

THE CAUSES OF THE DECLINE OF CHRISTIAN CIVILIZATION. THE HOPE

As you have come to this lecture to hear what are the causes of the decline of christian civilization, it might be taken that you agree that there are sufficient evidences that there has been a decline in christian civilization and that we can therefore proceed directly to consider the causes. We, however, feel that it is necessary to first examine the evidence in order to see whether this opinion is the result of the temporary and passing troubled state of the world at this time or whether it is a deep rooted condition.

In making a judgment of the state of society, it is necessary to consider how a just judgment is to be made, and not take for granted that we are prepared to make a judgment. A judgment to be of any value must be impartial, or unbiased. We must therefore first consider the things which might bias our judgment. A judgment biased by prejudice is obviously valueless.

It is a tendency of mankind to divide into two classes, one of which calls itself conservative and the other progressive. The conservative form of mind, clings to old habits which it considers proven, it has a fondness for things of the past, it cares for what is ancient. The so-called progressive form of mind, loves novelties, it takes up with the latest movements, in an attempt to be up with the times.

Either of these attitudes causes a biased judgment. A man of sound judgment views everything on its own merit, whether it is old or new makes no difference to him, he only wishes to know whether a thing is genuine or not, and he knows that whether a thing is old or new has nothing to do with its genuineness. Such a man is also on his guard against extremes. The Greeks used to speak of a golden mean. The golden mean can only be found by a man of balanced judgment. The golden mean is not a passive neutrality but an active and alert balance.. It may be compared to a man seated on a spirited horse, who alertly maintains his equilibrium lest he fall to one side or the other.

In this series of lectures we will show the ills of society are caused by going now to one extreme, now to the opposite extreme.

You have come to this lecture to hear me consider the causes of the decline of civilization; thus most of you are probably already of the opinion that there has been a decline. If your opinion is merely a prejudice in favor of old things, a kind of nostalgic regret at seeing them pass, it is of no value. On the other hand, if it involves a perception of an actual condition, you have come here in the hopes that the matter may become more clear.

A man who is truly adult desires to know the truth, even when it runs contrary to his prejudices. This Swedenborg calls, "The Love of truth for the sake of Truth". There are, however, many who call themselves "seekers after truth", who are so proud of seeking and examining all kinds of things with what they fancy to be an impartial mind that they would never recognize the truth when they meet it. To find the truth, would wound their vanity, for in this case they would no longer belong to the proud select group of seekers.

One who is truly looking for the truth does not boast of being a seeker after truth. To fairly and justly judge concerning our times, we must vigorously divest ourselves of prejudices due to our education and upbringing.

The Lord said "He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me, and he that taketh not up his cross and followeth after Me is not worthy of Me". Matt.10:37.

A man's spiritual father and mother, is all the tradition, the education he has received from parents, from teachers, from our fatherland, or from our alma mater. A man who is truly looking for the truth must be willing to give up all that is not in agreement with the truth when he finds it. If he is not willing to do this he is wasting his time in looking for the truth.

A man's spiritual sons and daughters are all the conclusions that a man has come to by thinking things out by his own effort, these also a man must be willing to give up if he finds the truth.

Inprofoundly troubled times, such as we are passing through, it is natural that many reflect on the foundations of civilization which at other times are generally taken for granted.

But in such reflection we must beware of forming our judgment from a superficial view of the immediate and present troubled condition. We must not make our judgment from the present moment which in the time perspective looms so large, but we must view it in relation to history as a whole in which our age forms but a little part.

If we view the christian period of Europe and America as a whole, we see that there were many periods of grave disorders, of lengthy wars, invasions by barbarians, which were enough to drive people to despair and these periods were followed by times of peace and prosperity. We also find periods when corruption and a general moral disintegration were followed by periods of reform. We must therefore beware of forming any opinion of the decline of Christian civilization merely upon the troubles of the present moment, which might be exaggerated by the time perspective.

On the other hand, history tells of the gradual decline of many civilizations with their ups and downs until in many cases civilizations have been overthrown permanently in various parts of the world.

It is, therefore, important to have some judgment as to whether Christian civilization is passing through a temporary troubled time or whether there is a danger of a permanent decline which finally leads to a fall.

A sound judgment in regard to this matter must be the result, not of a superficial viewing of the subject but a profound consideration of the fundamental trend.

On the one side we have the present situation of the world. We are told by various thinkers that the present situation has its value in that it causes many to turn from merely material and personal pursuits to a sacrifice of one's **personal** ambitions for the sake of an ideal, a sacrifice for the general welfare.

While this is undoubtedly true with some of the community, it does not lead to any permanent cure unless the roots, the causes which have led to the present conditions are removed, unless the origin, the roots of the disorders of the world are seen, recognized and removed, any improvement will be but temporary.

A nation at war or in danger of war is like a sick man, who makes a death bed repentance and turns to God and makes all kinds of good resolutions; but as soon as the danger is past and the man is well, the good resolutions are soon forgotten in the renewed pursuit of material and selfish ends, thus showing that there was

no essential change.

To be wakened out of a dull sleep by catastrophic dangers is of little value, unless it leads to more than a superficial and temporary change of mind. Any permanent improvement depends on finding the source of the condition and vigorously removing the source.

We have entitled these lectures the causes of the decline of Christian civilization and not the decline of the Christian church for the reason that the church as an organization or institution is of no importance or value except insofar as it effects the life of the people as a whole, it is useless if it does not lead in the building of a truly Christian civilization.

In fact one of the fundamental causes of the failure of Christian civilization has been due to the fact that the churches have been so much absorbed in what appeared to be their own prosperity that instead of serving the life of the people, they have striven for their own aggrandizement. Wherever this takes place, the finest flowers of Christian civilization has manifested itself outside the church as an institution.

The life of the Lord Jesus Christ was directed to calling the people to a new life, to a spiritual ideal, which they were to show forth in their life; and He commanded His Disciples to do likewise.

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven". Matt. 5:16.

The great danger, which has so often manifested its baneful influence in the Christian church, was present at the very beginning and was warned against by the Lord Himself. "The mother of Zebedee's children (the apostles John and James) said, "Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on Thy right hand, and the other on Thy left in Thy kingdom." "Jesus said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant. Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister". Matt. 20: 21, 26-28.

How often has not the church forgotten this? Its leaders have longed for either a high place in the kingdom of heaven or a high place, in the ecclesiastical institutions on earth. When such motives enter, politics enter, and the church ceases to be a church, and becomes a club, a kind of religio-political party, of no use in building a Christian civilization. Of course the church continues to speak of ministering and serving when the heart is really elsewhere.

Insofar as politics entered the church, The true spirit of Christianity manifested itself outside the church as an institution or, here and there, within it, but not of it. The genuine spirit of Christian civilization has as often if not oftener manifested itself in the song of the poet, the melody of the musician or the painting of the artist and this as often, in what is called secular, as in what is called religious art.

The truly Christian spirit has more often manifested itself in the humble and devoted lives of persons here or there than in the ecclesiastical potentialities of the church.

It frequently happens that leaders both in the state and in the church unconsciously identify the welfare of state and the church with things which favor their own advancement. They convince themselves that they are working solely for the good of the country or of the church in increasing their own authority. They are thus not conscious hypocrites in striving for high position, but they have never examined the subconscious working of their own minds and have never therefore discovered the self-seeking ambition behind what appears to be a working for the welfare of state or church.

Truth and eloquence are used as a means of gaining applause; the love of truth for its own sake is not placed above their personal ambitions. How often leaders in state and church appeal to the vanity and self interest of their hearers to further their ends.

We hear much these days of a call to self sacrifice. But the call to self-sacrifice may be directed to a man's vanity. Many are willing to sacrifice certain personal ends for the sake of the sake of applause or for praise of their friends. A man will sacrifice much for the sake of a popularity which flatters his vanity or pride.

Where vanity enters the genuine spirit of Christianity is absent, and who is free of vanity? A man can only free himself of vanity by being born again of God by losing his life, in order to receive new life from the Lord.

The life which a man must lose in order to become a son of God is the life of his vanity. Such a teaching will not have a popular appeal for the last thing most persons wish to give up is their vanity.

In Isaiah we read: "Who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form or comeliness; and when we shall see Him there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief, and we hid as it were our faces from Him: He was despised and we esteemed Him not" Is. 53:-1-3.

This is a prophesy concerning the Lord. It is also a prophecy of the true spirit of christianity. The living truth always comes to us in this form. A new and living truth has no beauty in the sight of men generally that they should desire it; it remains despised and unesteemed.

What might be called popular christianity has nothing to do with the true spirit of our Lord and Saviour.

While, as we have seen, even the apostles were not entirely free from ambition in regard to the kingdom of God; during the first three centuries of the Christian epoch, there flowed a vital stream of spiritual life, which touched many profoundly, totally changing their lives. Men and women literally were separated from father and mother, from son and daughter to follow the light of the new religion; they gave up everything they had held dear from their childhood to take on a life full of danger and persecution. Many were literally faithful unto death.

While some of these were undoubtedly moved more by the hope of gaining a martyr's crown in the kingdom of God, than by any unselfish love of the truth for its own sake, while, others were merely carried away by enthusiasm, for a cause, and the desire to be heroes in the latest movement; there can be no doubt that there were

many who were profoundly and sincerely affected by the teaching of the gospels, and desired to make their lives new by the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the year three hundred and nine a great change took place: Constantine Emperor of Rome became a Christian.

History says he saw in a dream a cross and heard the words "with this sign conquer". It is to be feared that Constantine was motivated by the hope of temporal victories; rather than by anything else in his conversion. But whatever his motives, the situation was now quite reversed from what it had been. It was to a man's material advantage to belong to the Christian church. The spirit of corrupt Roman politics was coupled to the church, and the gradual fall of Roman civilization set in.

The Barbarians who over ran the civilized part of Europe were a vigorous and healthier people than the degenerate and effete people they over-ran.

These northern people gradually accepted Christianity some times at the point of the sword. As time went by they acquired a degree of education and a great enthusiasm for Christianity which took form in giving the best they had to the building of the great cathedrals and churches which sprung up, particularly in France and England from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries.

This period was also the period of chivalry and of the crusades. While the crusades indicated that the times were one of youthful enthusiasm rather than one of a mature understanding of christianity, and while undoubtedly many of those who went to the crusades were animated more by the love of adventure than by a pure ideal, there were on the other hand many who made the supreme sacrifice for a noble although a mistaken ideal. As long as men are willing to make a great sacrifice for ideals there is hope.

During the next centuries the Italian Renaissance of classical learning took place. But in Italy the moral decline that had taken place in the effete Roman Empire had never been overcome. Moral lassitude was very prevalent in the Italian church, and the revival of learning brought with it a kind of paganism which invaded the church. It was against the political and moral lassitude of the Italian church, that the Reformation took form as a protest.

For a period the Reformation revitalized christianity, but as we will show in further lectures, many of the weakness of the Italian church were carried over into the Reformed churches.

The Reformation was followed by the period of scientific and mechanical developments, and of increased freedom that has continued down to the present day.

The increase of intellectual, religious and personal freedom, was an ideal that was fought for for many centuries. Finally it was nearly fully attained, it then became not a thing to fight for, but to use. But few had any idea as to how to use it when it had been gained. It was indeed accompanied by a great scientific development, with a great increase of the gadgets of civilization; but without a corresponding development of the things of the spirit. Those who were longing for something better felt the truth, that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every Word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God". Matt 4:4.

"Where there is no vision the people perish" Prov.29:18. We have given this introductory lecture including a brief history to give a certain perspective. In our next lecture we will consider more fully the present condition of the world and will commence the consideration of the deep seated roots of the condition.