OUR DEMOCRACY'S FOUNDATION

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EXCEPTIONAL attention is being given now, and promises to be given in 1921, during the celebration of the tercentenary of the landing of the Pilgrims, to the compact signed in the cabin of the Mayflower. In the Massachusetts State Library the famous little volume, "Of Plimouth Plantation," lies open under a glass case at the page where, in Governor William Bradford's handwriting, this vital document for world democracy is quoted in full. Of all the historical treasures of the Commonwealth, this ranks first. It is regarded by many judges as the foundation of modern democracy in principle; for the reason that its principle runs back to the creation of man, and the application of the principle runs far and wide to-day to all nations, and also runs forward to all future generations as long as man shall live on the earth.

In connection with the recent International Congregational Council in Boston, emphasis was laid in many ways upon the development of democracy from a religious foundation. Where such abundant testimony is given, both in fact and argument, it is easy to gather support from numerous sources of commanding authority. In the mind's eye of many writers and observers of religion and politics, the vital connection between our national life and glory today and the religious principles of the Pilgrims is the blazing truth of our United States history.

Quotation from various sources is easy to reveal many views of this truth. These views do not contradict, but corroborate each other in making a strong case from diverse angles. Ten English commissions and ten American were created to present reports upon important phases of denominational history. These make a case well worth attention outside of their own constituency. Fundamental

to our theme is a part of the first sentence of the American Report No. 1, "the believer's right and competency to have immediate access to God, and, with the aid of the Spirit, to interpret the Scriptures accepted as the supreme guide to faith and conduct."

Take the following from the report of the English Commission No. 3, on "the contribution of Congregationalism to civil and religious liberty":—

"Robert Browne, the founder of independency, as Dexter says, 'had no idea of being a democrat, or that he was teaching democracy. His conception of church government, it is clear, was of the absolute monarchy of Christ over the church. But then he conceived of Christ the King as reigning through as many agents as there are individual subjects in His kingdom.' And when he reached this point, he had (though probably perfectly unconsciously) laid the foundations of a spiritual democracy. From the church the democratic idea passed slowly and almost imperceptibly into the state."

Then the report quotes the compact of the Mayflower as an illustration of "the way in which the early independents attempted to transfer their spiritual ideas to the life of the body politic." Following the quotation is this comment:—

"This document is a clear proof that the Independents took the first opportunity that presented itself of declaring that their church principles ought to be applied to civic life and when so applied inevitably resulted in the establishment of democracy. This compact was not merely a church covenant made by members of the same Christian fellowship. The Pilgrims were not all Independents. Certain emigrants had joined the Mayflower at Southampton who had no religious ties with the majority of the passengers. To these strangers the Pilgrims naturally and in accordance with their religious principles extended the rights of civil freedom."

Another passage in this report affirms strongly the connection between democracy and religion:—

"The world cannot be made safe for democracy till democracy is made safe for the world. And this can never

be till democracy has solved the problem of how to reconcile law and liberty, order and freedom — a problem that only a redemptive and dynamic Christianity can really and ultimately solve. Only in a freedom based on the gospel can we successfully equate rights and responsibilities, privileges and duties. This is the bed rock of Congregationalism, which is essentially not democratic, but Christocratic."

In the report of the American Commission No. 1, on "Congregationalism and spiritual ideals," is this passage:—

"Matters of vast ethical and spiritual importance engrossed their attention and impelled the thinkers to simplicity in worship and in daily manner of life. In this inquiring, studious temper Congregationalism in America laid the foundations of popular education and brought into existence the common school and a host of academies and colleges."

Again, here is a notable passage:—

"Religious freedom makes political freedom inevitable. Men who are enfranchised in their spiritual relations cannot be content to remain under bondage in other relations."

Again: "In the natural sequence of its human valuations and sympathies, Congregationalism has been a proponent of international friendship."

Again: "Congregationalism is the uncompromising enemy of sectarianism."

Thus we get a view of the stirring truth which vitalizes both our religion and our democracy. Beginning with the purely religious doctrine of the equal priesthood of all believers, proclaimed by Wyclif over six hundred years ago, carried to a greater height and clearer utterance by Luther five hundred years ago, extended logically and successfully by the nonconformists to civil affairs three hundred years ago, then developed into our modern democratic institutions of to-day (which, in the world war, have overthrown monarchy and aristocracy and are on their way to overthrow class distinctions in our democracy, the antagonism of capital and labor, the hostility of sus-

picious and unsympathetic races, and the collision of religious sects claiming one common Father), we come to-day to the next phase of progress in this age-long, tremendous forward march of all mankind.

Now see what focus of forces we have, and what prospect of their projection into our coming religious and political life. Bear in mind that all modern political progress toward democracy, all the present strength, prosperity, and patriotism of our people, all our hope for the future,—in short, all that makes civilization what it is and what it promises to become,—depends for its very existence upon the personal contact of the individual human soul with the personal God.

Then look at our nominal religious and personal life to-day. We are living on the momentum given to our institutions by our Pilgrim forefathers and by men of like spiritual strength, consecration, and sacrificial temper of long ago. It is so notorious to-day that it only needs mention, that the present generation does not practice that personal communion with God which is the very vitality of all religion, democracy, civilization, and possible progress in the future.

For counts in the indictment note the general abandonment of family worship on the part of so-called Christian families, with its relation to the communion of the individual with the Infinite. What was common in Christian households on the part of the generation which laid the foundation of the United States, especially households in New England, is an exception on the part of their successors whose nominal membership in some church by no means implies that they practice equally with their ancestors the secret communion which was the foundation of our present democratic institutions. That communion inspired their absorbing devotion to religious vitality, promoted the application of religion to politics and daily life, and gave distinctive character to the United States as a so-called Christian nation. While it is impossible, in the nature of the case, to learn the proportion of Chris-

tians who follow the injunction of daily entering into the closet for prayer, it is a matter of common consent that personal prayer has nothing like its former practice and prestige.

Proof of this is evident in the decline of the midweek prayer-meetings of Protestant churches. Some churches have abandoned them altogether because they were so thinly attended. Others struggle along with only a slim attendance by a faithful few who are conscientiously trying to keep alive a dearly prized institution of their younger days. Doubtless the cases are rare where the midweek meeting is thronged by enthusiastic supporters who find the personal presence of God in these simple exercises of prayer and praise.

Personal familiarity with the Scriptures is another test of the frequency and the closeness of the personal touch with God. It needs no statistical statement to support the evident fact that the abundant reading of the newspapers, magazines, and the volumes of all sorts poured out by the prolific press has cut down very much the reading of the Scriptures. Attention has been called repeatedly in print to the lamentable and inexcusable ignorance of scriptural history and scriptural allusions on the part of young people supposed to be well educated.

On the other hand, the extreme development of light literature, especially the so-called comic illustrations of Sunday and daily papers, which flaunt their own proof of sheer idiocy, disgusting as the senseless slaver of an inmate of an insane asylum, seems to be a conclusive proof of the loss of the sane and serious view of life and personal dignity consequent upon daily close personal touch with the Father, infinite in intelligence and unapproachable in purity of personal worth and dignity. Our modern mind seems degenerate, trifling, muck-raking, unworthy of our political and spiritual ancestors.

Whether or not the command for Sabbath observance should bind the modern Christian as the ancient Jew, there is no question that the observance of the day of rest is

peculiarly favorable for listening to the still, small voice which is too often silenced by the din of the week. Yet the quiet, solitary use of the Lord's day seems to be largely discarded, while popular sentiment, as represented by legislatures and city councils, demands by large majorities the diversion and excitement of Sunday sports, which certainly do not promote the best possible use of the hours which might be given to that solitary communion whose realization revolutionizes all ideals of earthly values and amusements.

For this condition there comes a practical question. How long can we live on the momentum of our past? How long can our national and world civilization survive when cut off from its source? All that mankind has and is of worth and promise, as we moderns prize the good things of life, runs back for its origin to the personal touch of the individual soul with the Infinite Father. It is not government, not institutions, or popular movements, or churches, or evangelists, or newspapers, or soap-box orators, or automobiles, or band concerts, or lyceums, or labor resolutions, or any other thing or activity by people acting together, which will meet the crisis and bring our democracy and our churches back to the only force which can save civilization and religion from the threatened black night of utter extinction. It is only the practice of the truth whose glorious fruitage in all modern liberty and progress we to-day enjoy, the truth of the personal contact of the solitary human soul with our Heavenly Father, on its knees in its secret closet.