtue as their marketable qualification; and their merits, being brought into no strong light, do not obtrude conspicuously, and must be ascertained generally by the gradual process of intimate acquaintance. And however much, in the second place, may be said of the demerits of the clergy at any past time, or even in the present, it should not be forgotten that in spite of its peculiar temptations, — nay, by reason of them, when they are triumphantly overcome, — the order has been illustrated in every age by examples of saintly character seldom equaled in any class and surpassed in none. Not only from poetry, but from history, and from our own experience, looks out upon us with sweet and mild benediction the kindly presence of some country parson, or even, though more rarely, some city minister, deeply attached to his people, and the friend and counsellor of high and low; sincere in doctrine or reproof; "unpractised to fawn;" "more skilled to raise the wretched than to rise;" impartial in hospitality, and rich in charity; assiduous in the tender offices of his pastoral duty, and adorning his venerable place with meek and unaffected solemnity. In terms that handed down the substance, if not the very words, of his sweet sketch to Goldsmith, over a lapse of five hundred years, Chaucer depicts the good country minister of his day. There must have been many such in the interval beginning with that "poure persone of a toun" and ending with sweet Auburn's "village preacher;" and they still exist.

The bearing of the social standing of the minister upon the decline of churches is very obvious; for if the minister is held personally in high respect, treated on the one hand as well as a man of any other calling and of equal excellence, and on the other with that additional honor which civilized communities accord to intellectual eminence, it follows that it is not the function of the teacher of religion and morality which has fallen into disrepute, but the ecclesiastical forms and connections which are entangled with it. Indeed, it appears to be the admitted worthiness of preaching which props up the crumbling house that it inhabits. The present ecclesiastical methods belong to a past age. The more seriously disposed of the present time are puzzled how to get along with them. The lighter-minded heedlessly throw them away, and are left without the balance and stay supplied by *instituted* sentiments, which are essential to most people and useful even to the best. What to do; how to build a better shelter for that religious teaching; and how to institute wisely that social religious life which thoughtful people believe we cannot eradicate if we would, and would not if we could,—are serious questions of the hour. The tendency and actual effects of the "necessity of pleasing" are obvious enough. No great and delicate office can endure dictation by the interests or tastes of its constituents. We have had painful illustrations elsewhere to what condition it may reduce the judiciary, and it is the difficulty under which the whole elective system of government staggers. The critical objection is plain; but how to do better, the constructive problem, is not easy of solution. If the minister, once elected, held by a tenure independent of the people's pleasure, it is difficult to see how, in that case, he could escape the necessity of being agreeable, in doctrine and otherwise, to some power that would, in effect, be a hierarchy. Some suggestion may be obtained from the progress of society in the division of labor. These are not the days of universal workmanship or universal scholarship, and no minister, or other teacher, should be expected to enlarge on every topic that can interest mankind and on every passing crisis of thought or of events. The result of such an effort is a pernicious deluge of crudeness. Here I recur again to the excessive quantity of preaching as a morbid excrescence which should be courageously cut off. Any measure which will limit

the quantity of preaching and the number of preachers we may be very sure will improve the quality. This would not cut off the exercise of religious feeling, the sanctities of worship. The bearing of these upon the idea of an institution constitutes in itself a separate and a delicate topic. But such deep experiences and needs of human nature may be safely trusted to obtain at least so much provision as their proper life requires. Beyond this, we need a *great* and, so to express it, a *reserved* pulpit. The eminence that sufficed once is getting diffused. Let the preacher be as learned and able as he may, he will be waked up now and then by surprise at the excellent diction and vigorous mind displayed by some parishioner in a letter to a newspaper,—a quiet man, whose modesty makes no intellectual pretension, but does pass in strict review the pretension of his teacher, and decides upon it unerringly.

Vain babbling and crude "sensationalism" are too amusing and exciting to be put down by exhortation or derision. But they may be displaced. The profound religious instincts of humanity *instituted*, and instituted wisely according to the wants and genius of the time, will be equally potent to attract the wise and the simple, and to check the profane.

J. VILA BLAKE.