

THE MODERATOR'S SERMON.

"O Lord, send now prosperity." Psalm 118:25.

The poem from which this prayer is quoted, is throughout, an utterance of the Church: the utterance of gratitude for past experiences and of confidence as to the future. God had, according to His promise, brought her out of a long captivity, but there were still other of His pledges which were to brighten into splendid fulfillments. His special grace was to surpass His special providences; so that where there had been those hidings of His face, harder to be borne than the hidings of his power, there should henceforth be only light; and in this light was the Church to enjoy a spiritual prosperity with which no mere temporal advantages would compare. This alluring prosperity was, however, to come not by miracle nor by chance, nor yet by virtue of a listless waiting on the part of its expectants. The voice of prayer must rise to claim it. The hand of faith must open to receive it. Lifting that voice and extending this hand, each member of the body of Israel and all together as a united whole, are, accordingly, seen to stand, saying: "O Lord I beseech Thee, send now prosperity." What prosperity we already have, maintain, what we do not yet possess, add; but send only that which is real and lasting; and send it at once. Truly a prayer not less comprehensive than earnest!

That in this appeal to her divine Head, is represented the true attitude of the Church in our own day, it were a needless task to illustrate. A still further and larger prosperity is always to be sought in behalf of a living organism whose law is that of progress, and whose decline must begin just so soon as an imagined perfection has been reached;—and this is especially the case where the organism in view is of the nature of a personal existence.

1. There is, therefore, only one inquiry which here demands an answer: what is it that constitutes a Church's prosperity; which is equal to the question, how does she best realize the idea of her mission; or to this simpler interrogatory, how shall it be ascertained whether she is in the experience of a healthy growth?

That mere automatic expansion is not indicative of such a growth, we at once perceive by a look at the papacy, wherein mechanism takes the place of life.

That mere extent of territory occupied does not testify to it, we are assured by thinking of those primitive churches whose hands, so soon paralyzed, were joined in a circle the area of which included a great portion of the then civilized world.

That mere breadth of showy foliage fails to give proof of it, is seen in certain well-known specimens of modern ecclesiasticism, not necessary now to be named, which, whilst obtruding to the sight many limbs of bold assumption, are yet able to exhibit but a sparse fruitage of saving truth to the disappointed taste.

Nor, as is sometimes superficially thought, does a growthful prosperity depend for its expression upon the numbers whose names serve to swell the rolls of a professing membership—as is witnessed in not a few instances of individual churches, whose communion tables are crowded with nominal believers many of whom are nowhere else felt to be on the side of Christ. It is, indeed, a taking spectacle: that of a vast army gathered beneath the banner of salvation's imperial Chieftain. But, what other than an impediment to its efficiency are those thousands of them who are always faltering in the ranks:—the trembling doubters, the flinching dodgers, the prepared deserters: the images of soldiers only, upon whose ill-fitting and flimsy armor the ring of actual battle is never heard, in whose lifeless hands the blade of conquest is never seen to cut, and upon whose shrinking persons is never discerned the batterings and blood of a persevering heroism? Of what good use are the men who, when showing themselves at their best, are recognized as mere lookers-on where others are engaging the foe: or are known only as loitering murmurers, who, although ready to claim a share in the prizes that may be gained, will not venture beyond the safe margin of the fiery fray to help the struggling winners in its thick: cold, cautious, colorless, cumbersome! It may be well for the Church statistician to reckon up from year to year, the hundreds who have been added to the thousands already registered, and to gather into some imposing total a view of the augmented mass; and all concerned ought to be grateful the while for every fresh mark of gracious increase. But in the Church as elsewhere, people should be weighed rather than counted; and then it would probably be found that it is the clustered twos and threes, shining here and there like mutually-revolving stars amid spaces of comparative emptiness, whose influence of spiritual gravity most serves to maintain the balance of Zion's attractive and progressive forces. The Moravians were never numerous, and yet how great their achievements, how powerful their example, how penetrative their zeal! Numbers are desirable, but only when they constitute a membership whose constancy is as a law of nature, whose fidelity is as a principle of justice, and whose working-energy is as the movement of a tireless heart. Multiplied admissions into the

in its unadulterated pureness, a well-defined evangelical doctrine. Happily for us we inherit from our fathers a scriptural organization whose shining distinction has been its steadfast adherence to the entire revealed word of God, as that exclusive standard of faith and duty apart from which religious belief has nothing valuable to affirm and religious practice nothing laudable to achieve. So that almost the whole history of Presbyterianism is a history of battles under the banner on which was emblazoned this order: "hold fast the form of sound words." To such an extent is this true, that it has even been content to suffer reproach on account of the tenacity with which, with both hands, it has clung to the "thus it is written," and for its readiness to meet with sharp controversial zeal all those whose pseudo-charitable folly has presumed to loosen a single nail or obscure a single opening in the sanctuary of divine inspiration. We thus derive from an ancestry whose labors and endurance on the changing field of polemical disputation have served to shed a lustre imperishable upon our Church's annals, albeit the contention was sometimes over what might seem nothing more nutritious than a dry bone of metaphysical opinion. In these later days, however, has emerged a disposition, visible here and there, to relax the bonds of a theology, which, although fixed in the holiest experiences of God's people, is believed not to be broad enough for covering the advancing steps of "modern thought." Let it be softened, therefore, some are ready to cry, be toned down to a lower key, be relieved of its jagged points, made more humane, placed nearer to the demand of enlightened reason! Allow the several sciences to manipulate and mend it, to clip from it at this angle, add to it at that, reconstruct it everywhere, and render it less severe throughout! Temper your harsh doctrine of original sin with that of a self-resistable depravity; your doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty with that of man's partial independence of the divine will; your doctrine of elective grace with that of personal merit; your doctrine of a limited atonement with that of a universal final restoration; and all your doctrines with those which a philosophy more rational than apostles knew, is prepared to suggest! Amend your Confession of Faith, not merely touching what is obscure, but chiefly as to what is supernatural! Forget that it has stood the test of ages, some of which were more fiercely gladiatorial than the present, and the assaults of foes some of whom were giants taller and mightier than any who have since appeared; forget the baptismal fires of a martyrdom through which every one of those grand old truths has passed, leaving hardly any smell, and nothing of the soot of the furnace upon them, and passed thus unscathed because "One like unto the Son of God" was with them;—forget all those heroic strugglings of the Lord's people who, in sorrow and in joy, have witnessed to the truth which the Holy Ghost himself, lifting it from prophecy and psalm and epistle, conspicuously impressed upon their saintly lives; and, forsaking this wine of centuries, substitute therefor the watery gushings of a weak philanthropy such as influences, and thus, and renders contemptible, the teachings of those who seem to think that, instead of its being man's chief end to glorify God, it is God's chief end to glorify man! The Church grows towards a sure and ever-surer prosperity only when its nutriment is the strong meat of its Lord's own providing, however hard to digest some of it may be, and pines away towards ghastly death when it becomes content to feed from the made-dishes of men's preparation. Sad and dark will be the day whose coming is foretold by some who claim to have already beheld the streakings of its approaching dawn, in which our enfeebled pulpits shall cease to echo the heraldings of men who, strong with the courage of deep conviction, never suffered one note, however discordant to the ear of sinful nature, to fall away from the wondrous psalm of that same salvation which Paul taught, and for which a greater than Paul died. Fidelity to the whole body of inspired truth, is to any Church, not more a dictate of wisdom than a necessity of existence. Let us have God's word, or none! If His all-directing voice shall become faint amongst us, let every other voice, except that which is raised for the revival of His, become dumb!

There is little or no danger on this score, so far as we are concerned, do any of you exclaim? Well—perhaps not. But who knows? Other Churches, similar to our own, have not escaped the intrusion of heresies that have entered through unguarded doorways. There is always a temptation to leave ajar the gate where principle may go out to embrace popularity, and where the seductive voice of soft cant may come in to rebuke the faithful tongue of hard candor. How far, already, has mandarin sentiment begun to usurp the power of scriptural statement in the matter of eternal punishment? How far, too, have some gone who would dislocate the frame of our theology so as to leave space for elevating some favorite part—such as the doctrine of the second advent, such as the doctrine of the "higher life"—to a prominence which threatens to overshadow much of the residue? And what, to go no further than those murmurings against the sufficiency

monious, and because harmonious, strong and growthful.

Inasmuch, however, as no such strength-imparting harmony can be expected in the body at large unless it be conspicuous in the service of government, it becomes us in particular, fathers and brethren, to see to it that there be no needless jarrings on these "high places of the field," lest a cold thrill of separating influence be sent into the dependent mass below. Unity of official counsel is essential to union of subordinate conduct. But whilst no impact of mind, in those who share the burden of a co-ordinate and co-active Captaincy, can become too close, yet of course must room be always left, in such an incorporation of living forces—and just because they are living—for the utmost frankness and freeness of mutual discussion: only ought nothing of this room to be spared for the clashing of jealousy. There is always an atmosphere in Church courts wherein fraternal hearts may burn high with emulative love, but none for the low heart-burnings of antagonistic hate. There is abundant space here for the widest play of differing opinions, but none for throwing the war-stones of repelling alienations. There is ample scope for interchanges of charitable forbearance, but not one foot of ground for hurling the wounding darts of impatient egotism. There is large opportunity for applying the tests of critical examination to proposed measures and means, but not any for rolling the empty barrels of mere fault-finding; broad acreage for much planting, but no portion of it can be yielded for the marring process of pulling up sprouting roots or of felling blossoming trees. Genuine earnestness in Church management engages itself, rarely ever, in undoing. It lets alone what is well, and strives mainly to add what is better. It does not carp, it constructs; it does not suspect, but sustains; it does not worry, it works; does not waste the past, but awaits the future. In all true praying, therefore, for the prosperity which depends upon unity of counsel and effort, there must be a remembrance of the many hindering imperfections that are to be removed, as well as of the many desirable results that are to be attained.

3. The third and last element which needs now to be mentioned, as entering essentially into the idea of Church prosperity, is its free and steady *out-growth*. Besides soundness of doctrine, besides wisely-considered unitedness of action, there must be propagating spread. In these respects the life of the Church resembles that of a healthy human body: it must have good blood coursing through its veins, and also sympathetic organs whose blending activities are busy in maintaining, each in its appropriate place, the full measure of their common vitality; but it must also refuse to live for itself alone, by seeking timely contact with others, and by showing itself in all directions a member of the greater body of mankind. Isolation stifles. A recluse Church is none. She is bound to extend her warmest hand to every sister Church, the integrity of whose scriptural standards and the devotedness of whose scriptural spirit are akin to her own, and with these if she can, or without them if she must, is under obligations to proclaim her Lord to all the world. One of the very purposes of her existence is, to expend in behalf of the myriads outside of her pale those immense treasures of which she is the responsible steward; indeed otherwise, she has almost no adequate apology for existing at all. And hence, in both Testaments the numerous predictions to this end. Hence, especially, the importance which has been attached, and with such eminent reason, to Christ's ascension command, whose utterance was almost immediately followed by such an exhibition of the missionary zeal as gave no rest to apostles and evangelists, until they had set an example of heroic obedience which the lapse of time has served only to brighten as an inspiring lesson for all time. If the animating soul of the Church is the divinity that dwells at her heart, her worthiness of such a dweller is declared in the humanity that streams from her upon a pitied race which is crying to her for help: for it is by the conjunction of her divinity with her humanity that she alone fairly represents the God-man to whom she claims to be indissolubly wedded. Obscure her divine side, and you spoil her beauty no more than is done by dimming her human side. Attach her only to the skies, and she becomes a cloister; attach her to the earth alone, and she becomes a corpse; but attach her in just balance to both, and she becomes the comprehensive glory of each. Her light is the light of God; it has however been kindled to be borne onward and aloft, for the guidance of her own steps not merely but for a radiance which has no limit save the darkness of sin. Thus the gospel was never intended for a monopoly; it is, on the contrary, the gift of a universal property like the ever-circulating day. To confine it is to corrupt it. To amass, is to abase, it. To withhold, is to waste it, and is to convert it into a curse rather than to conserve it as a blessing. So true is this, that never yet has there been known a body, miscalling itself a Church, whose hand, denied to the rescue or perishing men has not proved a hand of suicide laid upon itself. Every soul that perishes by reason of her neglect, is a soul that plants the seed of its destruction in her own bosom.

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Nor is a *wealthy*, necessarily a prosperous, Church. Other things being equal, an opulent membership might be indeed justly regarded as occupying an important vantage position which it were folly to despise. Property sanctified is property serviceable; and the more of this kind the better. Otherwise, however, it may become even a source of weakness, by fostering a worldly pride in the soil where heavenly humility ought alone to grow. Money is power and power indispensable, but it is not always a helpful power; being such only when expended purely for the Master's sake who has Himself taught us that He is better pleased with the small gifts of the money unostentatiously dropped into His treasury, than with the larger offerings of the few who regard the noisy applause of men as above the silent praise of God. At any rate, His wisdom is illustrated in the fact that the controlling mass of His people is composed of those who have comparatively little of this world's goods—evincing that He, certainly, knows how to render a Church prosperous without the aid of such riches as other kingdoms depend upon. Men of wealth there are among His chosen ones, whose hearts, as liberally disposed as their means are plentifully bestowed, reveal them to the eye of a thankful admiration as truly noble specimens of consecrated Christian devotion; but "not many" of these are called: only enough to show that even in the most difficult walk of tempted life divine grace has power to subdue and to transcend. Assuredly, as things are, no Church is called to mourn over its poverty as if this were a fatal calamity, nor on the other hand to rejoice in the possession of distinguished affluence as if this were a principal good. Have not some of the most flourishing of the historic churches been those which knew not where, year by year, to turn for the maintenance of their worship except to their treasury in God? Has it not been so with the Waldensian Christians? Was it not so, at least for a time and that the most fruitful, with the Free Church of Scotland? Do we not read that this was the case with those early churches which Paul and Barnabas planted, and with that which, earlier than these, glorious Pentecost saw gathered? In fact, is this not true of our own body, which, although emerging from the war stripped almost to nakedness, yet has never ceased its successful efforts to advance its columns of spiritual conquest, at home and abroad? Poverty is thus a positive blessing sometimes; a blessing not disguised but manifest.

II. I now pass, however from a consideration of what does not constitute Church prosperity, to some suggestions as to what does; although knowing beforehand that I am thus about to enter upon territory less secure to the foot than the ground I have just left, and that I might herein walk far without fully overtaking the precise object of my search. In outline it is obvious enough, because it is very large; but in its many details, if these should all be traced, there could be no end to the pursuit of that which I have in view. I will look at it from only three somewhat elevated points of observation as sufficing for a comprehensive survey of the whole.

1. In the first place, a true prosperity is found in the thoughtful purpose of all who represent the Church to maintain, in its unabridged integrity and

the made-up of men's preparation. Sad and dark will be the day whose coming is foretold by some who claim to have already beheld the streakings of its approaching dawn, in which our enfeebled pulpits shall cease to echo the heraldings of men who, strong with the courage of deep conviction, never suffered one note, however discordant to the ear of sinful nature, to fall away from the wondrous psalm of that same salvation which Paul taught, and for which a greater than Paul died. Fidelity to the whole body of inspired truth, is to any Church, not more a dictate of wisdom than a necessity of existence. Let us have God's word, or none! If His all-directing voice shall become faint amongst us, let every other voice, except that which is raised for the revival of His, become dumb!

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2. A second element in Church prosperity is found in such a vital union of all its co-acting parts as shall, more and more fully, verify that text which describes "the whole body, fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part," making "increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love." When the Church has visible oneness, such as is evinced in community of doctrinal symbols and in identity of governmental order, much is already gained, that, viz., without which there could be no proper *movement*. But where, in addition, there exists an inward principle at work which is engaged in regulating the very beatings of the Church's heart, as is evinced in this movement being a movement of the entire body as a single mass and towards a common object, still more is gained, viz., that without which there could be no proper *vitality*. Sameness of knowledge as to what constitutes a Church, considered as to articles of belief and modes of polity, may exist along with languor of mutual interest and inefficiency every way. The orthodoxy may after all be a dead orthodoxy, and the most scriptural organization outwardly viewed may be in practice a nullity. It may be an exquisite marble statue, as hard and as cold, although as beautiful: a faultless work of art, but fixed in its place: an object to be admired, but having no other use.

Now the theory of the Church requires us to suppose that it is the body of Christ informed throughout with the Spirit of Christ, apart from which informing Spirit it is not different from any other voluntary association of men, self-constituted and self-guided. In this respect, accordingly, it resembles an individual believer, who, with all his outward professions, is of no valuable service unless he has secured the indwelling presence of the Holy Ghost. But when he does possess this life-imparting agent, what occurs? Why, this: in proportion to the extent in which he is thus spiritually pervaded, he is energized not only, but in a way that blends the purposes of his will into a single determination and that puts into harmonious activity all the parts of his being for making this concentrated determination effective. Were the Church as a whole, therefore, to be placed in a condition represented by the life of one of its godly members, what would necessarily be witnessed? This: they who rule ruling in concord, and they who serve serving in concert, whilst both of these parties are in equal agreement with the one all-controlling Spirit who sits at the convergent and uniting centre of all. Granted then a *true* Church, and it ought to prove a *vigorous* Church, with its universally diffused vigor manifested in the mutual sympathy of its several vitalized parts. And, if this vitality were complete throughout, what would be further seen? Certainly this: every one who helps to constitute the whole would always be found adjusted to his right place; and, in achieving therein each his own unobstructed work, the edifice would go up apace, story by story, until its cap-stone should be finally laid in heaven and song. The chief prayer of the Church, is, accordingly, for the Holy Spirit, if it would be a Church transfused with a life har-

been attached, and with such eminent reason, to Christ's ascension command, whose utterance was almost immediately followed by such an exhibition of the missionary zeal as gave no rest to apostles and evangelists, until they had set an example of heroic obedience which the lapse of time has served only to brighten as an inspiring lesson for all time. If the animating soul of the Church is the divinity that dwells at her heart, her worthiness of such a dweller is declared in the humanity that streams from her upon a pitied race which is crying to her for help: for it is by the conjunction of her divinity with her humanity that she alone fairly represents the God-man to whom she claims to be indissolubly wedded. Obsecure her divine side, and you spoil her beauty no more than is done by dimming her human side. Attach her only to the skies, and she becomes a cloister; attach her to the earth alone, and she becomes a corpse; but attach her in just balance to both, and she becomes the comprehensive glory of each. Her light is the light of God; it has however been kindled to be borne onward and aloft, for the guidance of her own steps not merely but for a radiance which has no limit save the darkness of sin. Thus the gospel was never intended for a monopoly; it is, on the contrary, the gift of a universal property like the ever-circulating day. To confine it is to corrupt it. To amass, is to abase, it. To withhold, is to waste it, and is to convert it into a curse rather than to conserve it as a blessing. So true is this, that never yet has there been known a body, miscalling itself a Church, whose hand, denied to the rescue of perishing men has not proved a hand of suicide laid upon itself. Every soul that perishes by reason of her neglect, is a soul that plants the seed of its destruction in her own bosom.

Beyond all question, the Church, when scripturally viewed, is that one institution for which mankind ought to be more grateful than for all others combined. In a sense that is far from being merely figurative, she presents a continued incarnation of the Lord of glory; she both personates and illustrates Him, by perpetuating His visibility; she *is* He, as a bride is her husband. But how can she verify herself to be all this, unless, like the Head with whom she is identified, she takes into the embracings of a boundless love the entire family which she is His arm to serve and save? And, in proportion as this arm is shortened, in the same proportion does it become shriveled; to lose, by and by, its unused strength altogether in a paralysis for which there is no remedy except the shameful remedy of death! In a word, her unceasing outgrowth of activity for Christ is but another expression for indicating her extending growth towards the perfection of Christ's own beneficence:—and in the advancing degrees of this heavenly beneficence are to be traced the corresponding degrees of her earthly prosperity. For she prospers only when she spiritually lives; she thus lives only when she graciously acts; and she acts in entire truthness to her lofty character, only when she is prepared with those feet of swiftness which shall carry her, burdened with the care of all souls, around the habitable earth. Talk, then, of prosperity—a prosperity worthy of the name—when the hosts of Zion substitute mere dreams of conquest for its ever-enlarging reality, or where their easy resolves to go forward to possible victories are suffered to take the place of the vigorous and persistent march. This were *talk* indeed! As well speak of health when air is withheld from the smothered lungs, or of strength when exercise is denied to the desponding limbs. In vain are your evangelical doctrines, empty are your fraternal unities, unless these are caused to melt into agencies of holy enterprise which shall flow from rill to flood in unceasing expansion.

I have now done. From other points of approach might my subject have been differently, and perhaps better seen. But in what has been said, all that was needful to the purpose in hand has been at least suggested to minds more fruitful than my own. It has not been forgotten in this discussion, you will have perceived, that the Church has no original power of her own, but is at every step dependent upon that almighty Spirit who alone imparts a true unity to His people, who alone vitalizes an otherwise dead doctrine, and who alone energizes all successful activity. But neither has that truth been forgotten which it is even more important to recollect because more likely to slip from the thoughts, viz: that the Church, although an agent whose duty is the duty of an appointed servant, is by no means a passive instrument in the hands of her Master, as if she possessed no real life of her own: an imparted and a dependent life, truly, but none the less a responsible life. The Church is, therefore, capable of sinning and of receiving punishment, or of freeing her skirts from blame and of receiving praise. She is a doer for God as no other of his creatures is, and albeit when she has done her best for Him there is herein no place for pride, yet when she falls short of this there is then room for shame. Let her pray, therefore, for needed prosperity, and pray urgently, because such prosperity is indeed of the Lord's sovereign bounty; but then it is no more a gift granted to kneeling prayer than it is a reward bestowed upon deserving labor; and where this labor is lacking that prayer is presuming.