

Great Searchings of Heart

James Smith, 1856

Being called upon to attend an *association of churches* during the past week, I was painfully affected by the fact, that out of more than twenty churches — only four could report an increase of numbers during the last twelve months, and that increase was small. Yet, in every church the gospel is preached, and in most, if not all, prayer-meetings are held. What is to become of the world, thought I, if things go on thus? What will become of our own beloved land?

The population is increasing, souls by millions are perishing, and the gospel seems to have lost its power! The churches decrease. What a solemn, what an alarming fact! About three thousand sermons had been preached, about three thousand children had been taught in the Sabbath-schools, a great number of Bibles, tracts, and religious periodicals had been circulated — and yet the majority of the churches had decreased! Surely this is enough to make one weep, lie low before God, and ask, "Show us why you contend with us." Three questions arose in my mind, and have been exercising my thoughts since. Let me invite you, my fellow-Christian, to attend to them with me.

First, Is there not a cause? Surely we cannot ascribe our present languishing condition *wholly* to the sovereignty of God. In Old Testament times the Lord laid the blame on his people, and asked, "Have you not procured this unto my yourself?" And again, by another prophet, "Is the Spirit of the Lord straitened? Are these the things He does?" Do not my words do good to him whose ways are upright?" Many similar portions may be remembered by the reader, if he is familiar with the Scriptures.

In the New Testament, the apostle James tells us, "You have not — because you ask not; or because you ask amiss, that you may consume it on your lusts." Surely there is some *worm at the root*, that causes the plant of God's right hand planting to wither. There is some wedge of gold and Babylonish garment hidden in some Achan's tent, which causes Israel to turn their backs on their enemies. Yes! There must be a cause. We have the same *gospel* to preach which the apostles had. We have the same *promises* of success. We have the same kind of *people* to address. Yet they were successful; they turned the world upside down; they triumphed in Christ, and spread abroad the savor of his knowledge in every place.

But what are *we* doing? Where are our triumphs? We decrease; what is the cause? Let us then inquire,

Secondly, Can we ascertain the cause? Methinks we may, if we are hearty in our desire, and are willing to dig deep enough. It does not seem to lie on the surface; let us therefore plough up the fallow ground, and look deeper. God said that he would search Jerusalem, as with candles, and punish the men that were settled on their lees.

Let us who preach, look at our preaching, and ask: Do I **preach Christ** enough? Is Christ *crucified*, and Christ *glorified* — constantly kept before the people? Do I, in my ministry, exalt and extol him? Is it my delight to proclaim Him in the glory of His person, in the merit of His blood, in the riches of His grace?

Do I present Him to my people as the *only Savior* to be trusted, and the *great example* to be copied? Do I preach Christ plainly, with deep feeling, and with a hearty desire that my hearers may believe in Him and live? Do I aim at the immediate conversion of every soul that hears me, travailing in birth for souls until Christ is formed in them?

Do I honor the **Holy Spirit** in His Divine personality, office, character, and gracious work? Do I preach, impressed with the thought, that unless the Holy Spirit accompanies the Word with His power — no dead sinner will be quickened, no undecided hearer will yield to Jesus, nor will the Lord's people be revived or comforted?

Do I realize that it is personal, heartfelt, believing **prayer**, that brings down the power of the Spirit, which alone can render the Word effectual? And do I in private, among my people, in the pulpit, and even while preaching — endeavor to bring down the Spirit by such prayer? Do I strive to impress upon my people, the necessity of incessant prayer for this invaluable blessing, and set them an example by

cultivating such a spirit of prayer? Am I an example to my people of deadness to the world, zeal for the Lord's glory, devotedness to the Lord's work, and burning desire to bring souls to God?

And let the brethren who are HEARERS examine themselves on this point also. Brethren, much depends on you. A praying, zealous, lively, working church, *must* be successful. We fear that many of you do not realize the value of the immortal souls around you as you should. You do not aim constantly at bringing souls to God, as if it was the first and grand object of your life. Souls are dropping into Hell around you — but where is your feeling? Souls are hardening in sin under the preaching of the gospel — but where is your concern? You know that though Paul preaches — yet without the power of the Spirit of God, no saving effect would be produced — and yet you hear sermon after sermon, without pleading with God for His Spirit to come down! You hear of the low state of the church, you talk of the low state of the church — but where are your *tears*? Where are your *wrestlings* with God? Where is your deep and heart-affecting concern? How few of you feel as if you could not live if the cause of God did not prosper? and yet this is how every one of us should feel. Ah, my brethren, I think a little examination will lead us to discover how we have grieved the Spirit, and why our churches are in the state they are! There is a cause — let us search it out, and then let us inquire,

Thirdly, Can we remove it? Are we willing to make the effort? Are we right heartily desirous to witness the change? If we are, let us ascertain what part we have had, in causing the Spirit to withdraw.

What *sins* do we indulge?

What *duty* do we omit?

What *wrong feelings* do we cherish?

What *improper principles* do we hold?

What *unhallowed spirit* or *temper* do we give way to?

There is some *special* cause in every one, though there may be a *general* cause spreading over the whole church.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life!" Psalm 139:23-24. Let then our pastors, elders, deacons, and private members, commence the work of self-examination at once, and let us be *impartial* in the work sparing no sin, tampering with no lust, listening to no temptation.

But let us make *thorough* work of it. Let every sin we detect be confessed over the blood of atonement; let us *deplete* it, *grieve* over it, seek the *pardon* of it, and pray for grace at once to *depart* from it!

Let us *humble* ourselves before God. The guilty should confess, and the confession of guilt should lead to deep humiliation before God. Brethren, let us lie low. Let us abhor ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes. O for humbling grace from God, for I fear most of us think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think!

Let us plead with God in earnest prayer for deeper sanctification, for greater spirituality, that, like Jesus, our Master, it may be our food and drink to do the will of God. How little we resemble him, who left us an *example* that we should follow His steps!

A *worldly* church can never be really a spiritually prosperous church. As our land, in a spiritual sense, is like what Israel's land was once in a literal sense, when for three years and six months there had been no rain, so that dearth and death were the characteristics of the country — let us, like Elijah, go up to the top of Carmel, and like him, determine never to leave our post until the Lord sends down revitalizing *rain* upon the earth. He is saying to us, "Ask the Lord for rain in the spring, for he makes the storm clouds. And he will send showers of rain so every field becomes a lush pasture. For I will pour out water to quench your thirst and to irrigate your parched fields. And I will pour out my Spirit." (Zechariah 10:1, Isaiah 44:3).

Remember, O remember, that the energetic prayer of the righteous man avails much! Who shall say how much? God is still love. We have his promise. He is on the throne of grace. He bids us to come to it boldly. He asks us to prove Him, by penitence, reformation, and prayer. (Mal. 3:10, 13.) He is true to His word. He will show himself faithful. He never did say to the seed of Jacob, "Seek me in vain," and He never will. It is still true that everyone who asks aright — receives; he who seeks in faith — finds; and to

him that knocks with importunity — the door of Heaven's storehouse is opened. Let us ask, seek, and knock, then, that our joy may be full.

O that I could write something that would touch the hearts of the Lord's people, and stir them up! O that the Lord would use my pen to awaken concern, quicken desire, and lead to hearty wrestlings for the *outpouring of the Holy Spirit!* Nothing will do but this. Without it we are like Samson, who lost his locks on Delilah's lap! We may go out and shake ourselves, we may make a stir — but we shall accomplish nothing! There can be no substitute found for the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the church.

He is the only giver and nourisher of spiritual life. He is the only efficient teacher of the ignorant. He is the only life of the church. O that God, even our own God, would at once give us anew this great blessing, that we may see a great and glorious revival of pure and undefiled religion! O to see thousands pierced in the heart, led to the Savior, and introduced into the church! O to hear the dear name of Jesus sounded forth by the tongues of millions of ransomed sinners, brought by the promised Comforter to know, love, and serve him! Lord Jesus, pour out the ever-blessed Spirit, to sanctify the church, to gather together into one your scattered people, and fulfill the largest promises of the everlasting covenant! Amen.