

The Gospel Witness

PUBLISHED WEEKLY

IN THE INTEREST OF JARVIS STREET BAPTIST
CHURCH, TORONTO, AND OF EVANGELICAL TRUTH.

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PASTOR AND EDITOR

"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ."—Romans 1: 16.

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VOL. I.

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The Jarvis Street Pulpit

THE CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE TOWARD AMUSEMENTS.

A Sermon by the Pastor.

(Preached in Jarvis Street Church, Toronto, Sunday Morning, Feb. 13, 1921).

See note at the end of the sermon.

"And through thy knowledge shall thy weak brother perish, for whom Christ died."—I Corinthians 8: 11.

The Christian attitude toward amusements is a subject of great importance. While belonging, in some respects, to the category of minor questions, to the "childish things" which we may be expected to "put away" as we attain to some degree of maturity in the Christian life: yet because, as Christians, we can never be unrelated to anything which affects in the slightest degree the spiritual welfare of the least of God's children, we cannot be either indifferent or superior to this matter.

It is a fact, moreover, which even the most liberally and charitably minded find themselves compelled to acknowledge, that vast numbers of professed Christians are now being carried away by an ever-growing love of pleasure, which, like a mighty tide, is sweeping over the world. It cannot be denied that many church members go oftener to the theatre than to church, and pay more for their amusements than for their religion; that there is reason to fear that many such are better versed in rules "according to Hoyle," than in the principles of the Gospel according to Matthew, and Mark, and Luke, and John; and are bolder and more expert in dealing cards than in disseminating the word of God. Some, too, there are, who are most punctilious in their observance of religious decorum; who would be offended by a colloquialism from the pulpit, or an inartistic performance by the choir; but who see no impropriety in the presence of professing Christians at the dance.

Nor is this condition of things peculiar to any one denomination, nor to any one country. It is a matter of general observation that vast multitudes of the professed disciples of Christ, by their addiction to these and other forms of amusement, openly advertise themselves to be "lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God."

Candid minds, I think, will acquit me of the charge of exaggeration, when I say that this has had, and now has a deadening and almost paralyzing effect upon the life of the churches. The public worship of the sanctuary, the preaching of the gospel, the study of Scripture, the exercise of prayer, the spiritual

service of the Christian life, and all the pure spiritual joys flowing therefrom, are esteemed dull and uninteresting.

And I venture the assertion that this inordinate love of sensuous pleasure vitiates not only the public taste, but the taste of that part of the public which professes to be Christian. This has resulted in many deplorable reactions upon the life and activity of the churches. Standards have been lowered to suit the popular taste. People who feed on Charlie Chaplin several days a week have but little appetite for anything but Charlie Chaplin on Sunday. Standards may not always, however, be vulgarized. They may only be reduced to fit the diminishing capacities of the people. The man who becomes addicted to the use of stimulants soon loses his appetite for wholesome food, and what food is forced upon him must be administered in tabloid form. And it seems to be the policy of "the god of this world" to vitiate the appetites of God's children for all healthy spiritual enjoyments, by treating them with stimulants.

Respecting the particular form of amusement provided in the moving picture theatres, it ought frankly to be said that, independently of the character of the pictures, the habitue of the "movies" is certain to find the habit mentally demoralizing. Even now there are many who refrain from reading certain books, preferring to await their production on the screen. Quite apart from the moral quality of the pictures, this aspect of the influence of the craze for the "movies" should give educators, and all concerned in the cultivation of the mind, the most serious concern.

The great question, however, which faces us is this: What is the Christian Church to do? What is the truly Christian attitude toward these things? If people will have nothing but pleasure, is the Christian Church to provide it? If the multitudes insist upon being entertained, must those who serve in the Church, in the pulpit, and elsewhere, learn the entertainer's art? If young people refuse to engage in religious exercises designed to develop both the mind and the spirit, unless such exercises are diluted with some sort of entertaining or pleasurable element, is it the duty of the Church to accommodate her ministry to the popular demand? Or is there higher and safer ground which we may take?

I. Let us examine the principle of the text, for our answer.

It appears to have been common in pagan Corinth, as in other places, to offer for sale in the market places, meat which was the residue of sacrifices which had been offered to idols in heathen temples. Some of the Corinthian believers seem to have made a practice of using such meat for food. They argued that as an idol was nothing in the world, meat which had been presented to the idol in worship was neither the better nor the worse for having been so used. Therefore they saw no reason why they, as Christians, should not eat it.

But there were others who viewed the matter differently. Lacking the clear intelligence of their more enlightened brethren, they appear to have felt that since the meat had been used in idol-worship, the eating of it would involve some recognition of the idol. Therefore when they saw their fellow-Christians eating such meat, notwithstanding their unenlightened consciences felt the practice involved a recognition of the idol, they claimed the liberty their fellow-Christians exercised, and in the doing of it were caused to stumble.

It is probable that this matter had been submitted to the Apostle Paul for judgment, as the first verse of this chapter seems to imply—"Now as touching things offered unto idols"—and this chapter is his answer. Many a pastor in our day is asked similar questions by members of his flock who are sincerely desirous of knowing and doing the will of God in all things.

The Apostle begins by telling them that they are right in the assumption that "an idol is nothing in the world," and that, therefore, meat is unaffected by the fact that it had been used in sacrifice. He tells them that in the eating of such meat in itself there is no wrong. He lays down the principle that

there is a spiritual knowledge which affords liberty: "As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth (as there be gods many, and lords many), but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him." That is to say, when a man knows God as He is revealed in Jesus Christ, he knows there is no other God; and that God is a Spirit Who requires of His creatures a spiritual service; and that, therefore, we are not to judge ourselves nor others by outward forms, by the mere externals of life, such as eating and drinking. On the contrary, we know that it is spirit, and motive, and intention with which God is concerned. Or, as the same apostle says elsewhere (Rom. 14:17): "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."

The argument, therefore, is that knowing an idol to be nothing in the world; so far as the act itself was concerned, and by itself considered, a Christian, knowing this, might eat meat which had been used in idol-worship without offence either to God or to his own conscience.

On the other hand, the Corinthians are reminded, there are some who lack the spiritual discernment to perceive that the nothingness of the idol leaves the sacrifice unpolluted: "Howbeit there is not in every man than knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled."

And herein another principle is enunciated to this effect: that while the believer's relationship to God is unaffected by his eating or refraining, and his own conscience, therefore, is also undefiled thereby, **there is still another relationship to be considered, and that is, the believer's relationship to his neighbor.**

And here let me pause to interject a more general observation: In respect to its own desires, the human mind is marvellously resourceful in discriminative judgments. When it suits us, sin and righteousness are defined in terms of our human relationships, and men go so far as to measure a man's fitness for the presence of God by the service he appears to have rendered to his fellows. But how swiftly we can swing to the other extreme: "As long as I have a clear conscience toward God, whose business is it what I eat or drink, or where I find my pleasures or my recreations?" Thus we choose to magnify the one or the other of the tables of the law as comprehending our whole moral obligation, as the inclination of the moment suits us. One day we are sure that if our consciences be at peace with God, nothing else matters. The next day we are equally certain that so long as we busy ourselves with some particular bit of human service—usually something we rather like to do—it really does not matter whether we pray or otherwise recognize God or not.

The underlying principle of Paul's teaching, however, is this, that the gospel provides a way whereby "the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit"; and that the principles of the gospel applied to life and conduct will relate the believer in self-denying service to both God and his neighbor too.

But now, to return to the specific matter more immediately before us. I have said the Corinthians are here reminded of their further obligation to their neighbor: "Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge." "But," someone will object, "am I to be brought into bondage to another man's ignorance? Because he is so ignorantly superstitious stupidly to suppose that the idol pollutes the meat, or that the idol and the sacrifice are inseparable, am I therefore to be deprived of the liberty which my clearer knowledge gives me?" So secure did they feel themselves to be in their spiritual knowledge, they felt they could actually "sit at meat in the idols' temple" without violating their own consciences, knowing the idol to be nothing, and God to be all in all.

But our apostle lays down a further principle: **that while there is a liberty**

in knowledge, there is a still larger liberty in love. "But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither if we eat not, are we the worse. (Which means that, knowing our relationship to God is not affected by such matters, we may do as we like. Thus the truth of God makes us free). But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak."

"But why should I allow the absurd prejudices of my ignorant brother to deprive me of legitimate enjoyment?" Because, my friend, you may cause your weaker brother to stumble if you insist on the exercise of your liberty. "But why should I be held responsible for his stumbling? If I may legitimately do without injury to myself, that which, to him, becomes an occasion of stumbling only and wholly because of his ignorance, why should not his stumbling be charged to his ignorance, and I be left in the enjoyment of my Christian liberty? Is there any sound reason why my freedom should be restricted, why I should be required continually to deny myself for fear of offending the ignorant, old-fashioned, and superstitious?"

In effect, you really ask, Why should you care if the ignorant, and weak, stumble?

There is a reason why you should care, and why you should deny yourself for the sake of the most benighted human being. Hear the tremendous answer! He is a soul "for whom Christ died"! This man Paul has but one answer for every question: it is always the Cross! Everything is referred to the Cross. He sees everything and everybody through the medium of the Cross. He measures and values everybody, by the Cross. Nor is this a solitary note in his teaching. He wrote the same to the Romans: "Destroy not him with thy meat for whom Christ died." Thus he measures and values all that is in this world and cries: "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world." And that is no more than our Lord Himself said: "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for My sake shall find it."

Thus our text, and the gospel generally, puts love before knowledge as the guiding principle of life, and as the foundation of the largest liberty. Knowledge afforded liberty conscientiously to eat meat: love gave liberty to refrain from eating for the sake of the interests of a soul for whom Christ died.

II. Let us now consider some modern illustrations of this principle.

There are certain forms of amusement which are only evil. There are plays which cannot be defended before the bar of an enlightened conscience; there are uses of playing cards which lead inevitably to ruin; there are kinds of dances which are flagrantly immoral, and which no reputable person will attempt to justify. To these propositions no one in this audience will object. But with these things we have nothing to do in our present discussion. Every true Christian will instantly, and instinctively, recognize that the thing which is evil in itself should have no place in the Christian life. Participation in such amusements as I have just named, I feel sure every one here this morning will readily acknowledge, would be as unworthy of a professed Christian as lying or stealing.

The case before us is that of a matter which is not evil in itself, but which some uninstructed people, here called "weak," think to be evil. It is with the Christian attitude toward these we are now concerned.

For the sake of argument let us assume that the theatre is an institution of great educational possibilities. Lest I be misunderstood, I give it as my personal conviction that the theatre, as an institution, is immoral; that its influence, on the whole, is not good but evil. But I speak of the theatre in

this way as an institution. I shall not argue the point here, for that is beside my purpose this morning. There may be exceptions, and I am willing to assume the exception, to assume that there may be individual theatres whose management keep their stage clean and pure and wholesome. And this involves the further assumption that there may be good plays. Doubtless many are not good; but we will assume that some are, and that their teaching is morally sound, and their influence morally uplifting—or at least not degrading.

We may assume further that the conscientious Christian—and who can be a Christian without being conscientious?—will exercise the utmost discrimination, and will go only to the best theatres, and the best plays, in which there can be nothing that is in any degree harmful.

And we may make the same assumption respecting the playing of cards. Surely no one will insist that there is any evil in the cards themselves; they are neither moral nor immoral: but unmoral. That, to the discerning, is self-evident. But I am aware of the strong prejudice conceived by many against the cards themselves, as though the pieces of pasteboard so marked were essentially evil. Personally I know nothing of cards; but I suppose there is something peculiarly fascinating about the various games they are used to play. It is not difficult for me to imagine a game of cards to be a very pleasant diversion, nor indeed to believe that such a game may be mentally refreshing. I am not now speaking of the use of cards for gambling purposes. No one questions that cards are frequently put to evil uses; that even in private drawing-rooms men and women have been inspired by a simple, friendly game with a passion for gambling which has led to their ruin, and even to suicide. No one whose knowledge is at all extensive, will deny that cards have been the latchkey to the penitentiary for many—to let them in, however, not to let them out. I say it is not to be wondered at that so many should look upon a pack of cards as having been printed in hell, in view of the terrible havoc they have wrought.

But it must surely be assumed that no true disciple of Christ would permit himself to have part in a game in which any of these things could find a place. He would play cards only in such a way as there could be "no harm" in it.

But what shall we say of the dance? I confess to having had no personal experience. There are those who insist that the modern dance in any and all its forms is always and only evil. I have no doubt it is often so. Indeed I feel sure that certain dances can work only evil to those who engage in them. But I have no time to-day to discuss that aspect of the question. I would take ground, for the sake of argument at least, that many censors of the dance who are better informed and more experienced than I, would not take, I would assume that there may be perfectly innocent and harmless dances. For I am compelled to assume that no Christian would deliberately and persistently participate in any sort of dance associated with the probability of evil. I assume, therefore, (I say again, for the sake of argument, for the testimony of the more experienced makes me cautious), that under right auspices some pure-minded people may dance without injury to themselves.

Thus I have assumed that it is only with the good play, the innocent card game, the harmless dance—if such there may be, the Christian will have anything to do.

Can you, however, be sure that others will be equally discriminating? It is admitted that these things are not always good, but sometimes decidedly evil. What if others fail to exercise your carefully discriminating judgment? Perhaps someone will say that their failure to do so is their own responsibility. Beyond question, to great multitudes, the theatre is the theatre, the dance is the dance, and cards are cards. They do not discriminate, and they will not. Some fail for want of capacity to discern between the good and the bad, and some from want of inclination. "But that," I have heard even professed Christians say, "is their concern and not mine."

But remember, the text lays down a principle for the governance of the

relationship of a person of a very high degree of religious intelligence to one who is densely ignorant and superstitious. You must draw the picture for yourself. At one end of the scale you have a religiously enlightened mind, plus education, culture, refinement, wealth; all these co-operating to discern between the precious and the vile. At the other end you have one steeped in prejudice, restricted in capacity, weak in character, and sheep-like in his imitative propensities. Between these two extremes there may be many varying degrees, of intelligence on the one hand or ignorance on the other. But I take the extremes. What principle can possibly bridge that gulf or span that difference of spiritual enlightenment and moral vigor? **Only the principle of the Cross!** And that is the principle by which all truly Christian conduct is determined, and on which all Christian character is founded: "For whom Christ died"! Let me take the highest possible ground. I anticipate your argument as to your taste for literature and the drama, and your love of music and the aesthetic, and your passion for cultivated society and mental recreation, and your superiority to the degrading influences to which the less favored are subject. I will take your argument at par—"Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge"! Do you hear it? "Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge." Let me thunder it in your ears: "**Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge!**" What then? "**Through thy knowledge shall thy weak brother perish for whom Christ died?**" Oh, my brother, do you care? Do you care for the soul for whom Christ died? What? Does this question of amusements affect the business of soul-saving? Yes, it does. Most emphatically it does! The passion for pleasure, for society, for worldly amusement, has made barren churches as it has made childless homes! **And we shall never accomplish our God-given task, nor glorify Him in the salvation of men, until by the power of the Holy Spirit we learn to relate ourselves to men everywhere as to souls for whom Christ died.**

III. May I venture now to offer a Word of Exhortation and Application?

For the sake of clearness, I repeat, I have nothing now to say about indulgence in that which is known to be sinful. Nor have I any word of denunciation to utter respecting that which is not evil in itself. It would be as wrong to belie your moral intelligence by assuming there is evil where there is none, as it would be to ignore the ignorant conscientiousness of another, who, where there is no evil, thinks there is.

The supreme question is, Can any one of us afford to be indifferent to the fate of one "for whom Christ died"? That is the highest and strongest appeal which even God can make. From eternity He has estimated everything by the Cross! Have we learned to estimate men by the Cross? The man is poor, and ignorant, and obscure, and unattractive, I know; but he is a soul "for whom Christ died." For his own sake he is worth much; and he is one for whom an inestimable price has been paid.

For Christ's sake we cannot afford to be indifferent toward such an one. Can you not remember the thrill of satisfaction you experienced when you first realized that Christ died for you? And in that hour you realized His own satisfaction in some measure. Dare any of us consent to permit anything which might defeat the purpose of the Cross in another's life? Shall we have done once for all with all worldly standards, and henceforth measure all men by the Cross?

Do you realize that **some may be perishing through your act of selfish indulgence?** "It is only an innocent pleasure," you say. But the moment your pleasure becomes an occasion of stumbling it ceases to be innocent: "When ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ."

Do you see what estimate they put upon the weak brother who selfishly insist upon doing their own pleasure irrespective of its influence upon others? They put their own passing pleasure before the salvation of the soul. That is

the text's teaching. That is the consideration it forces upon us: "Through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish for whom Christ died?" Is there a professed Christian here who will refuse to forego an evening at the theatre that another soul may have an eternity in glory? On one particular evening that weaker brother saw you there, and he found sanction for his course in yours. I know he is "weak," and "ignorant," and "prejudiced," and "narrow-minded," and all that is contemptible in the eyes of some: But for him Christ died! Can it be that anyone of us will deliberately sacrifice the interests of a soul for whom Christ died for a few hours' pleasure? Even to save a soul from death can we refuse to deny ourselves? I must be faithful. The spiritual requirements of the hour are insistent. The testimony of Scripture is most urgent: "Destroy not him with thy theatre-going, or with thy card-playing, or with thy dancing, or with the pursuit of any other kind of pleasure—destroy not him for whom Christ died"!

Does someone contend that such teaching is extravagant and impracticable? That it involves the erection of impossible standards? That such self-denial requires an unreasonable service? I remind you that the difference between the very greatest and the very humblest of earth, is infinitesimal in comparison with the gracious and infinite stoop of the Lord of glory when He died for your sinful soul? And for one for whom He died will you do nothing? For one for whom He sacrificed everything, will you sacrifice nothing?

No, my standard is not impossible. It is the simple standard of the New Testament. To be a "living sacrifice," to "be not conformed to this world," is our "reasonable service." It is for this we are here. For this we have been sent. I should be unworthy of my office were I to preach anything less. I must apply the principle to myself; and I say frankly, that if there be any pleasure upon which my heart is so set that it is more to me than the interests of a soul for whom Christ died, I am unworthy of my office, and I ought immediately either to resign that pleasure, or resign my office. And I say the same to the office-bearers in this church; I say it to the deacons: If there be a deacon of this church who thinks more of an evening at the theatre, of the diversion of a game of cards, or of the pleasure of the dance, than of the interests of a soul for whom Christ died, he is unworthy of his office; and he ought immediately to resign either his pleasure or his office. And the same may be said of Sunday school teachers and officers, and also of every member of the church. The teaching of Scripture requires that every interest in life should be subordinated to the purpose of the Cross—which is, that they should be saved for whom Christ died. For any of us who call ourselves disciples of Christ, there is but one course compatible with love and loyalty to Christ, and that is to resolve that by His grace, and by the might of His Spirit in the inner man, we will put Him always and everywhere first; that we will live to realize the purpose of the Cross in our own lives, and in the lives of others; that we will lose our lives for Christ's sake, that thus we may find them.

As I thus closed my meditation, a thought occurred to me, it may have been a day-dream—I said to myself: "What if some young man should rise in his pew before all the congregation and say, 'I have here and now resolved that henceforth at all costs, I will in all things put Christ first'—if such a thing should occur, who knows how many would follow his example, and perhaps the revival we have longed and prayed for would come to-day." Shall we not all resolve to rededicate ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord, and from this forward, put Him always first?

(As the conclusion of the sermon was reached a young man under the gallery rose and said, "I would like to say, Pastor, that I have resolved to put Christ first," and in a few moments a large number of men and women rose signifying the same decision.)

NOTE.—This sermon, while being used of God to bring blessing to many the Sunday morning it was preached, proved to be "the last straw" with others, and ultimately produced the upheaval in the church, of which the whole country has been informed; but which cleared the way for the great blessing which the church has since experienced. The sermon is now for the first time published in full from the manuscript completed February 12th, 1921; and is followed by the prayer of the whole church that the Holy Spirit may use it to lead many to put Christ first.

ABOUT THE GOSPEL WITNESS.

Our announcement of last Saturday in the newspapers met with a great response. Applications for this number of **The Witness** have come from all over the country, and, at the time of going to press, letters are still pouring in. This is to answer the many inquiries contained in these letters.

First: We are having an extra supply of this number printed and additional copies can be obtained at six cents each. It costs five cents a copy to print them, and one cent to mail them, not counting the cost of envelope and labor. But we have supplied the first issue at five cents each "under cost" to introduce **The Gospel Witness**. If the message of this number is of value we invite those who send for additional copies to co-operate with us, where possible, by sending a small contribution; but in any event all orders for copies at six cents each will be filled.

Secondly: Many have enquired the cost of **The Witness** per year. Our readers will understand that we carry no advertisements, and have as yet no subscription list. The cost of publication is met by special contribution. We hesitate to assume an obligation. But the actual cost of printing and mailing would be a little over \$3.00 a year per copy. This seems a high price when compared with the price of established periodicals, but we cannot, as yet, produce it for less. **The Witness** has received such a welcome that we feel its future is assured; and on consideration we have decided to offer **The Gospel Witness** from now until the end of February for \$1.50. The message of this week is unusually long. The sermon in the regular issue, and which is now stenographically reported, will occupy the first six pages.

To the ministers to whom this **Witness** comes we intend to send **The Witness** weekly until the middle of September as sample copies, by which time they will be able to judge of the paper's usefulness.

We hereby express our great appreciation of the hosts of correspondents who, in sending their applications for this number, have expressed a kindly interest in the work of Jarvis Street Church, and their endorsement of the things we stand for. God bless you, every one!

If this message is used to bring blessing to any, and if its teaching meets the need of those who read it, a note to the church office informing us of the fact would greatly encourage us in our work.

Note: The length of the message of this number has made it necessary to hold over other important material until next week.

The Church Calendar

For the week beginning Sunday, Aug. 20th, 1922.

SUNDAY

- 10.00—Prayer Service in the Church Parlor, Mr. George Greenway.
- 10.30—Communion Service.
- 11.00—Public Worship. The Pastor will preach.
- 3.00—The Bible School will meet.
- 2.30—Open-Air Work with the Gospel Car, starting from Jarvis Street Church.
- 5.30—Open-Air Service on Gerrard Street.
- 6.00—Prayer Meeting in Church Parlor.
- 7.00—Public Worship. The Pastor will preach.

MONDAY, WEDNESDAY and SATURDAY—8.00—Prayer Service.

THURSDAY—8.00—Open Air Service, Gerrard St. gate of Allen Gardens.

The Parliament St. Branch, 250 Parliament St. **Sunday:** Bible School, 3.00; Evangelistic Service, conducted by Mr. W. L. McKay, 7.00; **Thursday,** 8.00, Prayer Meeting.