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CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY

IN THE MATTER OF

Popular Amusements.

BY THE

REV. WM. COCHRANE, M. A.,

Zion Church, Brantford.

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P R E F A C E .

A Society under the name of the "Ladies' Benevolent Society of Brantford," having for its object, the raising of funds to assist in furnishing the new "Widows' Home," was organised during the past winter. In addition to the weekly meetings, for sewing and making sundry articles that may be sold for the above-named object, it was deemed advisable to give an entertainment in December last, so as still further to increase the funds. Exception was taken by several clergymen in Brantford, to the entertainment, and a remonstrance sent to the Lady Managers of the Home. The writer of the following pages declined to join his brethren in their action, and on the following Sabbath evening, preached a sermon on the whole question of "Popular Amusements." At the request of the society, Mr. Cochrane has kindly placed his notes at their disposal, and any profits arising from the sale of the discourse will be given to the "Widows' Home."

On behalf of the Ladies' Benevolent Society,

F. L. MILLER, President.

SARAH STRATFORD, Vice-President.

LOUISA ALLEN, Treasurer.

AGNES PHILLIPS, Secretary.

MAY 27 1960

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POPULAR AMUSEMENTS.

PROVERBS, CHAP. 35, V. 16.

"Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith and vomit it."

There is no book so full of practical counsels as the book of Proverbs. It takes cognizance of every age, rank and condition in life. It points out not only the more flagrant sins of society, but also the more secret temptations against which it is our duty to guard, and gives directions, that faithfully followed, are sure to add to our happiness and welfare in the present and the future. Though written long ago, these Proverbs are adapted to every age, and approve themselves to every intelligent and candid mind.

The largest proportion of these Proverbs are addressed to youth. The dark experience of Solomon and the bitter remorse that followed, made him a fit teacher of others. Like beacons on mountain tops, or light houses along rock-bound coasts, that warn of coming danger, so Solomon stands out upon the page of history, sad evidence of the fact that genius, learning, and wisdom, are of little avail, without the safeguard of religious principle. As ships need ballast, to steady them on the ocean, so do men need the grace of

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God, to keep them beyond the reach of temptation and evil.

In one of these Proverbs, the wise King speaks as follows:—“Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it.” Honey represents pleasure,—that which gratifies and pleases the mind, as honey does the sense of taste. But honey must be taken in moderation; a surfeit of it is dangerous to our physical well-being. A little honey may be beneficial, but more than what is sufficient will make a man wretched. And so pleasures and pastimes, even though innocent in themselves are not to be unduly or too frequently indulged in. They are intended not to oppress the mental powers, but to refresh and invigorate the higher energies of our nature; to fit and not to disqualify for the real duties of life; to be enjoyed in leisure moments, and not to fill up the entire measure of existence. Amusement is only lawful and allowable, for the sake of economising strength, or fitting us to discharge the obligations and bear the burdens of life. As a living writer says: “Mirth and music and wit belong to the class of stimulant: they are good seasoning, but poor food. Amusement is a piece of insertion put between solid fabrics, and is ornamental in connecting them. No amusement is good that unfits you for your regular duties in life; it must not be a rival, but a servant; it must give an appetite for duty. Amusement is a whetstone; after it the faculties should be sharper than they were before. The gayeties of society are extravagant, unnatural and unwholesome. Innocent dances under

the trees in summer, or at home among friends, closing at an early hour, are to be commended as not only harmless, but positively useful. But all-night parties and balls set at naught every rational principle ; they are condemned before they get half way up to moral consideration. They dissipate, not recreate ; they destroy the body, they do not revive it ; they are a satire on amusement. Amusement should revive those faculties which regular work leaves dormant ; and not tax those powers which are overworked."

Solomon, then, does not prohibit pleasure, but excess of pleasure—the abuse of what is in itself innocent, and as a matter of course all pleasures that are untimely—that tend directly or indirectly to the development of the mere animal nature—that take their rise in sinful passions, or, lead to sin.

This teaching is in full accord with the spirit of Christianity. The bible nowhere rebukes nor prohibits innocent amusements. It does not say it is wrong to laugh, and, although different interpretations may be given of the inspired penman's words, it does not say that it is wrong to dance. I am not now passing any opinion on the more fashionable amusements of the day, but simply stating what every Bible reader knows, that the religion of Jesus Christ, so far from being a melancholy, gloomy, repulsive thing, is a cheerful, happy experience ; that so far from demanding seclusion from society, it recognises the necessity of active commerce between man and man, and the fullest enjoyment of all that this fair world affords and that our Heavenly Father

has provided to meet the wants of our complex nature.*

I say "*complex nature*"—for man is the most wonderful, as he is the grandest of all God's creatures. There is within him reason, fancy, imagination, taste, the emotions of mirth and gladness, grief and sorrow. He is not a mass of matter unaffected by the influences of the outside world, but a delicately-formed organism, capable of being thrilled by a thousand different impulses. And God who has thus mysteriously framed his being, has provided in nature, in society, in art and literature and science, in communings with the seen and unseen world, all that is necessary for his happiness, and conducive to his comfort.

But while all men have these powers and emotions, they are variously developed. Some men are destitute of reason; others have little or no imagination. The world to them is but a vast workshop, and beneath its barren surface they never penetrate. "There is no beauty nor mystery in the bloom and brightness or decay of nature; the stars light up no

* Says Talmage, speaking of Christ's presence at the marriage of Cana of Galilee: "Christ was not impatient with the festal joy. He was the chief of the banqueters. When the wine gave out He supplied it; and, so I take it, He will not deny us the joys that are positively festal, and that the children of God have more right to laugh than any other people. There is not a single joy denied them that is given to other people. Christianity don't clip the wings of the soul. I take Christianity to be simply a proclamation from the throne of God of emancipation for all the enslaved. Yet men try to make us believe that God's children are on the limits, and the chief refreshments and enjoyments of life are for outsiders and not for His own children."

worlds of wonder to their souls ; the seasons in their annual round wake up no sense of marvel"—as the poet has said of the unconscious, ignorant rustic who goes through the fairest scenes of nature unimpressed :—

"In vain through every changeful year
Did nature lead him as before ;
A primrose by a river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more.

"The soft blue sky did never melt
Into his heart ; he never felt
The witchery of the

"There was a hardness in his cheek,
There was a hardness in his eye,
As if the man had fixed his face
In many a solitary place
Against the wind and open sky."

Others again are grave, serious, and solemn, not easily excited ; while many as good and more useful christian men and women are full of mirth—easily moved to laughter and overflowing with good nature. Now it is not the part of the man void of fancy and imagination, to rail at or depreciate his neighbor's love of the ideal ; nor is it becoming in the man of grave and serious temperament, to denounce the happy and mirthful tendencies of his brother. Both are but acting out the impulses put within them by an all-wise Creator. The one perchance finds complete relaxation from the labor of life in severe studies,—the other in the private or the more public assemblies of social life ; the one finds perfect enjoyment in fellowship with the mighty dead, the other in listening to the sweet sounds of music, or the sparkling utterances of eloquence, all of which help very materially

to sweeten the machinery of life, and make men forget or overcome the petty sorrows of existence.

The hardest students and the most diligent merchants of the present day, claim certain periods of perfect *abandon*, when books and ledgers are closed, and when unrestrained by the ordinary avocations of life, they can relax their energies. But for such relaxation nature would succumb. Undue tension breaks the bow, and over-much travel founders the fleetest and strongest steed, and so prolonged application of mind or body, ends in brain disease and madness, if not in suicide. No man can steadily work for twelve or ten hours a day from week to week, without paying the penalty of outraged nature. Mere drudgery, in which neither skill nor thought is demanded, may be performed for a much longer period, but solid work, directed by skill and demanding forethought and steady application, cannot be profitably continued beyond a certain point. "Profitableness in work depends not so much upon the number of hours, as upon the number of faculties concentrated in each; upon how much mind you have been able to transform into work. Four hours work by a healthy mind, is better than twelve hours by one that is not invigorated by rest and amusement. It is with thought as with an axe, the sharp edge economizes strength—if sharp it cuts; if dull it pounds. Half a man's time well put in, is better than the whole; it is the concentration,—it is the cutting edge that achieves."

So far, there is very little difference of opinion among christians. The necessity of

relaxation and recreation is universally admitted. But there remains the more difficult question, what pastimes and amusements are safe for christian men and women to engage in? What is consistent with a profession of religion? Are there any, that while innocent in themselves, should be avoided on the grounds of expediency? There are amusements so-called, which no christian man, will for a moment defend, far less indulge in. The race-course — the gaming table, and the *average character* of theatrical representations, (which in our larger towns and cities pander to the lowest passions of humanity, and are supported and patronized by men and women whose views of social obligations and whose practice of impurity, are so radically opposed to the canons of morality, as to make them dangerous in any community) belong to that class. But leaving these out of sight, as matters regarding which we are all agreed, what shall we say of many others, that are rigidly condemned by some and as strongly advocated by others? One class of the religious world eschew the lecture room, the concert room and all assemblages outside the brotherhood of the saints. Others deem it no sin to attend the concert room, but regard it as a grievous wrong to listen to the same singer in operatic melodies. Some relish manly field sports, but condemn all indoor amusements, while others consider them as equally innocent, and above reproach. Some think it right and proper in their own homes, to encourage and take part in games and charades and tableaux, and delight to see their children "speak-

ing their pieces" and going through their dialogues, dressed in costume; but esteem it an offence against christian propriety, to countenance such amusements when put upon the stage by persons of mature age! With such diversity of opinion, who shall presume to act the part of judge, and frame a perfect code of laws for the guidance of the christian community!

I do not imagine that any definite rule, can be laid down in such matters. Wiser men than the writer have again and again attempted to specify what amusements are or are not in accordance with christian propriety, and have signally failed in securing anything like unanimity of sentiment on the subject. Good men differ in regard to such matters as much as they do in politics and theology. Churches make rules, and profess to be guided in the admission of members and the discipline of offenders by such rules, while practically they are a dead-letter. And laws that cannot be enforced had far better not be made. If you cannot carry with you the individual conscience, you cannot hope to change the individual practice.

In regard, then, to this much vexed question, I hold that christian men and women must regulate their conduct according to the dictates of an enlightened conscience. Each to his own Master stands or falls. If we feel that we are the better physically, mentally and morally, by moderate indulgence in innocent pleasures, then whatever be the opinion of our fellow-men, or the views of esteemed brethren who cannot see eye to eye with us in such matters, we have a right to use them—

in so far as they invigorate and strengthen us for the severer toils and the more arduous tasks of life, but no further. As it has been well put :

No amusement is innocent that hurts the participant, no matter whether it is right *per se* or not. Nothing is wrong in itself or right in itself,—that is right which does good, and that is wrong which does harm. What may be right for me might be wrong for my neighbor. Every man must discriminate, and select or reject pleasure, not by fashion or other people's experience, but according to its good or bad effect on himself.

There comes in next the question of christian expediency. What I may or may not do is to be regulated, not simply by my own feelings or preferences, but by a consideration of the influence exerted upon the conduct of others. "No man liveth to himself." In a most important sense, we are our brother's keeper and chargeable with his blood, if through our example he perish. "All things," says Paul, "are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient; all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not."

The young men and women of our land should ponder well the words already quoted. "Hast thou found honey? eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith and vomit it." Habitual or even occasional attendance upon questionable places of amusement, or undue indulgence in innocent pleasure is productive of moral injury. No man can become physically strong, who lives on sweetmeats, and no man can attain a robust manhood by cultivating a taste for the more

frivolous amusements of the present day. It is indeed, with certain amusements, as with the poisonous Manchineel, a tree which grows in the West Indies. Its appearance is attractive and its fruit most beautiful to the eye. The apple, resembling a golden pippin, which hangs on its branches, looks very tempting and smells very fragrant, but to eat of it is instant death, and its sap or juice is so poisonous that if a few drops of it fall upon the skin it raises blisters and occasions great pain. The Indians dip their arrows into the juice, that they may poison the enemies they wound. So sin, partially robed in fascinating colors, looks pleasing to the eye; and men desire it—eat of it and die. Many a promising young man has thus been ruined for time and eternity. Of such an one the poet says:

“He was a lovely youth! I guess
The panther in the wilderness
Was not so fair as he.”

“A youth to whom was given
So much of earth, so much of heaven
And such impetuous blood.”

“But ill he lived, much evil saw,
With men to whom no better law
Nor better life was known.”

“His genius and his moral frame
Were thus impaired, and he became
The slave of low desires;
A man who without self-control
Would seek what the degraded soul
Unworthily admires.”

I need hardly say that these remarks have been occasioned, at least in part, by the entertainment given last week in aid of one of our charitable institutions. Brethren in the Min-

istry whom I highly esteem, saw fit to issue a protest against such a method of securing aid, however good the object in view, on the ground that Christian people by attending or taking part in such entertainments, are setting a dangerous example before the youth of our town. I am not here to criticise the conscientious convictions or actions of brethren, but simply to give my reasons, why I did not join in such a protest, and refused my signature when solicited. I think that in all such cases, prudence and charity suggest caution, before charging Christian ladies with anything that directly or indirectly tends to the subversion of public morality. I therefore declined joining in such a manifesto, until satisfied regarding the promoters of the entertainment. As is now well known, the lady managers of the Widows' Home, had nothing whatever to do with the entertainment in question, more than the general public, it having been arranged by a benevolent society, organised for an entirely different purpose than the *maintenance* of that institution. In such circumstances it was not their part either to sanction or condemn. Those who are entrusted with the financial affairs of the institution, are surely competent to accept or refuse any contributions that may be offered by individuals, or benevolent societies, as the case in question. I declined, moreover, taking any part in the protest referred to, because from what I knew of the character and social standing of several of the parties interested in the entertainment, I could hardly believe that anything would be introduced antagonistic to morality. I may have been mistaken

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in my opinion, but certainly I cannot imagine the members of such a society, (some of them in good standing with evangelical churches), capable of doing anything intentionally, to cast reproach upon their own good name, or hurt the cause of religion in the community; and finally, I do not consider, that as clergymen we are called upon to protest in a united capacity against all and sundry amusements, that from time to time seek the patronage of the public. I do not feel myself responsible for the actions of my fellow-townsmen to such an extent as to take the position of censor and critic on occasions when even entertainments of a questionable character are given by professionals. The care of my own congregation, and increasing labors connected with the church at large, more than fill up my time, without attempting the impossible task of rebuking all and sundry evils through the public press.

And now let me add, that if the entertainments given in the town for benevolent institutions, are in any case of a questionable character, the churches are guilty of promoting them, by condescending to the use of means for raising funds, in behalf of religious objects, altogether opposed in my opinion to the spirit and the practice of the Gospel. Is it not true that many religious people give their countenance to tableaux, charades, lotteries and other amusements of a questionable character? Is it not true that churches are decorated by secular concerts and foolish exhibitions, in order to procure funds for the support of the preaching of the Gospel, or the liquidation of church debts, and that men

who make no profession of religion whatever had scoff at Christianity, are importuned to assist in this way, what in other circumstances they despise ! It is our churches that have taught the general public whatever questionable means are now resorted to for raising funds for benevolent enterprises, and until reformation begins in the house of God, we cannot expect that manifestoes or protests will be of any value in warning our youth against amusements—injurious and sinful in themselves, or because of their associations. Possibly I hold somewhat rigid notions regarding church buildings. Edifices erected for and consecrated to the worship of God, should, I apprehend, be devoted to such or kindred objects, and not given up to entertainments that had better be held in public halls ; and churches that cannot exist upon the free-will offerings of the people, have no right in my opinion, to extort contributions from an unwilling public, by condescending to the use of means at variance with the teachings of the religion they profess.

I trust that I am not less earnest than my brethren in seeking the welfare of this community and the purity of my own congregation. I do not often in the pulpit single out special sins as topics of discourse, but I endeavor to inculcate upon my hearers and especially the members of the church, the duty of *abstaining* from all appearance of evil. In the admission of new members, I hold up before them the highest possible type of Christian character, towards which they are bound to aspire ; but once received into fellowship, I regard them as capable of drawing the line

between what is right and what is wrong, without constant admonition regarding details of conduct. This is a better way, it seems to me of checking abuses in the community, and regulating the character of popular amusements, where such are indulged beyond measure. When such entertainments are promoted by men and women beyond the jurisdiction of church discipline, clergy cannot directly interfere. But where, as in the present instance, the originators are connected with the evangelical churches, personal dealings and the administration of kindly rebuke, where deemed necessary, can do more than any number of protests, that are not only unheeded, but only serve in many cases to advertise what they are intended to oppose. If a minister is afraid to deal with his members in such matters, it seems to me cowardice and folly to resort to vague and indefinite manifestoes and sermons against prevailing sins; and if his people are unwilling to receive such kindly admonitions from one set over them in the Lord's name, ideas of the pastoral relation must be very wrong indeed, and the confidence which should exist between minister and people, not what it ought to be.

Let us as pastors and people, in all our conduct, bear in mind and practice apostolic exhortation, "Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity."

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