

Needs of the Times

by J.C. Ryle

The sermon emphasizes the importance of standing firm in one's faith and holding clear and distinct views of Christian doctrine in the face of widespread unbelief and skepticism.

Scripture: Romans 12:10, 1 Corinthians 3:9-10, Galatians 5:13, Ephesians 2:20, Philippians 2:3, Colossians 3:13, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, James 5:16

Topics: "Christian Growth", "Church Unity"

Description

Alexander Maclean preaches on the concept of edification, emphasizing the importance of self-edification, united edification, and divine edification in the Christian life. Self-edification involves building up one's character on the foundation of Jesus Christ, with faith as the cornerstone, continuous effort, orderly progression, and a clear plan for growth. United edification stresses the reciprocal building up of the Christian community, both in adding new members and in fostering unity and growth among believers. Divine edification highlights God as the ultimate Builder of believers into a temple fit for His dwelling, inspiring boundless hope and confidence in His work within us.

Transcript

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"Men that had understanding of the times" (1 Chron. 12:32).

These words were written about the tribe of Issachar, in the days when David first began to reign over Israel. It seems that after Saul's unhappy death, some of the tribes of Israel were undecided what to do. "Under which king?" was the question of the day in Palestine. Men doubted whether they should cling to the family of Saul, or accept David as their king. Some hung back, and would not commit themselves; others came forward boldly, and declared for David. Among these last were many of the children of Issachar; and the Holy Spirit gives them a special word of praise. He says, "They were men that had understanding of the times."

I cannot doubt that this sentence, like every sentence in Scripture, was written for our learning. These men of Issachar are set before us as a pattern to be imitated, and an example to be followed; for it is a most important thing to understand the times in which we live, and to know what those times require. The wise men in the court of Ahasuerus knew the times (Esther 1:13). Our Lord Jesus Christ blames the Jews, because they "knew not the time of their visitation," and did not "discern the signs of the times" (Luke

19:44; Matt. 16:3). Let us take heed lest we fall into the same sin. The man who is content to sit ignorantly by his own fireside, wrapped up in his own private affairs, and has no public eye for what is going on in the church and the world, is a miserable patriot, and a poor style of Christian. Next to our Bibles and our own hearts, our Lord would have us study our own times.

1. First and foremost, the times require of us a bold and unflinching maintenance of the entire truth of Christianity, and the divine authority of the Bible.

Our lot is cast in an age of abounding unbelief, skepticism and, I fear I must add, infidelity. Never, perhaps, since the days of Celsus, Porphyry and Julian, was the truth of revealed religion so openly and unblushingly assailed, and never was the assault so speciously and plausibly conducted. The words which Bishop Butler wrote in 1736 are curiously applicable to our own days "It is come to be taken for granted by many people, that Christianity is not even a subject of inquiry, but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it as if, in the present age, this was an agreed point among all people of discernment, and nothing remained but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, as it were by way of reprisals for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world." I often wonder what the good bishop would have now said, if he had lived in 1879.

In reviews, magazines, newspapers, lectures, essays and sometimes even in sermons, scores of clever writers are incessantly waging war against the very foundations of Christianity. Reason, science, geology, anthropology, modern discoveries, free thought, are all boldly asserted to be on their side. No educated person, we are constantly told nowadays, can really believe supernatural religion, or the plenary inspiration of the Bible, or the possibility of miracles. Such ancient doctrines as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the personality of the Holy Spirit, the atonement, the obligation of the Sabbath, the necessity and efficacy of prayer, the existence of the devil and the reality of future punishment, are quietly put on the shelf as useless old almanacs, or contemptuously thrown overboard as lumber! And all this is done so cleverly, and with such an appearance of candor and liberality, and with such compliments to the capacity and nobility of human nature, that multitudes of unstable Christians are carried away as by a flood, and become partially unsettled, if they do not make complete shipwreck of faith.

The existence of this plague of unbelief must not surprise us for a moment. It is only an old enemy in a new dress, an old disease in a new form. Since the day when Adam and Eve fell, the devil has never ceased to tempt men not to believe God, and has said, directly or indirectly, "You shall not die even if you do not believe." In the latter days especially we have warrant of Scripture for expecting an abundant crop of unbelief "When the Son of man comes, shall He find faith on the earth?" "Evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse," "There shall come in the last days scoffers" (Luke 18:8; 2 Tim. 3:13; 2 Peter 3:3). Here in England skepticism is that natural rebound from semi-popery and superstition which many wise men have long predicted and expected. It is precisely that swing of the pendulum which far-sighted students of human nature looked for; and it has come.

But as I tell you not to be surprised at the widespread skepticism of the times, so also I must urge you not to be shaken in mind by it, or moved from your steadfastness. There is no real cause for alarm. The ark of God is not in danger, though the oxen seem to shake it. Christianity has survived the attacks of Hume and Hobbes and Tindal, of Collins and Woolston and Bolingbroke and Chubb, of Voltaire and Payne and Holyoake. These men made a great noise in their day, and frightened weak people, but they produced no more effect than idle travelers produce by scratching their names on the great pyramid of Egypt. Depend on it, Christianity in like manner will survive the attacks of the clever writers of these times. The startling

novelty of many modern objections to revelation, no doubt, makes them seem more weighty than they really are. It does not follow, however, that hard knots cannot be untied because our fingers cannot untie them, or formidable difficulties cannot be explained because our eyes cannot see through or explain them. When you cannot answer a skeptic, be content to wait for more light; but never forsake a great principle. In religion, as in many scientific questions, said Faraday, "The highest philosophy is often a judicious suspense of judgment." He that believes shall not make haste: he can afford to wait.

When skeptics and infidels have said all they can, we must not forget that there are three great broad facts which they have never explained away, and I am convinced they never can, and never will. Let me tell you briefly what they are. They are very simple facts, and any plain man can understand them.

a. The first fact is Jesus Christ Himself. If Christianity is a mere invention of man, and the Bible is not from God, how can infidels explain Jesus Christ? His existence in history they cannot deny. How is it that without force or bribery, without arms or money, He has made such an immensely deep mark on the world as He certainly has? Who was He? What was He? Where did He come from? How is it that there never has been one like Him, neither before nor after, since the beginning of historical times? They cannot explain it. Nothing can explain it but the great foundation principle of revealed religion, that Jesus Christ is God, and His gospel is all true.

b. The second fact is the Bible itself. If Christianity is a mere invention of man, and the Bible is of no more authority than any other uninspired volume, how is it that the book is what it is? How is it that a book written by a few Jews in a remote corner of the earth, written at distant periods without consort or collusion among the writers; written by members of a nation which, compared to Greeks and Romans, did nothing for literature--how is it that this book stands entirely alone, and there is nothing that even approaches it, for high views of God, for true views of man, for solemnity of thought, for grandeur of doctrine, and for purity of morality? What account can the infidel give of this book, so deep, so simple, so wise, so free from defects? He cannot explain its existence and nature on his principles. We only can do that who hold that the book is supernatural and of God.

c. The third fact is the effect which Christianity has produced on the world. If Christianity is a mere invention of man, and not a supernatural, divine revelation, how is it that it has wrought such a complete alteration in the state of man kind? Any well-read man knows that the moral difference between the condition of the world before Christianity was planted and since Christianity took root is the difference between night and day, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of the devil.

Whenever you are tempted to be alarmed at the progress of infidelity, look at the three facts I have just mentioned, and cast your fears away. Take up your position boldly behind the ramparts of these three facts, and you may safely defy the utmost efforts of modern skeptics. They may often ask you a hundred questions you cannot answer, and start ingenious problems about various readings, or inspiration, or geology, or the origin of man, or the age of the world, which you cannot solve. They may vex and irritate you with wild speculations and theories, of which at the time you cannot prove the fallacy, though you feel it. But be calm and fear not. Remember the three great facts I have named, and boldly challenge skeptics to explain them away. The difficulties of Christianity no doubt are great; but, depend on it, they are nothing compared to the difficulties of infidelity.

2. The times require at our hands distinct and decided views of Christian doctrine. I cannot withhold my conviction that the professing church is as much damaged by laxity and indistinctness about matters of

doctrine within, as it is by skeptics and unbelievers without. Myriads of professing Christians nowadays seem utterly unable to distinguish things that differ. Like people afflicted with color blindness, they are incapable of discerning what is true and what is false, what is sound and what is unsound. If a preacher of religion is only clever and eloquent and earnest, they appear to think he is all right, however strange and heterogeneous his sermons may be. They are destitute of spiritual sense, apparently, and cannot detect error. Popery or Protestantism, an atonement or no atonement, a personal Holy Spirit or no Holy Spirit, future punishment or no future punishment, "high" church or "low" church or "broad" church, Trinitarianism, Arianism, or Unitarianism, nothing comes amiss to them: they can swallow all, if they cannot digest it! Carried away by a fancied liberality and charity, they seem to think everybody is right and nobody is wrong, every clergyman is sound and none are unsound, everybody is going to be saved and nobody is going to be lost. Their religion is made up of negatives; and the only positive thing about them is, that they dislike distinctness, and think all extreme and decided and positive views are very naughty and very wrong!

These people live in a kind of mist or fog. They see nothing clearly, and do not know what they believe. They have not made up their minds about any great point in the gospel, and seem content to be honorary members of all schools of thought. For their lives they could not tell you what they think is truth about justification or regeneration or sanctification or the Lord's Supper or baptism or faith or conversion or inspiration or the future state. They are eaten up with a morbid dread of controversy and an ignorant dislike of "party spirit," and yet they really cannot define what they mean by these phrases. The only point you can make out is that they admire earnestness and cleverness and charity, and cannot believe that any clever, earnest, charitable man can ever be in the wrong! And so they live on undecided; and too often undecided they drift down to the grave, without comfort in their religion and, I am afraid, often without hope.

The explanation of this boneless, nerveless, jellyfish condition of soul is not difficult to find. To begin with, the heart of man is naturally in the dark about religion, has no intuitive sense of truth and really needs instruction and illumination. Beside this, the natural heart in most men hates exertion in religion and cordially dislikes patient painstaking inquiry. Above all, the natural heart generally likes the praise of others, shrinks from collision and loves to be thought charitable and liberal. The whole result is that a kind of broad religious "agnosticism" just suits an immense number of people, and specially suits young people. They are content to shovel aside all disputed points as rubbish, and if you charge them with indecision, they will tell you, "I do not pretend to understand controversy; I decline to examine controverted points. I dare say it is all the same in the long run." Who does not know that such people swarm and abound everywhere?

Now I do beseech all who read this message to beware of this undecided state of mind in religion. It is a pestilence which walks in darkness, and a destruction that kills in noonday. It is a lazy, idle frame of soul which, doubtless, saves men the trouble of thought and investigation; but it is a frame of soul for which there is no warrant in the Bible, nor yet in the Articles or Prayer Book of the Church of England. For your own soul's sake dare to make up your mind what you believe, and dare to have positive distinct views of truth and error. Never, never be afraid to hold decided doctrinal opinions; and let no fear of man and no morbid dread of being thought party-spirited, narrow or controversial, make you rest contented with a bloodless, boneless, tasteless, colorless, lukewarm, undogmatic Christianity.

Mark what I say. If you want to do good in these times, you must throw aside indecision, and take up a distinct, sharply cut, doctrinal religion. If you believe little, those to whom you try to do good will believe

nothing. The victories of Christianity, wherever they have been won, have been won by distinct doctrinal theology, by telling men roundly of Christ's vicarious death and sacrifice, by showing them Christ's substitution on the cross and His precious blood, by teaching them justification by faith and bidding them believe on a crucified Savior, by preaching ruin by sin, redemption by Christ, regeneration by the Spirit, by lifting up the bronze serpent, by telling men to look and live, to believe, repent and be converted. This, this is the only teaching which for eighteen centuries God has honored with success, and is honoring at the present day both at home and abroad. Let the clever advocates of a broad and undogmatic theology--the preachers of the gospel of earnestness and sincerity and cold morality--let them, I say, show us at this day any English village or parish or city or town or district, which has been evangelized without "dogma," by their principles. They cannot do it, and they never will. Christianity without distinct doctrine is a powerless thing. It may be beautiful to some minds, but it is childless and barren. There is no getting over facts. The good that is done in the earth may be comparatively small. Evil may abound and ignorant impatience may murmur, and cry out that Christianity has failed. But, depend on it, if we want to "do good" and shake the world, we must fight with the old apostolic weapons, and stick to "dogma". No dogma, no fruits! No positive evangelical doctrine, no evangelization!

Mark once more what I say. The men who have done most for the Church of England, and made the deepest mark on their day and generation have always been men of most decided and distinct doctrinal views. It is the bold, decided outspoken man, like Capel Molyneux, or our grand old Protestant champion Hugh McNeile, who makes a deep impression, and sets people thinking, and "turns the world upside down". It was "dogma" in the apostolic ages which emptied the heathen temples, and shook Greece and Rome. It was "dogma" which awoke Christendom from its slumbers at the time of the Reformation, and spoiled the pope of one third of his subjects. It was "dogma" which one hundred years ago revived the Church of England in the days of Whitefield, Wesley, Venn and Romaine, and blew up our dying Christianity into a burning flame. It is "dogma" at this moment which gives power to every successful mission, whether at home or abroad. It is doctrine--doctrine, clear ringing doctrine--which, like the ram's horns at Jericho, casts down the opposition of the devil and sin. Let us cling to decided doctrinal views, whatever some may please to say in these times, and we shall do well for ourselves, well for others, well for the Church of England, and well for Christ's cause in the world.

3. The times require of us an awakened and livelier sense of the unscriptural and soul-ruining character of Romanism.

This is a painful subject, but it imperatively demands some plain speaking.

The facts of the case are very simple. There is no longer that general dislike, dread and aversion to popery, which was once almost universal in this realm. The edge of the old British feeling about Protestantism seems blunted and dull. Some profess to be tired of all religious controversy, and are ready to sacrifice God's truth for the sake of peace. Some look on Romanism as simply one among many English forms of religion, and neither worse nor better than others. Some try to persuade us that Romanism is changed, and not nearly so bad as it used to be. Some boldly point to the faults of Protestants, and loudly cry that Romanists are quite as good as ourselves. Some think it fine and liberal to maintain that we have no right to think anyone wrong who is in earnest about his creed. And yet the two great historical facts,

(a) that ignorance, immorality and superstition, reigned supreme in England four hundred years ago under popery,

(b) that the Reformation was the greatest blessing God ever gave to this land--both these are facts which no one but a papist ever thought of disputing fifty years ago! In the present day, alas, it is convenient and fashionable to forget them! In short, at the rate we are going, I shall not be surprised if it is soon proposed to repeal the Act of Settlement, and to allow the crown of England to be worn by a papist.

The causes of this melancholy change of feeling are not hard to discover.

a. It arises partly from the untiring zeal of the Roman "Catholic" church herself. Her agents never slumber or sleep. They compass sea and land to make one proselyte. They creep in everywhere, like the Egyptian frogs, and leave no stone unturned, in the palace or the workhouse, to promote their cause.

b. It has been furthered immensely by the proceedings of the ritualistic party in the Church of England. That energetic and active body has been vilifying the Reformation and sneering at Protestantism for many years, with only too much success. It has corrupted, leavened, blinded and poisoned the minds of many churchmen, by incessant misrepresentation. It has gradually familiarized people with every distinctive doctrine and practice of Romanism the real presence, the mass, auricular confession and priestly absolution, the sacerdotal character of the ministry, the monastic system and a histrionic, sensuous, showy style of public worship; and the natural result is, that many simple people see no mighty harm in downright genuine popery! Last, but not least, the spurious liberality of the day we live in helps on the Romeward tendency. It is fashionable now to say that all sects should be equal, that the state should have nothing to do with religion, that all creeds should be regarded with equal favor and respect, and that there is a substratum of common truth at the bottom of all kinds of religion, whether Buddhism, Mohammadanism or Christianity! The consequence is that myriads of ignorant folks begin to think there is nothing peculiarly dangerous in the tenets of papists any more than in the tenets of Methodists, Independents, Presbyterians or Baptists, and that we ought to let Romanism alone, and never expose its unscriptural and Christ dishonoring character.

The consequences of this changed tone of feeling, I am bold to say, will be most disastrous and mischievous, unless it can be checked. Once let popery get her foot again on the neck of England, and there will be an end of all our national greatness. God will forsake us, and we shall sink to the level of Portugal and Spain. With Bible reading discouraged, with private judgment forbidden, with the way to Christ's cross narrowed or blocked up, with priestcraft re-established, with auricular confession set up in every parish, with monasteries and nunneries dotted over the land, with women everywhere kneeling like serfs and slaves at the feet of clergymen, with men casting off all faith, and becoming skeptics, with schools and colleges made seminaries of Jesuitism, with free thought denounced and anathematized, with all these things the distinctive manliness and independence of the British character will gradually dwindle, wither, pine away and be destroyed, and England will be ruined. And all these things, I firmly believe, will come unless the old feeling about the value of Protestantism can be revived.

I warn all who read this message, and I warn my fellow churchmen in particular, that the times require you to awake and be on your guard. Beware of Romanism, and beware of any religious teaching which, wittingly or unwittingly, paves the way to it. I beseech you to realize the painful fact that the Protestantism of this country is gradually ebbing away, and I entreat you, as Christians and patriots to resist the growing tendency to forget the blessings of the English Reformation.

For Christ's sake, for the sake of the Church of England, for the sake of our country, for the sake of our children, let us not drift back to Roman "Catholic" ignorance, superstition, priestcraft and immorality. Our

fathers tried Popery long ago, for centuries, and threw it off at last with disgust and indignation. Let us not put the clock back and return to Egypt. Let us have no peace with Rome until Rome abjures her errors, and is at peace with Christ. Until Rome does that, the vaunted reunion of Western churches, which some talk of, and press upon our notice, is an insult to Christianity.

Read your Bibles and store your minds with scriptural arguments. A Bible-reading laity is a nation's surest defense against error. I have no fear for English Protestantism if the English laity will only do their duty. Read your Thirty-nine Articles and Jewell's Apology, and see how those neglected documents speak of Roman "Catholic" doctrines. We clergymen, I fear, are often sadly to blame. We break the first canon, which bids us preach four times every year against the pope's supremacy! Too often we behave as if "Giant Pope" was dead and buried, and never name him. Too often, for fear of giving offense, we neglect to show our people the real nature and evil of popery.

I entreat my readers, beside the Bible and Articles, to read history, and see what Rome did in days gone by. Read how she trampled on liberties, plundered your forefathers pockets, and kept the whole nation of England ignorant, superstitious and immoral. Read how Archbishop Laud ruined church and state, and brought himself and King Charles to the scaffold by his foolish, obstinate, and God displeasing effort to unprotestantize the Church of England. Read how the last popish King of England, James II, lost his crown by his daring attempt to put down Protestantism and reintroduce popery. And do not forget that Rome never changes. It is her boast and glory that she is infallible, and always the same.

Read facts, standing out at this minute on the face of the globe, if you will not read history. What has made Italy and Sicily what they were until very lately? Popery. What has made the South American states what they are? Popery. What has made Spain and Portugal what they are? Popery. What has made Ireland what she is in Munster, Leinster and Connaught? Popery. What makes Scotland, the United States, and our own beloved England the powerful, prosperous countries they are, and I pray God they may long continue? I answer, unhesitatingly, Protestantism, a free Bible and the principles of the Reformation. Oh, think twice before you cast aside the principles of the Reformation! Think twice before you give way to the prevailing tendency to favor popery and go back to Rome.

The Reformation found Englishmen steeped in ignorance and left them in possession of knowledge; found them without Bibles and placed a Bible in every parish; found them in darkness and left them in comparative light; found them priest-ridden and left them enjoying the liberty which Christ bestows; found them strangers to the blood of atonement, to faith and grace and real holiness, and left them with the key to these things in their hands; found them blind and left them seeing, found them slaves and left them free. Forever let us thank God for the Reformation! It lighted a candle which we ought never to allow to be extinguished or to burn dim. Surely I have a right to say that the times require of us a renewed sense of the evils of Romanism, and of the enormous value of the Protestant Reformation!

4. The times require of us a higher standard of personal holiness, and an increased attention to practical religion in daily life.

I must honestly declare my conviction that, since the days of the Reformation, there never has been so much profession of religion without practice, so much talking about God without walking with Him, so much hearing God's words without doing them, as there is in England at this present date. Never were there so many empty tubs and tinkling cymbals! Never was there so much formality and so little reality. The whole tone of men's minds on what constitutes practical Christianity seems lowered. The old golden

standard of the behavior which becomes a Christian man or woman appears debased and degenerated. You may see scores of religious people (so-called) continually doing things which in days gone by would have been thought utterly inconsistent with vital religion. They see no harm in such things as card-playing, theater-going, dancing, incessant novel reading and Sunday traveling, and they cannot in the least understand what you mean by objecting to them! The ancient tenderness of conscience about such things seems dying away and becoming extinct, like the dodo; and when you venture to remonstrate with young communicants who indulge in them, they only stare at you as an old-fashioned narrow-minded, fossilized person, and say, "Where is the harm?" In short, laxity of ideas among young men, and "fastness" and levity among young women, are only too common characteristics of the rising generation of Christian professors.

Now in saying all this I would not be mistaken. I disclaim the slightest wish to recommend an ascetic religion. Monasteries, nunneries, complete retirement from the world, and refusal to do our duty in it, all these I hold to be unscriptural and mischievous nostrums. Nor can I ever see my way clear to urging on men an ideal standard of perfection for which I find no warrant in God's Word, a standard which is unattainable in this life, and hands over the management of the affairs of society to the devil and the wicked. No, I always wish to promote a genial, cheerful, manly religion, such as men may carry everywhere, and yet glorify Christ.

The pathway to a higher standard of holiness, which I commend to the attention of my readers, is a very simple one, so simple that I can fancy many smiling at it with disdain. But, simple as it is, it is a path sadly neglected and overgrown with weeds, and it is high time to direct men into it. We need then to examine more closely our good old friends the Ten Commandments. Beaten out, and properly developed as they were by Bishop Andrews and the Puritans, the two tables of God's law are a perfect mine of practical religion. I think it an evil sign of our day that many clergymen neglect to have the commandments put up in their new or restored churches, and coolly tell you, "They are not wanted now!" I believe they never were wanted so much! We need to examine more closely such portions of our Lord Jesus Christ's teaching as the sermon on the mount. How rich is that wonderful discourse in food for thought! What a striking sentence that is "Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter the kingdom of heaven!" (Matt. 5:20). Alas, that text is rarely used. Last, but not least, we need to study more closely the latter part of nearly all Paul's Epistles to the churches. They are far too much slurred over and neglected. Scores of Bible readers, I am afraid, are well acquainted with the first eleven chapters of the Epistle to the Romans, but know comparatively little of the five last. When Thomas Scott expounded the Epistle to the Ephesians at the old Lock Chapel, he remarked that the congregations became much smaller when he reached the practical part of that blessed book! Once more I say you may think my recommendations very simple. I do not hesitate to affirm that attention to them would, by God's blessing, be most useful to Christ's cause. I believe it would raise the standard of English Christianity about such matters as home religion, separation from the world, diligence in the discharge of relative duties, unselfishness, good temper and general spiritual-mindedness, to a pitch which it seldom attains now.

There is a common complaint in these latter days that there is a want of power in modern Christianity, and that the true church of Christ, the body of which He is the Head, does not shake the world in the nineteenth century as it used to do in former years. Shall I tell you in plain words what is the reason? It is the low tone of life which is so sadly prevalent among professing believers. We want more men and women who walk with God and before God, like Enoch and Abraham. Though our numbers at this date far

exceed those of our evangelical forefathers, I believe we fall far short of them in our standard of Christian practice. Where is the self-denial, the redemption of time, the absence of luxury and self-indulgence, the unmistakable separation from earthly things, the manifest air of being always about our Master's business, the singleness of eye, the simplicity of home life, the high tone of conversation in society, the patience, the humility, the universal courtesy, which marked so many of our forerunners seventy or eighty years ago? Yes, where is it indeed? We have inherited their principles and we wear their armor, but I fear we have not inherited their practice. The Holy Spirit sees it, and is grieved; and the world sees it, and despises us. The world sees it, and cares little for our testimony. It is life, life--a heavenly, godly, Christ-like life--depend on it, which influences the world. Let us resolve, by God's blessing, to shake off this reproach. Let us awake to a clear view of what the times require of us in this matter. Let us aim at a much higher standard of practice. Let the time past suffice us to have been content with a half-and-half holiness. For the time to come, let us endeavor to walk with God, to be thorough, and unmistakable in our daily life, and to silence, if we cannot convert, a sneering world.

5. Finally, the times require of us more regular and steady perseverance in the old ways, of getting good for our souls.

I think no intelligent Englishman can fail to see that there has been of late years an immense increase of what I must call, for want of a better phrase, public religion in the land. Services of all sorts are strangely multiplied. Places of worship are thrown open for prayer and preaching and administration of the Lord's Supper, at least ten times as much as they were fifty years ago. Services in cathedral naves, meetings in large public rooms like the Agricultural Hall and Mildmay Conference Building, mission services carried on day after day and evening after evening--all these have become common and familiar things. They are, in fact, established institutions of the day, and the crowds who attend them supply plain proof that they are popular. In short, we find ourselves face to face with the undeniable fact that the last quarter of the nineteenth century is an age of an immense amount of public religion.

Now I am not going to find fault with this. Let no one suppose that for a moment. On the contrary, I thank God for revival of the old apostolic plan of "aggressiveness" in religion, and the evident spread of a desire "by all means to save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). I thank God for shortened services, home missions and evangelistic movements like that of Moody and Sankey. Anything is better than torpor, apathy and inaction. If Christ is preached I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice (Phil. 1:18). Prophets and righteous men in England once desired to see these things, and never saw them. If Whitefield and Wesley had been told in their day that a time would come when English archbishops and bishops would not only sanction mission services, but take an active part in them, I can hardly think they would have believed it. Rather, I suspect, they would have been tempted to say, like the Samaritan nobleman in Elisha's time, "if the Lord would make windows in heaven, might this thing be" (2 Kings 7:2).

But while we are thankful for the increase of public religion, we must never forget that, unless it is accompanied by private religion, it is of no real solid value, and may even produce most mischievous effects. Incessant running after sensational preachers, incessant attendance at hot crowded meetings, protracted to late hours, incessant craving after fresh excitement and highly spiced pulpit novelties--all this kind of thing is calculated to produce a very unhealthy style of Christianity and, in many cases I am afraid, the end is utter ruin of soul. For, unhappily, those who make public religion everything are often led away by mere temporary emotions, after some grand display of ecclesiastical oratory, into professing far more than they really feel. After this, they can only be kept up to the mark, which they imagine they have reached, by a constant succession of religious excitements. By and by, as with opium-eaters and

dram-drinkers, there comes a time when their dose loses its power, and a feeling of exhaustion and discontent begins to creep over their minds. Too often, I fear, the conclusion of the whole matter is a relapse into utter deadness and unbelief, and a complete return to the world. And all results from having nothing but a public religion! Oh, that people would remember that it was not the wind, or the fire, or the earthquake, which showed Elijah the presence of God, but "the still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12).

Now I desire to lift up a warning voice on this subject. I want to see no decrease of public religion, remember; but I do want to promote an increase of that religion which is private--private between each man and his God. The root of a plant or tree makes no show above ground. If you dig down to it and examine it, it is a poor, dirty, coarse-looking thing and not nearly so beautiful to the eye as the fruit or leaf or flower. But that despised root, nevertheless, is the true source of all the life, health, vigor and fertility which your eyes see, and without it the plant or tree would soon die. Now private religion is the root of all vital Christianity. Without it we may make a brave show in the meeting or on the platform, and sing loud, and shed many tears, and have a name to live and the praise of man. But without it we have no wedding garment, and are "dead before God". I tell my readers plainly that the times require of us all more attention to our private religion.

a. Let us pray more heartily in private, and throw our whole souls more into our prayers. There are live prayers and there are dead prayers; prayers that cost us nothing, and prayers which often cost us strong crying and tears. What are yours? When great professors backslide in public, and the church is surprised and shocked, the truth is that they had long ago backslidden on their knees. They had neglected the throne of grace.

b. Let us read our Bibles in private more, and with more pains and diligence. Ignorance of Scripture is the root of all error, and makes a man helpless in the hand of the devil. There is less private Bible reading, I suspect, than there was fifty years ago. I never can believe that so many English men and women would have been "tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine," some falling into skepticism, some rushing into the wildest and narrowest fanaticism, and some going over to Rome, if there had not grown up a habit of lazy, superficial, careless, perfunctory reading of God's Word. "You do err not knowing the Scriptures" (Matt. 22:29). The Bible in the pulpit must never supersede the Bible at home.

c. Let us cultivate the habit of keeping up more private meditation and communion with Christ. Let us resolutely make time for getting alone occasionally, for talking with our own souls like David, for pouring out our hearts to our great High Priest, Advocate, and Confessor at the right hand of God. We want more auricular confession--but not to man. The confessional we want is not in a box in the vestry, but the throne of grace. I see some professing Christians always running about after spiritual food, always in public, and always out of breath and in a hurry, and never allowing themselves leisure to sit down quietly to digest, and take stock of their spiritual condition. I am never surprised if such Christians have a dwarfish, stunted religion and do not grow and if, like Pharaoh's lean kin, they look no better for their public religious feasting, but rather worse. Spiritual prosperity depends immensely on our private religion, and private religion cannot flourish unless we determine that by God's help we will make time, whatever trouble it may cost us, for thought, for prayer, for the Bible, and for private communion with Christ. Alas! That saying of our Master is sadly overlooked: "Enter into your closet and shut the door" (Matt. 6:6).

Our evangelical forefathers had far fewer means and opportunities than we have. Full religious meetings and crowds, except occasionally at a church or in a field, when such men as Whitefield or Wesley or Rowlands preached, these were things of which they knew nothing. Their proceedings were neither

fashionable nor popular, and often brought on them more persecution and abuse than praise. But the few weapons they used, they used well. With less noise and applause from man they made, I believe, a far deeper mark for God on their generation than we do, with all our conferences, and meetings, and mission rooms, and halls, and multiplied religious appliances. Their converts, I suspect, like the old-fashioned cloths and linens, wore better, and lasted longer, and faded less, and kept color, and were more stable and rooted and grounded than many of the newborn babes of this day. And what was the reason of all this? Simply, I believe, because they gave more attention to private religion than we generally do. They walked closely with God and honored Him in private, and so He honored them in public. Oh, let us follow them as they followed Christ! Let us go and do likewise.

Let me now conclude this message with a few words of practical application.

1. Do you want to understand what the times require of you in reference to your own soul? Listen, and I will tell you. You live in times of peculiar spiritual danger. Never perhaps were there more traps and pitfalls in the way to heaven; never certainly were those traps so skillfully baited, and those pitfalls so ingeniously made. Mind what you are about. Look well to your goings. Ponder the paths of your feet. Take heed lest you come to eternal grief, and ruin your own soul. Beware of practical infidelity under the specious name of free thought. Beware of a helpless state of indecision about doctrinal truth under the plausible idea of not being party-spirited, and under the baneful influence of so-called liberality and charity. Beware of frittering away life in wishing and meaning and hoping for the day of decision, until the door is shut, and you are given over to a dead conscience, and die without hope. Awake to a sense of your danger. Arise and give diligence to make your calling and election sure, whatever else you leave uncertain. The kingdom of God is very near. Christ the almighty Savior, Christ the sinner's Friend, Christ and eternal life, are ready for you if you will only come to Christ. Arise and cast away excuses; this very day Christ calls you. Wait not for company if you cannot have it; wait for nobody. The times, I repeat, are desperately dangerous. If only few are in the narrow way of life, resolve that by God's help you at any rate will be among the few.

2. Do you want to understand what the times require of all Christians in reference to the souls of others? Listen, and I will tell you. You live in times of great liberty and abounding opportunities of doing good. Never were there so many open doors of usefulness, so many fields white to the harvest. Mind that you use those open doors, and try to reap those fields. Try to do a little good before you die. Strive to be useful. Determine that by God's help you will leave the world a better world in the day of your burial than it was in the day you were born. Remember the souls of relatives, friends and companions; remember that God often works by weak instruments, and try with holy ingenuity to lead them to Christ. The time is short the sand is running out of the glass of this old world; then redeem the time, and endeavor not to go to heaven alone. No doubt you cannot command success. It is not certain that your efforts to do good will always do good to others but it is quite certain that they will always do good to yourself. Exercise, exercise, is one grand secret of health, both for body and soul. "He that waters shall be watered himself" (Prov. 11:25). It is a deep and golden saying of our Master's, but seldom understood in its full meaning "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

3. In the last place, would you understand what the times require of you in reference to the Church of England? Listen to me, and I will tell you. No doubt you live in days when our time-honored church is in a very perilous, distressing and critical position. Her rowers have brought her into troubled waters. Her very existence is endangered by papists, infidels, and liberationists without. Her life-blood is drained away by the behavior of traitors, false friends and timid officers within. Nevertheless, so long as the Church of England sticks firmly to the Bible, the Articles, and the principles of the Protestant Reformation, so long I

advise you strongly to stick to the church. When the Articles are thrown overboard, and the old flag is hauled down, then, and not until then, it will be time for you and me to launch the boats and quit the wreck. At present, let us stick to the old ship.

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