

MARCH 1, 1892.

THE DOCTRINAL TEST IN METHODISM.

The Pittsburgh *Christian Advocate*, a Methodist publication, recently contained an editorial which serves as a straw to show how the still rising wind-storm, which has caused so much commotion in Presbyterianism, is beginning to affect Methodism.

The article was a plea for the abolition of the doctrinal test required of lay members, on the ground that it is a violation of Wesley's teaching on that subject, contrary to the constitution of the society, and mischievous in its effects, illustrations of which were given in men who were kept out of the church by it, though heartily in sympathy with its otherwise free, aggressive and progressive spirit, and in men driven out of it by the conviction that they ought not to pretend to believe what they do not believe.

Commenting on this, the Pittsburgh *Times* says: –

"The article in the *Advocate* repeats with evidence that this requirement is not consonant with Wesley's idea; says 'furthermore, this requirement is, as it seems to us, unconstitutional,' and gives plain reasons from the most authoritative source for thinking so; calls attention to the contradiction which has worked the mischief just spoken of – 'We who in our history have laid the least stress on mere dogma now stand forth as the most exacting in this particular;' and insists that the only thing which should be required of the private member is that he show an honest and earnest wish to lead a good and useful life.

"Methodism claims to have on its rolls and in its congregations about one-fifth of the Protestants of the United

States. Every preacher knows that there are scores of the most active and influential members who do not believe doctrines which stand out prominently in the articles of faith, and that the church dare not try to enforce a literal subscription to them. This article in the *Advocate* is a challenge to the exaction which does violence to the history and hampers the progress of the church. The article is noteworthy as showing that Methodism is falling into line with those who deny that a Christian life is dependent upon subscription to an interpretation of Christian doctrine made by men who were no better qualified to interpret it than they are themselves."

The suggestion of the *Advocate* is a good one, so far as it goes, but if Methodists would go further and abolish the distinctions of clergy and laity and remember that they are all brethren, and that the Word of God is the only legitimate creed for Christians, they would be getting a little nearer the true position of the Church.

Then let them not forget that the Lord himself is the only rightful Head of the Church, and consequently the only authority in it. A recognition of his headship or supreme authority in the Church, and of his Word alone as its doctrinal standard, with faith in him as the Redeemer and in the power of his truth to sanctify, together with a recognition of the individual liberty of consecrated believers, to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the truth, is the only proper attitude of the Church.

The article, we think, is very significant of the fears which thinking Methodists have for Methodism [R1375 : page 68] in view of the rising breeze which has already struck and so badly damaged Presbyterianism. The thoughtful and solicitous begin to feel the necessity for observing some wise precautions so that the storm will not strike them so severely when it does come.

It is significant also of another fact, viz., that Methodists – even those very anxious to support and perpetuate Methodism – care more for the name and for the numbers and prestige of the denomination, than for the doctrines that constitute Methodism and which distinguish it from other *isms*. But if the doctrinal tests be abolished among the lay members, why not among the clergy as well, leaving all free to accept and teach what they honestly believe? O, say they, that would be too radical; for then the world would soon discover that Methodists are not Methodists at all. We must still have a Methodist yoke and must put it on somebody's neck; and since the clergy are paid for wearing it they will submit to it, but the membership, having no such inducement, will not; and if we try to make them do so, they will just leave, and we want to retain them, as every one counts both numerically and financially.

Very sound logic that, from the standpoint of worldly policy. But what requirement shall we make of members? is the inquiry. Now mark the suggestion. Is it that they should recognize themselves as justly condemned in Adam, but justified to life through faith in the precious blood of Christ shed for their redemption and the remission of sins? Is it that they recognize the Word of God as the only rule of faith and practice, and having repented of and forsaken sin that they desire henceforth to conform their lives thereto? No: the article insists that "the *only thing* which should be required of the lay member is that he show an honest and earnest wish *to lead a good and useful life.*"

Why, who could not be a Methodist under those conditions. Mr. Ingersoll would make a very good Methodist; so would Mr. Carnegie, though he claims to hold the principles of Buddhism. He is surely leading a good and useful life – has plenty of money and appropriates much of his surplus wealth to the public benefit. And there are scores and hundreds and thousands of such – very good Methodists, indeed.

But all this indicates still further the trend of Methodism to be, in common with other denominations, toward open infidelity. The church nominal is full of infidels, and the above is an open confession of the fact to those who are sufficiently awake to read it.

Such a precaution as this article suggests will not, however, be able to protect Methodism against the rising storm. It is coming, and coming, too, with tremendous force; and every *ism* in the broad domain of Christendom may well tremble in view of it. But let the few precious saints who love the Lord more than the *isms*, and the Bible more than the creeds, and the truth more than the speculations of men, cling yet closer to the Rock of ages. Here only is safety, and not in fellowship and alliance with the hosts of unbelievers, whatever be their name or position among men. Remember that the true saints whom alone God recognizes as his Church are a "little flock" –

"A little flock disowned of men,
But owned and loved of God."
