

National Reform Leaflets, No. 22

The Religious Character of the National Reform Movement.

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All the friends and advocates of the National Reform Movement must be conscious that by many it is not regarded as strictly religious work. Most persons probably feel that it does not stand on the same plane with home or foreign missions or evangelistic work; that to turn from the consideration of these themes which deal directly with the eternal salvation of human souls to the cause of National Reform is turning aside or coming down to less spiritual matters. This feeling is due, in part, to the unconscious influence of the prevailing view that national affairs are secular, and are not directly related to the kingdom of Christ. The friends of the cause may also have contributed to this feeling by dwelling too much on controversial as-

pects of the subject, or by dealing with it too much in a controversial spirit.

In opposition to this feeling we maintain that the work of the National Reform Association is strictly religious work, that it is closely related to the honor and success of Jesus Christ and to the salvation of men, and that it cannot be rightly or successfully carried on except in a religious spirit and by religious means.

1. The immediate results aimed at are religious convictions and feelings in the minds and hearts of men. In working for the conversion of an individual man we seek to establish faith in the being and perfections of God, a sense of God's authority, conviction of his sin in breaking God's laws, apprehension of His pardoning mercy through Jesus Christ, acceptance of that mercy and a purpose of obedience. National Reform work is an effort to produce these same convictions and feelings and purposes in the mind and heart of a nation of men. In this work we are not dealing with the nation as a philosophical abstraction, but with the concrete nation, the people who are the nation. Our effort is to convince

our fellow citizens that we, the people, are under the moral government of God: that we have sinned against Him and are exposed to His judgments, but that there is forgiveness for us: that this forgiveness is in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ Who only "hath authority on earth to forgive sins," and Whom God has appointed to receive the submission and obedience of nations as well as of individual men. Now these are the same convictions and feelings and purposes which constitute personal religion in the sphere of an individual life, and the producing of these convictions is strictly religious work. Our conception of a National Reform meeting is that a section or portion of the nation is there gathered before the Lord, and that we are there to deal with one another and with God precisely as if we were the whole nation. We are there to consider our national sins and make confession of them, to pray for forgiveness, to declare our purpose of obedience and to pray that these convictions may be speedily diffused throughout the whole nation. Such a meeting is as strictly religious as an evangelistic meeting. It is an evangelis-

tic meeting, for it is an effort to press Christ as a personal Saviour, and the forgiveness which He offers upon the acceptance of men who have the same need of Him and His salvation in their national as in their individual life. The proclaiming of Christ's authority as Ruler of nations and the demands for submission to that authority are not the real heart of the National Reform Movement, but the offer of the forgiveness of national sins on the acceptance of which a nation passes from under the wrath of God and comes under the description, "Blessed is that nation whose God is Jehovah." With the nation as with an individual soul, the remission of past sins must precede any genuine and acceptable obedience. Vain and foredoomed to failure are all reform movements which ignore or seek to reverse this order established equally in the nature of man and in the moral government of God.

National Reform work and work for the salvation of individual souls are, therefore, strictly and closely related to each other. They are efforts to produce the same convictions, by the presentation of the same truths and under the power

of the same divine Spirit. Work for individual souls must go first, for we cannot expect a man to be convicted for the sins of the nation of which he is a part, if he knows nothing of personal religion. But as soon as a man is personally converted to God he ought to be taught to apply his new-born convictions and to act upon them in the sphere of his life as a citizen, just as he should also be brought to do so in the life of the family. In the almost total neglect of these religious ideas in our national life lies the need and the warrant for the National Reform Movement.

2. The establishment of these convictions in the mind and heart of the nation tends powerfully to produce and confirm and deepen in the hearts of individual men the same convictions concerning their personal relation to God. The absence of these convictions from the national life is a powerful hindrance to all work for individual souls. In other words, national religion promotes personal religion; the want of it conduces to irreligion and impiety. The moulding power of the nation's life upon the life and character of her citizens is one of

God's most beneficent arrangements in the interest of virtue and religion; but, like all God's provisions, if perverted, it is as powerful for evil as for good. Decisions reached by the nation become in time the judgment and purpose of all the people. The too general decay of our Sabbath laws is the result, it is true, of increasing disregard of the Sabbath by the people; but the general overthrow of these laws would greatly promote and confirm the habit of Sabbath desecration. The general exclusion of the Bible from our public schools would help to discredit the book and banish it from the hands and the homes of the people. Individual men are drops of water in a river; the river is the nation. When the Spirit of God enters into a man, that man moves toward God; but if the current of the nation's life sets away from God, how it increases the difficulty of his religious life, and the difficulty of all who are seeking to draw him Godward! And if now we can reverse the current, how powerfully it will tend to bear all the people toward God, and virtue and religion!

3. The National Reform Movement

seeks a religious reformation in the nation as the true way, and the only way, to destroy great evils which destroy the souls of men. Of the bearing of public evils on the salvation of human souls we will take two illustrations. It is computed that there are at least a million of men and women in the United States who use strong drink to excess, and that of this number not less than one hundred thousand die every year. There are about two hundred thousand saloons in this country. Including saloon-keepers, bartenders and their families, we have more than a million persons who are dependent on the drink traffic for their livelihood. The brewers, distillers and wholesalers, with their families and other dependents, will greatly increase this aggregate. Add together now the confirmed drunkards, the moderate drinkers, whose indulgence grieves and quenches the Spirit of God, the army of men and women and children who are dependent on the drink trade and who are driven into a position of antagonism and hostility to the church and religion by the necessary attitude of the Church toward their business, and the still greater num-

ber of their friends and sympathizers— what a multitude of men and women and children who are placed practically beyond the reach of gospel influences by the drinking habits of the people and the drink traffic which, under the sanction of law, ministers to these habits!

We shall shortly know, from the report of the pending investigation, the number of divorces now granted in this country in a single year. In 1886 it was over twenty-five thousand. If it is now seventy-five thousand, as is probable, these divorces involve one hundred and fifty thousand persons. When subsequent marriages are contracted after unscriptural and immoral divorces, these marriages are adulterous. No church, Protestant or Roman Catholic, can receive these parties, while continuing in these relations, into membership. They themselves, therefore, and the children who are born to them and all their relatives and friends who approve their course are placed in an attitude of hostility to the church and religion by the immoral relations which they have been led to form under the permission and sanction of the law. What a procession,

of men and women and children moving every year beyond the reach of evangelistic influences!

Now cannot men be saved amid these sweeping and potent forces of evil? Blessed be God, they can, and are, individual souls here and there, like Jerry McAuley rescued from the slums of New York, a brand plucked from the burning. Enough are being saved to justify and reward the labors of the great host of home missionaries and evangelists who are "fishing for men" in the seething waters of the great human sea. May God multiply the number of evangelists and prosper all their labors! But while some are saved, and more might be, the masses are being swept steadily down to perdition. The few who are rescued are scarcely missed from the throng of lost men and women who drift steadily beyond the reach of help or of hope. If only we could arrest or abolish these evil forces we might hope to save the masses, and not merely some out of their number.

All these evils are antagonized by definite and separate movements of reform. We dare not disparage these reform

movements, nor discourage the noble men and women who, at unreckoned cost to themselves, are striving in many an unequal contest to "turn the battle to the gate." God bless every man and every organization which strikes a blow against these enemies of God and of the nation! But if we persuade a wicked man to forego his drinking habits, to renounce his gambling and profanity and licentiousness, we have not thereby saved him, nor have we any assurance that the reformation we have wrought will be permanent. He may change the form of his sins and remain a sinner still. Our only sure hope concerning him lies in bringing him to Christ for regeneration and conversion. And mere reforms will no more save a nation than they will save an individual man. The National Reform Movement is broadly, fundamentally differentiated from all other movements of reform in that it contemplates these evils not merely as evils but as sins; sins which call down the judgments of God upon a guilty nation; and it seeks to remove them by means of a genuine religious reformation in the nation. It labors to have the nation come

before God and say: "We have sinned against Thee and against men; in our skirts is found the blood of the poor innocents; we implore the forgiveness which Thou hast promised to penitent nations; we ask this in the name and at the hands of Jesus Christ, Thy Son, the Saviour of the world; if Thou wilt grant it to us we will serve Thee and keep Thy commandments." This movement writes on the banners of reform "the Name which is above every name." Its work is to lift up Christ before the nation that he may draw the nation to Himself. It exalts the Cross as well as the Crown, and devoutly acknowledges that "by this sign we shall conquer." A movement of which this is true is definitely, pre-eminently a religious movement.

But some man says: "If men are converted their politics will take care of themselves." Alas, there are multitudes of men who, in the judgment of charity, are converted but whose politics give no evidence of the fact. These men in other departments of their lives show the restraining, uplifting power of religion, but their politics remain "of the earth, earthy." How could it be otherwise?

They have never been taught the responsibilities and obligations of Christian citizenship. The church has insisted with measureable earnestness on the Christian life of her members within the church and the family, but she has left their politics to "take care of themselves." The results are before us. There is no form of political corruption in which the church, through her members, is not implicated. No political issue arises in which Christian men are not found in large numbers working and voting on the wrong side, even of a moral question, as well as the right. The National Reform Movement is an appeal to all citizens to make moral and religious principles the dominant and decisive considerations in all questions in which such principles are involved.

Again some one says: "Christian citizens are not numerous enough to determine the national character and life; therefore the first need of the nation is to increase the number of her Christian citizens." It were enough to say, in answer to this plea, that, whether they be many or few, the Christian citizens in any nation need to be instructed and

aroused and united for the better performance of their civic duties. But it is also to be said that if they were so instructed and aroused and united the Christian citizens of the United States are an overwhelmingly preponderant majority of the whole people. To determine the national character and conduct we are not dependent on a numerical majority. There are great numbers who do not exert themselves to sway the national will on any question, and are therefore a negligible quantity. National decisions are won, usually, by minorities. Those who have intelligence and definite convictions and weight of character and moral earnestness and a resolute purpose and the capacity for organization and who are actually organized to accomplish some definite result, win their cause long before they become a numerical majority of the whole people. The effort to bring about a religious reformation in this nation is, with the blessing of God, an entirely feasible and practicable undertaking. There is a vast body of Christian sentiment and conviction which needs only to be summoned, awakened, organized, in order to bring the nation

in repentance and submission to the feet of Jesus Christ. We must sow the seed and have "long patience" for it. Some day some issue will be sprung which will appeal to the Christian heart of the nation as the threatened invasion of the Spanish Armada appealed to Protestant England, and in a magnificent uprising of Christian and patriotic feeling the nation will return to the God of our fathers. To prepare for and strive toward that result is the work of the National Reform Association. It is truly religious work, and as such deserves the prayers, the labors and the gifts of all who are at once lovers of their country and lovers of Christ. If any man fails to perceive the religious character of this movement the fault lies not in the movement but in his conception of it. Let all its representatives seek a clearer understanding of the real spiritual character of this work, and labor to impart that understanding to all before whom they plead for this sacred cause.

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