

Christian World urging the necessity of an 'apostolic' visit from some leading minister—he mentions Dr. Horton and the Rev. Silvester Horne—in order to give a much-needed impetus to Congregationalism in New South Wales in particular and in Australia generally. In the United Kingdom the latest figures to hand tell the same tale of Congregational shrinkage. The *Congregational Year Book* for 1909 was, when the last mail left London, nearly ready for the press, and some of the advance-sheets have been already published. The summary of statistics shows that, by comparison with last year, there is a decrease of thirteen churches, a decrease of 13,976 Sunday scholars, and a decrease of 1291 in Church membership. In Wales the Congregational Church membership has dropped from 171,371 to 168,045, thus affording striking and conclusive evidence of reaction after the emotional Welsh 'revival.'

In America—even in those States in which it had a special start over other religious bodies—the Church of the Puritans is falling far in the rear. A few weeks ago we published in our 'Catholic World' column some remarkable figures showing the almost phenomenal progress the Catholic Church had made in and around Boston, the original home of the Puritans in America. Let us quote, by way of contrast, just one authority, himself a Congregational minister, on the decadence of Puritanism in the same locality. In a paper on 'The Perpetuation of the Church,' read recently at the union conference of the Congregational Churches of Boston and vicinity, the Rev. G. L. Cady, of Dorchester, declared that the Puritan stock is committing race suicide. 'I find,' he said, 'fifty-six churches which boast of a single child each for last year, and sixty-three which reported twins each.' His figures showed twenty-three churches which, with a combined membership of 7494, with 7276 in the Sunday schools, and with 1474 young people in Endeavor Societies, were able in a year to bring forth six new births into the kingdom of God. 'Congregational families,' he said, 'have ceased to perpetuate themselves. The days when the family came to church and filled one or two pews, as in our youth, are gone, and in their place we look in vain for the children in the church or in the house. The Catholic Church has a great army of children coming up each year, native born, and the priest knows just what he can count upon for Confirmation each year, and he knows that next year there will be just as large a crop to harvest. I have no doubt that, things being equal, if there were as many children born in Congregational as in Catholic families, we could to-day witness as great a proportionate native growth and front the future with a calm face. When the Puritan stock commits race suicide the Puritan Church must also follow the path of involuntary hari-kari.'

In these days of religious declension and growing materialism, Catholics will find no necessary subject for comforting reflection in figures quoted in the paragraphs printed above, nor in any evidence of a crumbling of faith going on among creeds that believe in Christ and a divine revelation. Our object in referring to the meetings of the Congregational Union is to point a moral and adorn a tale that is of fundamental interest to Catholics as well as to Protestants of every creed. We refer to the fact—at once very natural and very significant—that the chairman of the Conference (the Rev. W. S. Fernie) should have chosen as the subject for his presidential address 'The Need for Authority.' The lecture was especially significant as being addressed to the ministers of a Church which, both in ecclesiastical government and in doctrine, has, of all non-Catholic religious bodies, out itself the furthest adrift from the very principle whose aid is now invoked. In point of Church government each Congregational Church is absolutely independent and autonomous, and is not subject to president, synod, conference, or external authority of any kind. In respect to doctrine, the Congregational Church imposes no formal creed upon its members, and does not exact adherence to any specified summary of the Christian faith. And this almost unrestricted liberty in regard to doctrinal belief is consistently conceded throughout all the practical working of that Church. Even on the occasion of the administration of what is called the Lord's Supper—the nearest approach which the non-episcopal bodies have to the idea of a Sacrament—it is customary in Congregational churches to invite to the 'holy table' not only the regular members of the particular church, but all present who have any desire to come, 'whether they be members of any Church or not.' Yet, in spite of this historic policy of avowed, deliberate, formal latitudinarianism, we now find a learned and zealous leader of that faith emphasising 'The Need for Authority.' In the Catholic idea, it is indeed high time that the cry was raised not only among our friends of the Congregational Church, but in other Protestant bodies as well. When, for instance, it is possible for a prominent clergyman of

a Church in New Zealand to deny, without reproof, doctrine on which our very hope of salvation depends, it seems to be time, in the interests of all Christian believers, that an appeal should be made—even if it be made to deaf ears—for some sort of power of clear definition such as the Catholic Church exercised in the case of Loisy and his fellow-modernists. When it is possible for the leading minister of a Church to teach publicly that the Bible is full of blunders, that there is no such thing as sin, that our Blessed Lord, though a good man, was ignorant and foolish like the rest of mankind, and that the Atonement is a myth—when it is possible for the Rev. R. J. Campbell, the most eminent Congregationalist minister in the world, to teach such anti-Christian things openly and yet retain both his Church membership and his ministry, it is time a voice should be raised, however feebly, to call for a remedy. And hence we welcome with cordial good-will the earnest words of the reverend chairman of the Congregational Union, emphasising 'The Need for Authority'—in other words, advocating some measure of a return to a principle, the denial of which created the great religious revolution of the sixteenth century.

Unfortunately, however, although the president of the Congregational Conference is groping in the right direction for a remedy, his proposal still falls very far short of the true solution of the problem. The kind of authority which he suggests would have no more holding power than a rope of sand. Some of his general statements, indeed, regarding the necessity for authority in religion are beyond criticism. 'Men need authority for their faith as well as for their conduct.' 'Faith in Christ without authority is like a house built on the sands.' 'It is not a question of whether a man's faith or creed is sufficient, but the question is on what foundation it rests.' These are excellent, but when the speaker goes on to indicate that the kind of authority which he has in view is that of the Bible only, without any authoritative interpreter, he gives evidence that his study of the subject has been, after all, of a rather superficial kind. The authority of the Bible only, conjoined with the right of private judgment, has received a fair trial now for well over three hundred years, and it has produced its natural and foreseen fruits in the shape of almost countless sects, each contradicting the other, and each basing its claim to recognition on 'the Bible and the Bible only.' Centuries ago the Reformed theologian Werenfels expressed this happily in the historic distich:

'Hic liber est in quo quaerit sua dogmata quisque;
Invenit et pariter dogmata quisque sua.'

Which has been Englished as follows:

'Within one book each seeks to read
The tenets of his private creed;
And, strange to tell, each reads so well,
The selfsame words all doctrines spell.'

The principle of 'the Bible and the Bible only' has proved itself insufficient to hold together in unity of belief even the members of a single family, much less to restrain the restless intellects of large bodies of men. It is, in point of fact, no authority at all; for when one of our separated brethren professes to receive the Bible as God's Word, yet passes over and gets rid of so much that is in that Word, it is clear that his ultimate standard of truth is not the Scripture, but—unconsciously to himself—some view of things in his mind which he thinks he finds in Scripture. In other words, he believes himself, so to speak, and not the external Word of God; and the particular thing that he calls the 'authority' of the Scripture is only a name. When will our good friends realise that, if there is to be any external authority at all in religion, the only authority with any real claim to recognition is that of the Church which has always claimed to be, and is, the God-appointed guardian, teacher, and interpreter of God's revelation? Faith, history, and reason alike teach that the natural and divinely-provided safeguard of the unity of faith was the appointment of one supreme earthly head, to whom was given the power of the keys, of one shepherd who was to feed the whole flock, of one who was to serve as the rock-foundation on which was to be built that Church which should never fall away, and against which the attacks of enemies, and even the assaults of hell itself, should dash themselves in vain.

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