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Remarks on the Prevailing Custom of Attending
Stage Entertainments: Also on the Present Taste for
Reading Romances and Novels: And on Some
Other Customs: Submitted, with a Heart
Overflowing with Good Will, to the Notice and
Consideration of the Professors of the Christian
Name, in the Different Religious Societies

John Kendall

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Thomas Scattergood
to
Rebecca Scattergood
1812

REMARKS, &c.

REMARKS
ON THE
PREVAILING CUSTOM
OF ATTENDING
STAGE ENTERTAINMENTS :
ALSO
ON THE PRESENT TASTE
FOR READING
ROMANCES AND NOVELS :

And on some other Customs ;

Submitted, with a heart overflowing with good will, to
the notice and consideration of the professors of the
Christian name, in the different religious societies ;

By JOHN KENDALL.

“ People are rejoiced, and feel much complacency
in that pomp and high appearance in themselves, and
others, which is not consistent with Christian gravity : also
in shews, which fill the heart with vain ideas, and tend to
stir up impure passions.”

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REMARKS, &c.

IT has often grieved me to observe a disposition in my neighbours and acquaintance, to attend the plays and assemblies, and other places of publick entertainment, more especially at a time when we are called upon, by the almost unparalleled afflictions which at present attend a neighbouring nation, and the late visitation of Heaven by sickness, among those who are more nearly allied

to us,* to be sober-minded, and amend our ways ; as the like may be permitted to reach us, if our transgressions should so increase as to require such chastisement.

I would have us disposed to seek the favour and blessing of the Almighty, by breaking off from our sins ; and ordering our lives, through his assistance, in great sobriety and temperance ; rather than indulging ourselves in vain shews, which tend to unfit for the concerns of immortal spirits : whose happiness consists in the practice of virtue, and a near approach to that Sovereign Good, without whose favour no happiness can be experienced.

* The city of Philadelphia is here meant, where upwards of 3000 of the inhabitants died by a sickness not much different from the plague, in the space of a few months.

Though

Though the entertainments of the stage continue to be used, as though they were necessary to the well-being of a people, and are not disallowed by the law of the land; I can venture to say, they are disallowed by the law of righteousness placed in our minds; and are contrary to the nature of the religion we profess, and the injunctions of those sacred records we so much place our dependance upon, as a rule of our faith and practice. We shall find nothing in the practice or precepts of Christ (the great example and high priest of our profession) or in the writings of his apostles, to countenance these diversions; but instead of it, a constant watchfulness recommended. So that it will not be easy to open any part of the New Testament, without meeting with passages which tend to shew us the necessity of using our endeavours to be prepared for a removal from this scene of action: in which,

whilst

whilst we are doubtful concerning many things; and see only in part, as to the wonderful productions of nature, and the conduct of the great Author of our being, in the formation of man, and the earth he inhabits; we are certain as to the testimony of our conscience; which informs us of the way we should walk, and what tends to promote the peace of our minds, and the favour of heaven; as the prophet declares, “God hath shewed thee, O man, what is good:”
 “and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, love mercy,
 “and walk humbly with thy God?”

Let us be awakened by the intimations of decay, which we feel, from time to time, in ourselves, and the frequent objects of mortality placed before us. They ought to be regarded as calls to prepare for our removal. The time of sickness, and great bodily weakness, is not
 the

time to be depended upon for working out our salvation, with fear and trembling, as the apostle advises ; but rather a time when our greatest comfort should be to look back upon the former part of our lives, and consider the sacrifices of love and obedience we have made to the great Author of our being ; and how we have endeavoured to walk before him (through the assistance of his good spirit) in all holiness of life and conversation, with a perfect heart. Even then we have nothing to depend upon but the mercies of a gracious God, through his Son Jesus Christ, who remembers our weakness, and has sent help to us ; if we are willing to receive it, and make use of it.

But what will become of those, who, neglecting this great salvation, persist in the indulgence of vain inclinations, being lovers of pleasure more than lovers of

God; to whom seriousness, and serious people, or serious thoughts, are burdensome; of whom it may be said, too truly, they live as without God in the world? What will be the end of these? If the righteous scarcely are saved, where will the ungodly and sinner appear? *

To speak freely, I can see nothing in these assemblies, or in the discourses of the stage, which has a tendency to promote the practice of piety, or a good life; but, on the contrary, they are likely to weaken the best resolutions which may be formed to amend our ways, and reform our lives. Meeting with many in these places, who are disposed for pleasure, we are in danger of being brought to lay aside the restraints of religion, by which only we can be kept in the bounds of Christian moderation. I would therefore advise my neighbours and acquaintance,

* 1 Pet. iv. 8,

and all into whose hands these may come, to decline the practice of attending them, if they have at any time indulged themselves in it. I think it most of all unfuitable for the ministers of religion to countenance these entertainments, by their presence, or in any other way. I would warn them to keep at a distance, lest harms should come which they may not expect. No example, however, of others (in whatever station they may be) should draw us to a conformity in things which our conscience dictates not to be expedient nor safe for us. If we should transgress the rule of virtue and holiness placed in our minds, as a direction and help to us in our passage through life; who knows but we may be left to follow the devices of a wicked heart, till great mischief comes? The contest with evil inclinations must be kept up, or we shall soon be lost to what is good for us here, and will prove of

everlasting advantage hereafter. If we indulge in the pleasures of this world, we must part with the peace and inward complacency of a conversation ordered in God's fear : which may be called his kingdom, here begun on earth, in the hearts of those who follow him in the way of his leadings.

Another consideration makes me disapprove of the custom ; which is, that few, if any, attend the play-house from religious motives, to be instructed and benefited as to their moral conduct ; but, I am apprehensive people go, for the most part, with a view of being entertained, and diverted by ludicrous shews and discourses, and other performances which tend to enervate the mind. If the advice of the apostle is regarded “ to abstain from all appearance of evil,” we shall keep away from these nurseries of vice, and find a more rational
and

and Christian-like way of spending our time.

I would further observe, that we cannot with safety conclude, that, because these entertainments have been long in use, and are become general, they are therefore allowable. If any customs of those who lived before us appear to be inconsistent with the religion we make profession of, it will be right to lay them aside. The frame of the human mind is such as to admit of improvement from age to age; so that things which were practised in former times, are now seen to be improper, and are no longer in use, as might be shewn in many instances: and we are ready to wonder how men could be so void of a right understanding, as not to see the impropriety of such conduct.

Thus I trust it will be in some future time, with respect to stage entertainments;

ments, if the inconsistency of them should not be seen by us of the present age. As light and truth rise, like the sun, on the minds of people, and they are obedient to them in succeeding times ; these, with some other things will be removed from states and nations professing the Christian name, and be no longer in use. This is my belief ; which affords me comfort, in a prospect of the increasing happiness which may attend some future generation.

But however it may be in succeeding times, we are to attend to the discoveries of truth in the present time ; and as any information or warning comes to us, it will not be safe hastily to reject it, because it comes not in the way our reason may suggest, or may be contrary to the sentiments we have of things, from prejudices of education, or otherwise. We should remember, many discoveries of
truth

truth have been made by means of instruments, weak in the sight of men, and of low condition in this world, but favoured by heaven with wisdom beyond many of their fellow-creatures : and much good would have come from their instructions, had they been regarded.

I speak this, that there may be a disposition to receive what is proposed for our good. It is well known we must be removed from this state of trial, and that it often happens in a way and time which are not expected. We are also assured there is a future state, in which the most excellent part of us will exist through unnumbered ages ; and that there are joys prepared, as the reward of virtuous conduct ; and unspeakable sorrow for those who err from the path of virtue ; according to the mercy and justice of the great Ruler of the universe. Such thoughts should make us desirous of spending our
days

days in the fear of God ; waiting, with a humble hope of being admitted into his presence, to join the assembly of the righteous of all generations. But if the God who made us is not in our thoughts, but rather an anxious pursuit after the perishing enjoyments and pleasures of this life ; what shall we have to depend upon, when they are taken from us ? How shall the void be filled up in our minds, when the world, and all that is in it, sinks under our feet ; and leaves us without those comforts we have been used to draw our support from ?

I am inclined to add the sentiments of some excellent persons in times past on this subject, in hopes their judgment may tend to check these indulgencies.

Archbishop Tillotson says of plays :

“ They are not fit to be admitted in
 “ a civilized, much less a Christian, na-
 “ tion.

“ tion. They do most notoriously minister
 “ to vice and infidelity. By their pro-
 “ faneness they are apt to instil bad prin-
 “ ciples into the minds of men, and to
 “ lessen that awe and reverence which
 “ all men ought to have of God and re-
 “ ligion: and by their lewdness they
 “ teach vice, and are apt to infect the
 “ minds of men, and dispose them to
 “ lewd and dissolute practices.”

Another writer remarks——“ Those
 “ who think that plays make no ill im-
 “ pression on them, because they do not
 “ find them excite any formed evil de-
 “ fire, deceive themselves greatly. There
 “ are many degrees before one comes to
 “ an entire corruption of mind; and it
 “ is always hurtful to the soul, to destroy
 “ the ramparts which secured it from
 “ temptation. One does not begin to
 “ fall when the fall becomes sensible.
 “ The fallings of the soul are slow; they
 “ have

“ have progrefſions and preparations.
 “ We may be overcome by a temptation,
 “ only by having weakened ourſelves
 “ in occaſions which ſeemed of no im-
 “ portance : he who deſpiſes ſmall things
 “ ſhall fall by little and little. Let not
 “ thoſe who do not find that romances
 “ and plays excite in their minds thoſe
 “ paſſions which are apprehended from
 “ them, think themſelves therefore in
 “ ſafety ; and let them not imagine theſe
 “ books and fights have done them no
 “ hurt.

“ But ſuppoſing it true, that plays
 “ have no ill effect upon ſome perſons,
 “ they cannot, however, think them-
 “ ſelves blameleſs in being preſent at
 “ them. Plays are not acted for one
 “ perſon alone, they are expoſed to all
 “ ſorts, of which the greater part are
 “ weak and corrupted ; and to whom,
 “ by conſequence, they are extremely
 “ dan-

“ dangerous. ’Tis their fault, you’ll say,
 “ to go to them in that state. That’s true,
 “ but you authorize them by your ex-
 “ ample: you contribute to make them
 “ look on plays as a thing indifferent;
 “ the more regular you are in other ac-
 “ tions, the bolder they are to imitate
 “ you in this—You are accessary then to
 “ their sin; and if plays give you no
 “ wounds of themselves, you wound
 “ yourselves by those which others re-
 “ ceive from your example; and thus
 “ you are the most guilty. Let it be con-
 “ sidered.”

Nothing better shews the danger of
 plays, and how much they are forbidden
 to Christians, than their opposition to the
 state of mind in which we ought to en-
 deavour to establish ourselves, by conti-
 nual requests for preservation. For temp-
 tations being in a manner continual,
 prayer,

prayer, which is the remedy against them, ought to be so too.

It appears by writings of the Christians in the first ages of the church, that they considered the entertainments of the stage contrary to their profession, and wholly unlawful for them. It will be well for us to consider, if they are any more allowable to us of the present time, who are called by the same name, and profess to be reformed from the superstition and other gross practices of a degenerated church.

One of the early writers thus expresses himself :

“ Many imagine it is not certain there
 “ is any sin in going to the play ; but,
 “ whatever they may think of it, plays
 “ do certainly cause abundance of evil :
 “ for the pleasure that is taken in them
 “ pro-

“ produces all sorts of debauchery. We
 “ are not only obliged to avoid sin, but
 “ we ought also to shun those things
 “ which do insensibly lead to it.”

He adds,

“ It is not fit for us to pass our time
 “ in diversions and entertainments, which
 “ are only fit for players. This is by
 “ no means the spirit of those who are
 “ called to an eternal kingdom; whose
 “ names are written in the celestial city,
 “ and profess a spiritual warfare. It is
 “ Satan who has made an art of these
 “ diversions to draw away the soldiers
 “ of Jesus Christ to himself, and to re-
 “ lax the vigour of their virtue. For
 “ this end he has caused theatres to be
 “ erected in publick places; and makes
 “ use of them to infect, as with a plague,
 “ the whole city. St. Paul has forbid
 “ foolish jesting, and whatever tends to
 “ vain

“ vain diversion ; but satan persuades us
 “ to love both the one and the other.”

A writer of great note, and general esteem, of later times, says,

“ The hearts of men are so perverse
 “ and blind, that they imagine the world
 “ to be in full felicity, when the in-
 “ habitants of it think of nothing but
 “ adorning and embellishing their houses,
 “ whilst they take no notice of the ruin
 “ of their souls ; when magnificent the-
 “ atres are built, and the foundations of
 “ virtue thrown down ; when the abun-
 “ dance of the rich maintains the luxury
 “ of players, whilst the poor want what
 “ is necessary for their subsistence. If
 “ God permits these disorders to pre-
 “ vail, and leaves these crimes unpunish-
 “ ed, 'tis then he may be said to punish
 “ them most severely ; but when by
 “ poverty he prevents the increase and
 “ excess

“ excess of voluptuousness and dissipation, however contrary to our desires, it is an effect of his mercy.”

Having made these remarks on the stage entertainments which are so much attended to, in the present time, (in my apprehension to the great hurt of the nation, both in its civil and religious capacity), and eased my mind a little of the weight which I have felt on this account; I shall proceed to say something concerning the disposition for reading Novels, and other books calculated to afford diversion and entertainment; the sale and hire of which make a considerable part of the business of a bookseller, in most parts of the nation. The hurt which attends the reading these books is like to be great, to the youth in particular; who, instead of being formed to the practice of religion and virtue, and instructed in a Christian-like conduct, by frequent

frequent reading the Holy Scriptures, and other excellent writings which may tend to form good principles, have their minds filled with ideas of vanity and lightness, and are ready to forget the obligation of a humble walking in the fear of God, in a land from which they must soon be removed !

If Christian characters were exhibited in these compositions, with a view to promote the interests of religion and piety (which I fear is seldom the case) ; there would be the less objection to them ; but when it appears they are intended merely for the purpose of amusement, and rather to banish serious thoughts and reflections, than to strengthen them in us ; it gives room to fear great harm will come from this method of spending our precious time : much the same as by seeing and hearing the actions and speeches of the stage ; and ought to be equally avoided

ed by those who desire to be helped in all the ways of promoting their best interests, and to be preserved from the contaminating evils of a wicked world.

I would also caution against reading some publications of the present time, which, under a specious appearance, tend to subvert the doctrines of Christianity; by a presumptuous abuse of reason, and by vain disputations, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

Having said thus much on some customs of the present time, which have a tendency to lay waste the obligations of religion, and lead from that humility and fear, which are the ornaments of the Christian profession; I am inclined to take notice of the great neglect which appears amongst us, both in those of high and low degree, in attending places of worship, on the day appointed by the laws of the land for this purpose.

If

If the number of servants who are employed to prepare our food, to ornament our persons, and provide for our travelling from one place to another, on this day, were rightly considered ; it would fill our minds with sympathy, for so many of our fellow creatures, who are thus deprived of the opportunity of publick instruction ; and it is to be feared have little, if any, afforded them at other times. If it is true that we often want to be reminded of our duty, and that even with frequent instruction we are apt to deviate from a virtuous conduct ; how is it like to be with this numerous class of the people, who are left in a neglected state, as if they had no other part to provide for than their perishing bodies ; nor any other concern than what relates to the present life and its enjoyments ? Whereas, it is certainly known, they have souls to be saved or lost, and are in the same awful state of trial with those they serve.

God

God has declared by his prophet, “ The
 “ souls of men are his, as the soul of the
 “ Father, so also the soul of the Son is
 “ mine; the soul that sinneth it shall die.”*

I would not be thought to place so much stress upon the attending of publick worship on certain days of the week, as to insinuate that it will make amends for the misconduct of other days; or that the observance of any rites or ceremonies, will be available to obtain the favour of Heaven, whilst we remain in a state of transgression, and are violating the righteous law of God written in our hearts.

Let us mourn for the condition of thousands of our fellow creatures, who are left in a great measure destitute of outward instruction, wallowing in the mire of sin and pollution without restraint; unless they are stopped in their course by

* Ezek. xviii. 4:

the immediate visitation of Heaven : which must not be presumed upon, but the means of help and instruction are to be made use of.

I consider the state of many, who are employed in the different manufactories and trades of the nation, as workmen, who are no further under the direction of their masters, than to do the work appointed them, and receive their wages ; how they spend much of their time in publick houses, and contract habits of drinking strong liquors to the great injury of their health : so that numbers are brought to their graves who might have lived many more years, and been useful members of society, had they conducted themselves by the rules of reason and religion, and kept within the limits of temperance. Having been in the practice of spending much of their time in these houses, on other days
of

of the week, they have no comfort in attending a place of publick worship on the day appointed for this purpose ; but still resort to the place where they have been used to gratify their appetites, to associate with such as are like minded, to rejoice and be merry, to the endangering their peace and happiness in the present life, and in the life which is to come.

What words can be used to express the harms which proceed from this conduct, not only to themselves, but to all with whom they are connected ; and to the nation at large, whose sins are accumulated by the undue liberties of individuals ! Have we not room to expect, that after much long suffering of the great Ruler of the universe, and many warnings given to an offending people, great troubles may come as the chastisement of wickedness persisted in, and not repented of ? In the affection of a brother and friend, I would request

request of those who are in the higher stations, of heads of families, and rulers in the land, that they would come forward by their example, to stop the increasing dissipation and undue liberties which are taken in many respects, to the great dishonour of the Christian name !

As my intention in the preceding remarks is to recommend the practice of that which will promote the peace and prosperity of individuals as well as families, both as to their temporal concerns, and also those comforts which are of everlasting duration, I am the more free to make them publick, and the less afraid of giving offence. And my request to the Author of all good (whose favour is above all things to be sought for, though it be with the loss of many sensual gratifications) is, that his blessing may attend the weak endeavour of his servant, to promote the cause of religion and virtue :
and

and that the attention of some inconsiderate minds may be turned to those concerns which have a tendency to prepare us for a removal from this transient state, to a happy Eternity.

FINIS.