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RIGHTEOUSNESS EXALTETH A NATION:

A

THANKSGIVING SERMON,

BY THE

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HAMILTON, C. W.

HAMILTON, C. W.

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The following sermon was preached in the McNab Street Presbyterian Church, Hamilton, on Thursday evening, the 6th inst. It was written without any view to publication, and the author hesitated as to the propriety of yielding to the request for its publication; it is now printed from the conviction that, at this crisis in our history as a province, it is of the utmost importance to urge with all plainness the duties which the Christian owes to the Crown and to the nation.

HAMILTON, Dec. 10, 1866.

“RIGHTEOUSNESS EXALTETH A NATION.”

PROV. XIV. 34. Righteousness exalteth a nation ; but sin is a reproach to any people.

Various circumstances contribute to a nation's wealth and power. The fertility of the soil, the mineral resources, the climate, and the geographical position of the country in relation to other nations—all exercise their appropriate influences. As civilization advances, much depends upon the right application of the facts which science has brought to light, upon the judgment with which capital is invested, and upon the skill, industry and thrift of the inhabitants. The soil is the source of all material wealth, but it is only by science and art and skilled labor that the materials of wealth are developed and brought into use, while commerce does its part in the distribution of the products. There are, nevertheless, phenomena in the history and present position of nations which cannot be accounted for by the facts which properly come within the province of the political economist, and it becomes necessary to take into account the moral and spiritual forces that are at work. There are various nations which have occupied positions in the history of our world, and exercised an influence on the human race, quite disproportioned to their extent, their physical resources, or the number of their inhabitants. Palestine, Switzerland and Scotland will at once be suggested to your minds as illustrative of this remark. In the relative positions and powers of the nations of the earth in the present day, as well as in the history of the past, we find striking illustrations of the maxim of my text—RIGHTEOUSNESS EXALTETH A NATION.

This terse and comprehensive Jewish proverb contains a Divine truth of universal application. Righteousness

here is not to be understood in the Pauline sense as the cause of our justification, but rather in the sense of that purity of heart and rectitude of life—that conformity of heart and life to the Divine law, which is the fruit of justification. It signifies rightness—right-thinking and right-doing. It includes all holy affections, all pure principles. It expresses the practice of all that we call piety, justice, honesty and virtue. It recognises God's law as the perfect standard of truth and justice, and demands conformity in heart and life to that standard. It stands opposed to sin, which is a want of conformity to, or transgression of, the law of God whether in act, thought, purpose, word or desire. The doctrine of my text is that it is not the wisdom of policy, extent of empire, splendid conquests, abundant resources, or flourishing commerce—but righteousness, which exalteth a nation. Sin, on the other hand, is a reproach to any people—a source of weakness which, if persevered in, must ultimately lead to the decline and fall of the mightiest people. Thus Greece, with all her proud science and refinement, Rome, with all her colossal strength, sank under the weight of moral degradation. The annals of God's ancient people furnish us with abundant illustrations of the maxim of my text. As they were a righteous or a sinful people, so were they correspondingly exalted or depressed. It behoves us to realize that God is still the King, the Lawgiver and the Judge among the nations. His government among the Jews was not a more actual government than that which He exercises now. His will is still the only ground of right-thinking and right-doing. A nation fully and heartily recognising this truth, and acting in accordance with it cannot be shaken by any power on earth. Apart from this all is insecure and fluctuating.

Let us glance for a moment at the position of Christendom, as distinct from the outlying world of Pagan and Mohamedan nations. We use the word Christendom as including the Greek and Roman communions; for while we believe that these communions have so overshadowed the great and glorious truths of the gospel by their errors

and superstitions, that as systems we can only designate them as anti-Christian rather than Christian—yet we gladly recognize the fact that amid all these corrupting errors there is still gospel truth. They contain within their communions many of Christ's people—so that even their errors have not, through the great long suffering of our God, excluded them from the promise of the Spirit. Our Reformers were fully persuaded of this, and there is no reason why we should deny it, even while bearing the most determined testimony against these so-called churches in their corporate capacity, and especially against the blasphemies of the Man of Sin, as usurping the throne of Christ in His own temple. Of Christendom as a whole, we say that it occupies a place vastly superior to the whole heathen world, and this distinction and superiority it owes to the moral life and rectitude which it possesses in virtue of the truth of God received, believed in and obeyed.

We advance a step further in the argument, and call attention to the fact, that just in proportion as the nations of Christendom have embraced and held fast the Christian faith in its scriptural simplicity, have they risen to power, and enjoyed the blessings of national stability. In this respect the contrast between Protestant and Papal nations is scarcely less striking than that between Christendom and the Pagan world. There arose in the sixteenth century a crisis in the history of the nations of Europe. The truth of God was then offered to those nations, and upon their reception or rejection of it all their future history has turned. The acceptance of the Reformation in almost every instance involved persecution and trial for the time being. Its rejection on the other hand secured a temporary peace and prosperity. But subsequent events have shewn that while the Protestant nations have risen in spite of trial, the Popish nations have sunk by a slow process of moral decay into imbecility and distress. Compare the history of Spain, during the intervening period, with that of Great Britain. At the epoch of the Reformation Spain was in the zenith of her glory. The truth of God was offered to

her, but she proudly refused, and trampled out the Reformation with an iron heel. What is Spain now? Once the possessor of a colossal empire both in Europe and America, she is now spoiled of her many crowns. Her colonies on this continent have for the most part renounced their allegiance. The Netherlands, after many a hard and bloody struggle, drove her out of the land. Naples and Sicily are hers no more. The story of her Armada, shattered along the rock-girt coast of Britain, only lives to point the moral of the wicked folly of religious persecution. Confined now within the narrow limits of her Iberian peninsula, her glory is a thing of the past, and she is every day sinking into a still lower depth of moral degradation.

Great Britain to a large extent embraced the truth of God, and from that date she has expanded in power and influence. In the face of persecution and death our fathers held fast the truth, and in spite of papal intrigue Protestantism gained a firm foothold in the nation. Who, looking at the position of Britain, and contrasting it with that of Spain, can hesitate to acknowledge it as an incalculable blessing that Protestantism has been upheld in the kingdom, and that Popery has not been suffered to regain its ascendancy?

Turn now from Spain and Britain to France; and the facts are not less instructive. France too rejected the truth of God, and the Reformation which had risen so brightly on that great nation was quenched in blood.— Since the sad date of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, France has swung like a pendulum between despotism and the maddest republicanism, between debasing superstition and equally debasing infidelity. She has not indeed, like Spain, actually forfeited her place among the nations, but she owes this largely to the fact that even bloody and relentless persecution could not wholly drive the truth from her borders. In the Reformed Church there has still been a remnant who have held fast the faith once delivered to the saints, and to this France is largely in-

debted for the place she to-day occupies as one of the great powers of Europe.

Directing our attention to the great public events of the year now drawing to a close, we find fresh proofs and illustrations of the maxim of my text. This year has been looked forward to by the students of prophecy as one likely to be fraught with events of the highest importance. However much the actual results may have disappointed the expectation and rebuked the presumption of those who have sought to be wise above what is written, and who have assumed to be prophets rather than reverent interpreters of God's word, there cannot be a doubt that the events of the year have opened up a brighter era than that which has just closed—and that the cycle of changes, which the late European war has done so much to hasten, is rich in promise of ultimate blessings to the nations. There are indeed dark and lowering clouds in the horizon, and it may be that these clouds are destined soon to burst in terrible judgments on all anti-Christian systems, and on an ungodly world; but it is the glorious prerogative of our heavenly King to bring ultimate good out of present evil—to bring deliverance to His Church in immediate connection with judgments upon His enemies.

In order rightly to understand the results of the recent mortal struggle in Europe, we must glance at the history of the two great powers that were engaged in it. Austria previously to the Reformation, had ruthlessly persecuted the followers of John Huss. When in the early years of the Reformation, the long forgotten truths of a simple gospel were offered to her, she not only proudly rejected the truth, but she persecuted even to the death—and it was her boast that in large sections of her dominions heresy was rooted out. The victory over truth was indeed gained, but at a fearful cost;—villages laid waste, towns depopulated, fertile fields a wilderness, the noblest and the best, the wisest and most learned of the people buried or banished. Austria has since regarded herself as the great defender of the Papacy. Prussia, on the other hand, did not exist as a

kingdom till long after the Reformation; but in the Electorate of Brandenburg and the Duchy of East Prussia, whose union laid the foundation of the present Prussian kingdom, the Reformation was eagerly embraced, and Prussia has been always distinguished as a Protestant Power. These powers were brought into deadly conflict. The question as to which party was most to blame in the quarrel that led to the short but bloody campaign, does not come within our present province. Interesting questions in reference to the restoration of old geographical boundaries and the union of nations belonging to the same great Teutonic race must also be left untouched.* The result of the war may be summed up in a sentence. The power of the Germanic confederation has been transferred as by a single stroke from Austria to Prussia, from the Popish to the Protestant rule. Austria has relinquished Venetia; and Italy, in proportion as the breach between her and Rome widens, rises higher in the scale of nations. Thus the year 1866 furnishes new illustrations of God's care of His own truth, and is destined to be memorable as another turning point in the history of the fall of the Papacy,

We have sought by this brief induction of facts to bring before you the truth of the existence and benignity of the Divine government. God's almighty power and His tender care over His own Church are as truly seen in the history of the nations now, as in the history of Israel, and the old Hebrew proverb is as true now as in ancient times: "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people."

In the events of history we are brought into direct contact with the divine mind. These events are not a succession of incoherent fortuities. They are all full of moral significance. The doctrine of the manifest destiny of the nations is the vain idol of irreligious minds. God is Governor among the nations; the Disposer of empires; He

*For a full discussion of the bearings of the recent war on Protestantism and Popery, see an article on this subject in the October number of the B. & F. Evangelical Review.

overthrows one dynasty and sets up another. We cannot study history without becoming sensible of God's presence, and recognizing a divine purpose in the process of events. The so-called philosophy which denies the Divine will, and reduces all history under the leaden sceptre of necessary laws, must shut its eyes to the truth of facts.

The Bible embraces all the great thoughts towards men which from eternity filled the mind of God; the treasures of Divine knowledge; the manifold wisdom of God; the unsearchable riches of Christ. This truth received or rejected becomes the turning point in the destinies of our race. Thus the Church becomes a spiritual centre round which all secular history gathers. The best way to understand the history of the world is to make the Church the text on which the whole of history is a running comment. Amid unceasing changes the Church remains unchanged. Her outward aspects veer and vary, and her inner life is liable to fluctuate, but the great truths which form her special heritage can never perish, and those truths are ever pregnant with fresh elements of growth and vigor; and thus from age to age it is righteousness which alone can exalt a nation. This is the only source of a nation's well-being, the only security for a nation's stability. We trace, through the centuries of the past, the mighty march of events; we turn to the movements and changes of the present time, and from the past and present combined, we reverently deduce the spiritual conquests of the future. We may be in the vestibule of the latter times, overshadowed by perplexity and trial, but Christ will in the end glorify the cause that is his own; and hence we look with strong confidence for the advancement and final triumph of the cause of righteousness in the earth, notwithstanding temporary and local reflexes of the tide.

We have been called together to-day to return thanks to Almighty God for the mercies of the year now drawing to a close. Our attention has been directed in the morning service to the various causes of thanksgiving, and surely we may add this as a cause of profound thankfulness to the

Great Head of the Church, that in Britain, where our fathers had their own share of suffering for truth, yet the true religion was upheld in the kingdom, and every effort whether of papal intrigue or papal persecution has hitherto failed to overthrow it. We inherit in this province the rich heritage of civil and religious liberty, and our manifold blessings imply corresponding responsibilities and duties. It is proper on such an occasion as this, to consider especially the duties we owe as Christians to the Empire and Province of which we form a part. These duties are the more urgent in view of the events which are transpiring around us. The expected confederation of the British North American Provinces gives bright promise of a nation growing up here which shall occupy a high place in the future annals of civilization. The contemplated confederation warrants us to expect not only a large increase of our population, but also an unprecedented impulse to commercial activity, and a greatly increased development of our resources. In the good Providence of God our lot has been cast here, and at this time we are called to do our part in building up what may be regarded as a new nation. A high responsibility devolves upon us. What is to be our national character? On what do we rest as our security for national permanence and prosperity? Not surely on our extensive national resources, or on our facilities for making them available, or the energy and enterprise of our people. Not even on our much cherished relation to the British Throne, though this is a tower of strength to us. Only as we are faithful to God, only in so far as we maintain the truth of God, and obey it can we expect to preserve, our glorious heritage of gospel truth and civil liberty. If we possess and maintain that righteousness which exalteth a nation, then no power shall be suffered to prevail against us. It is becoming far too common a thing to say that Canada with its immense frontier cannot be defended,—that in the event of war between Great Britain and the United States we are powerless to defend ourselves. A war between these two great Christian nations is a thing to be deprecated.—War, however just and successful, is a great evil, and

Christians instinctively shrink from the very thought of men meeting each other in deadly conflict, and the long list of terrible evils that necessarily follow in its train. But there are evils that are worse than war—to be forced into the Republic of the United States—to be driven by cowardly fear or sordid avarice into annexation, would be to injure and debase us morally, to forfeit all claim to respect, and to yield up our dearest liberties. It is argued that we are powerless to defend ourselves against the forces which the United States could pour in upon us from every direction. We are powerless to attack such a nation, and we have no wish but to live on terms of peace with them as neighbors. But should war be forced upon us, in our defence and in a righteous cause, who will say that we cannot maintain our own, and with the Divine blessing defend our altars and our hearths. Have we forgotten the history of Switzerland, or has that history no lesson for us? Have we even forgotten the old heroic stories of Scotland, or have they no lessons for Canadians? It is devoutly to be wished that peace may be maintained between the two nations that have so much in common, and are bound by so many ties to each other, but, in times such as these it is essential to our security and well-being as a people that while we study earnestly the things that promote peace and charity, we put from us with scorn the idea that our independence as a Province, and our loyalty to the throne and crown of our beloved Queen are held by us on the sufferance of our neighbors, to be tamely surrendered when the first speck of war appears on the horizon. Let us fully realize that as a matter of Christian duty we are bound to maintain our position, to protect ourselves against aggression, and to defend every inch of Canadian soil against the invader. This attitude is not only right in itself, it is also our best protection against war. By a cowardly, unpatriotic spirit, war is provoked and invited. The sooner our neighbors realize that we value our present political institutions, and above all, our connection with the British throne, and that we will defend these to the utmost, the

better will it be for the cause of peace on this continent. We value our privileges, and as the indignation of the whole country would be roused at the thought of a traitor in our councils—so we will tolerate no invader's foot upon our soil. Our confidence rests not on our own resources or valor, not even upon the vast power of the British Empire, which is pledged for our defence. Our confidence rests upon the fact that God is judge among the nations, and claims to himself the same sovereignty over human affairs—over the civil and political world as over the natural world. Men are but the instruments in carrying out His counsels, and if we, as a people, are faithful to His truth, He is able to give the battle to the weak.

The very fact that such events as these are spoken of as possible, is a call to us to repentance, lest we provoke the Lord to anger against us. Should we not prize that gospel which alone guides us into the way of righteousness? Shall we not personally embrace it, and live under its influence? Shall we not by exercising repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and by earnest, practical religion, throw all the weight of our individual influence on the side of that righteousness which exalteth a nation? A responsibility rests upon us to strive earnestly to promote public and national morality. It becomes us by every available means to elevate the general morality of the people—to discountenance all false maxims, whether of business or of public policy, and to withstand every thing which degrades or corrupts the general sentiment of the community. So long as dishonest, cheating tricks are spoken of as only sharp practices, or boasted of as smart transactions, so long must it be apparent that men are dead to the consciousness of God's presence, are strangers to an honest recognition of God and a real regard for His law. Justice and right are the only true basis of all transactions between man and man; and when people become greedy of gain and heedless of truth and right, their profession of regard for God's truth is only a cloak. Guard, then, your trade and commerce from the pollution of dishonesty, and let upright, high-resolved

moral principle guide your every transaction. Against every practice that tends to lower the general respect for the things that are honest and true, and of good report, lift up a loud and an indignant protest.

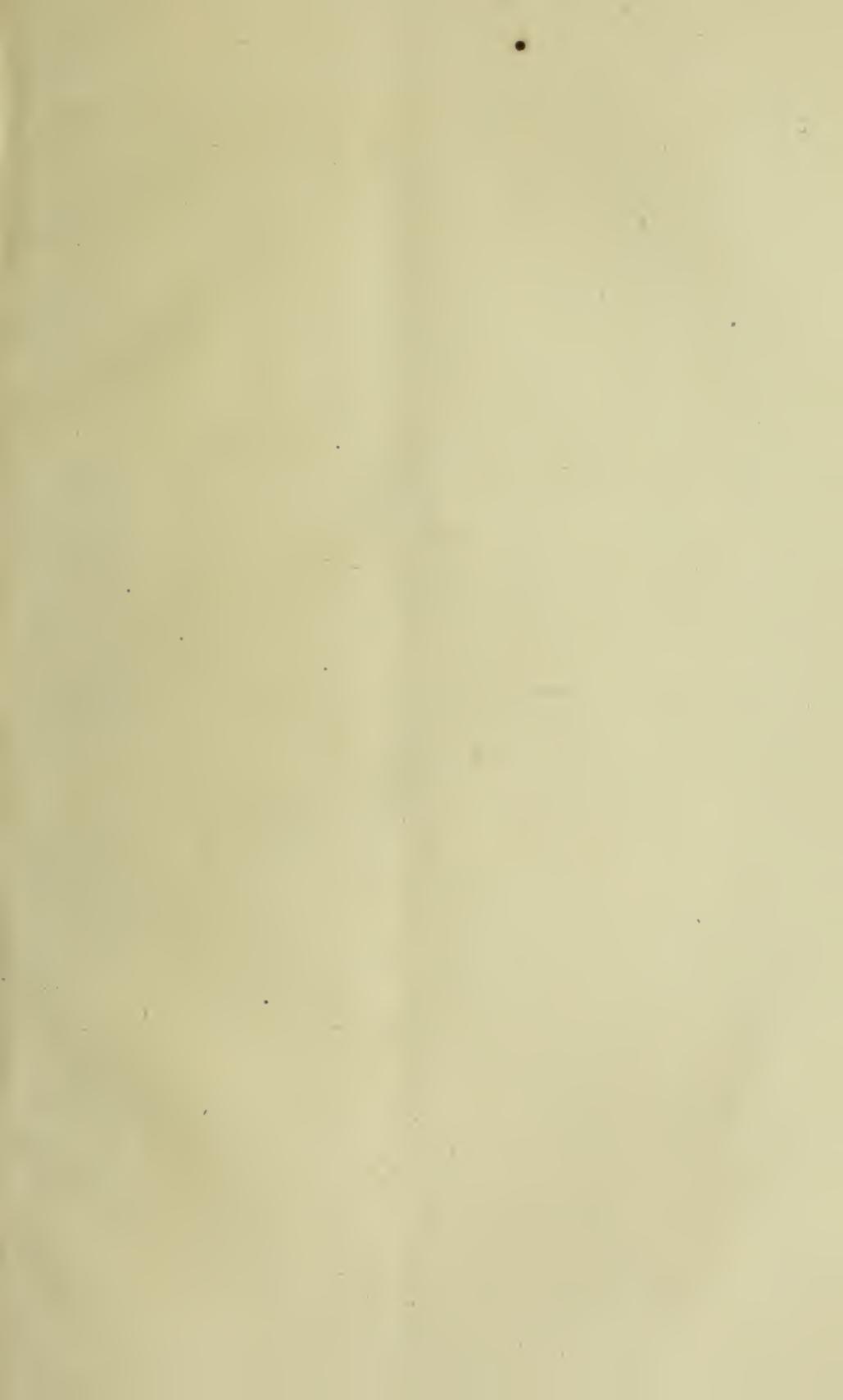
Resist the progress of ungodliness in the community. If intemperance, profanity, Sabbath breaking, impurity and other vices are allowed to run their course among us unchecked, a moral blight will fall upon us, and social corruption will penetrate the bones and eat out the vitals of the nation. "The nations that will not serve God shall perish." Especially must we see to it that the principles by which our government is guided are those of righteousness, and that our public men are themselves upright and law-abiding. We cannot separate ourselves from the body politic; we cannot throw off our personal responsibility in reference to our legislators. Not only do we elect our legislators, but such is the power of public opinion—as expressed through the press—that no man, however high, is beyond its reach. Men cannot in our day, and in this country, act in the face of public sentiment. If there is corruption and wickedness in high places, it is because the tone and habits of the people do not hold it in check.

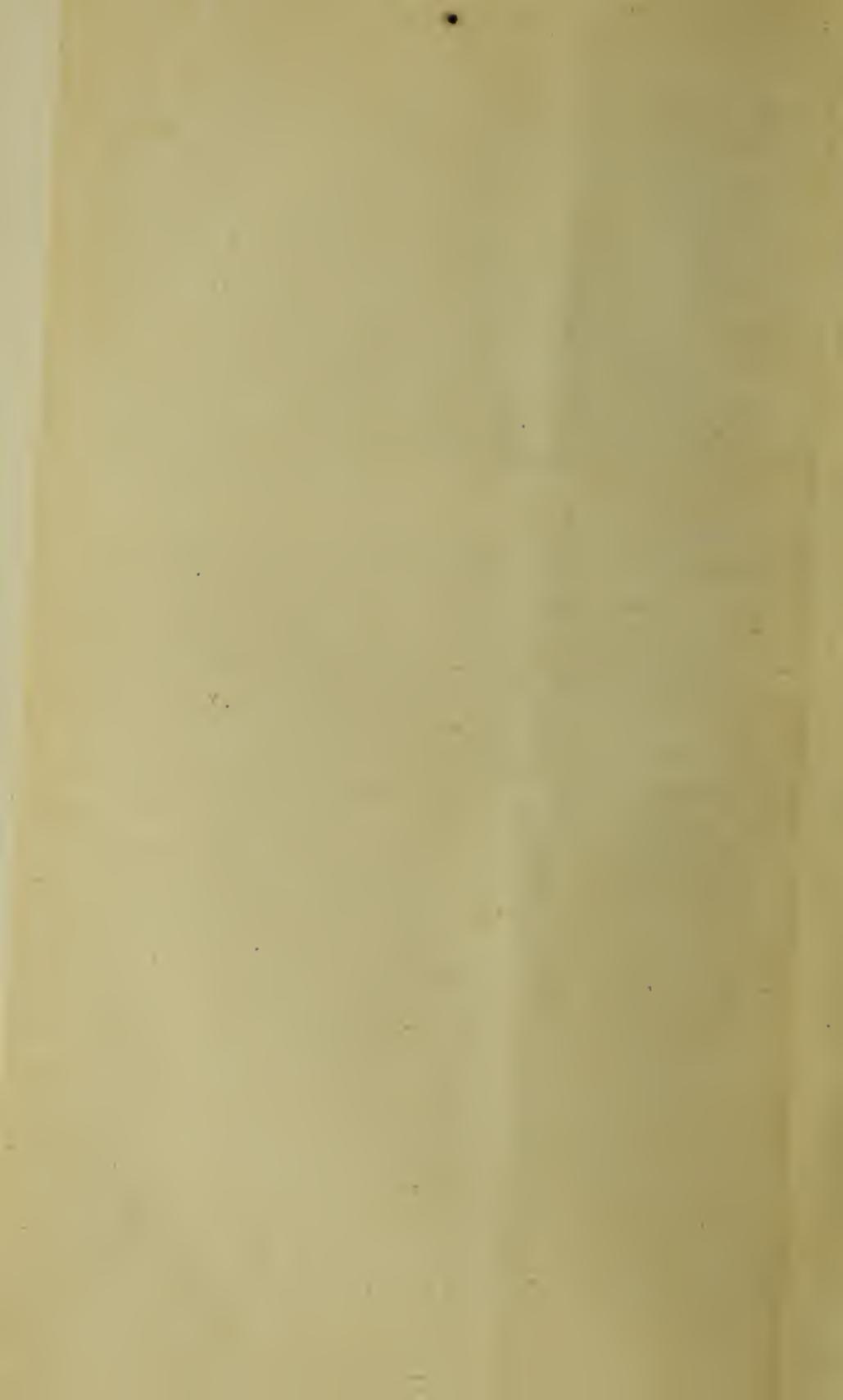
It is alleged that our legislators have openly profaned the Sabbath by pleasure trips. Such acts proclaim a disregard of law, both human and divine. It shews a debased state of public sentiment in reference to the obligation of the Sabbath, and a disordered civil condition, when the very law of the land on the Sabbath can be thus shamelessly set at defiance by the men to whom the government is intrusted.

Do our public men use their official power to serve their personal ambition, and narrow personal ends? Do they use the knowledge they have obtained through their official position that they may meanly speculate for their own pecuniary advantage? Then we are responsible. Their shame is our shame; their dishonor is ours. The shifts and evasions and artifices by which such transactions are sought to be covered over or excused only in-

crease the disgrace. Whatever it may have been in time past, such is the standard of public morals in Britain now, that no public man dare attempt such transactions, or if some unprincipled man has ventured to attempt it, he has only made himself infamous, and the voice of the nation has driven him for ever from public life. If we are to preserve our character as a nation we must lift up the voice of indignant protest against such practices, and by force of public opinion as well as by the exercise of the franchise, we must strive to secure men as legislators who love righteousness, who hate and abjure iniquity, and who shape their policy with a view to the welfare and the honor of the nation.

Let us see that with entire union of heart and effort we labour for the exaltation of the land. Let us guard our religious privileges, and seek to extend them to others. We have the Bible in our language and given to every man to read and study and pray over for himself. We have the Gospel proclaimed in its simplicity, the sacrifice of Christ presented as the only cause of our reconciliation to God—the Holy Spirit as the great promise to the Church, the giver of all light and life and blessing,—faith the only instrument of justification, and holiness the necessary fruit of faith. We have the sacraments and ordinances of religion in their New Testament purity and simplicity. Let us guard these privileges, and let us see to it that in our own lives of holy obedience we add to the righteousness, not to the sin of the nation. We must combine with all God's people to promote the honor of the Sabbath, to resist the encroachments of Popery and infidelity, and to repress all wickedness and ungodliness. But it is also our duty in view of the great wants of the province, to seek to enlarge the usefulness and efficiency of the Church, and to circulate the Bible and the preaching of the Gospel throughout its length and breadth. It is a grand old motto of an ancient Scottish city: "Let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of the word." We echo it back and say, "Let Canada flourish by the preaching of the word."





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