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THE PASSING OF USSHER'S CHRONOLOGY.

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JAMES USSHER (1581-1656), Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland, will always be held in honor for his high character, his great learning, and his decided Calvinism. He was twice appointed by the Long Parliament a member of the celebrated Westminster Assembly of Divines, but, on account of the opposition of the King, never took part in the proceedings. Cromwell respected him, though he was a steadfast royalist, and, at his death, honored him with a splendid funeral, his remains being interred at Westminster Abbey. Ussher's name, however, would never have become a household word but for his scheme of Biblical chronology, which, though only one of a hundred and eight different views of the same Biblical data (some of which differ from others by no less than two thousand years), had the extraordinary good fortune to be printed in the margin of the Common English Version of the Bible. It thus became fastened upon the popular mind, and was gradually invested with a reverence akin to that with which the people regarded the sacred text itself. For these dates were first placed in the margin in 1701, and the custom of printing them along with the text has continued to the present time, so that for fully two hundred years the people have been drilled in the habit of regarding them as authoritative. Being familiar and convenient, the scheme has been generally adopted by historians also, and has thus gained still wider currency. But its inaccuracy has been fully established, and the scheme is now obsolete. This has been generally recognized for some years as to certain parts, such as

THE CHRISTIAN AND THE THEATRE.

BY REV. J. M. WELLS.

SHOULD the consistent Christian attend the theatre of to-day; and by the term theatre is included not only drama, but the opera and the many forms of spectacular performances? There have been times in the history of the church when such a question would have only provoked a smile, so self-evident the answer would have seemed; but in this day of advanced ideas, of liberal opinions, of the church walking hand in hand with the world, it is often asked seriously, and as asked seriously, often by those who desire to live consistently and be faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, it deserves a serious reply. To strive to give such an answer is the purpose of this article.

Good old John Newton said, "The theatres are fountains and means of vice. I can hardly think there is a Christian upon the earth who would dare to be seen there if the nature and effects of the theatre were properly set before him." How near correct is this answer of his?

The history of the theatre, did we have time to fully trace it, would give an excellent answer. With profit we might follow its development and decadence in those nations in which it had an independent rise. Might see how the Christian church, warring against both Greek and Roman drama, in the hour of its triumph sealed the doom of the theatre in the Roman empire. Might see how the Roman Church, at a later day, brought into existence the liturgical and collective mysteries, the miracle plays and moral plays, only finally at the Council of Milan to forbid them entirely. Might note the growth out of these religious plays, as they passed from the control of the church, of the theatre of modern times. Might trace this modern theatre in each country of the modern world, down to to-day. But such a study as this would be, of course, too extensive for us to make here. But from such a study as that outlined here, certain facts can be gathered without fear of successful contradiction. These facts are the following:

First. The theatre has almost invariably had its rise in that

which is low, base and licentious. The Greek theatre came from the festivals of Dionysus. The Phallic songs sung here were of unbridled license; the festive procession was obscene beyond anything that can be conceived. The whole feast was of the utmost freedom of speech and behaviour. The Roman theatre came from the mimic dances of the Etruscans, to which were shortly added comic verses. These "mimi" were of "innate grossness," being originally "a representation of low life," and treating subjects in accordance with the demands of a "lubrique and adulterate age."

The Chinese theatre came from early ballets and pantomimes.

The Hindu sprang from the "natya," which was a realistic dance of the nymphs, combined with speech.

The Egyptian had its source in a form of rural Phallic procession, united to forms of dancing where license and wantonness prevailed

Second. The theatre has been most popular and most flourishing in times of greatest moral degeneracy. It was when Greek morality had reached its lowest plane that the theatre most flourished there. In proportion as the Romans "lost their stern love of virtue, yielded to luxury and grew weak and effeminate," the popularity of the theatre increased. It was in the days of Ariosto, days "which equalled those of the worst days of ancient Rome or Byzantium in looseness and surpassed them in effrontery" that the theatre seemed most to flourish in Italy.

France never seemed to enjoy the theatre as she did during that dread carnival of fire and sword—the Revolution.

It was in the time of Charles II.—that time Macaulay so finely describes: "Those days, never to be recalled without a blush; the days of servitude without loyalty, and sensuality without love; of dwarfish talents and gigantic vices; the paradise of cold hearts and narrow minds; the golden age of the coward, the bigot and the slave,"—that the stage reached its lowest abyss of sensuality, shame and vice.

Third. The theatre has seemed, tracing its history in each nation and age, to be "an institution which has within itself the seeds of corruption, and which exists only under a law of degeneracy."

Down, down, down has been its course, despite legislation,

spasmodic reforms and every effort made to purify and elevate it. "The history of the Greek plays," says Sir Walter Scott, "is that of the dramatic art in general." The end of the Roman drama was spectacle and show, buffoonery and sensual allurements.

Fourth. The theatre has tended to debase those who acted there; the very exceptions proving the rule.

This is denied of ancient Greece, but the denial needs further proof. And there no women acted. Plutarch tells us that at a certain time in Athens a law was enacted that "common actors should be reputed infamous."

At Rome the actors were slaves. They might purchase freedom, but they could not lift the infamy of their former condition.

The actor's profession is not a respectable one in China. In Japan "the class has been always held in contempt." The sole ancient exception seems to have been India.

And in this day, while there have been, and are, some notable exceptions, who by sheer genius lift the ban of social ostracism, the profession seems everywhere to feel the debasing effect of its surroundings. What true man wants his daughter to become an actress? What pure mother has ambition for her son to tread the boards? And why is this so? Because the profession tends almost inevitably towards immorality.

Surely, an institution *which has its rise in vice, that most flourishes in a vicious environment, that has within itself the seeds of corruption, and exists only under a law of degeneracy, and is so prone to debase those who have an official connection with it*, should not be supported, encouraged and countenanced by the true child of God.

It is worth while to ask what has been the attitude of the great leaders of thought in the realm of morals throughout the centuries. Both Prynne in his "*Histrio-Mastix*" (the masterly treatise for which he suffered so cruelly and severely) and Collier in his "*A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*," have with great learning and acumen proven that the vast weight of authority, both of the heathen and Christian worlds, is against the theatre. Among the Greeks, Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon opposed on principle, not only the abuses of the institution, but the institution itself.

Among the Romans Seneca and Tacitus condemned the theatre.

Among the early church fathers, Tertullian, Clement, Cyril, Chrysostom and Augustine scathingly denounced all stage-plays.

Prynne gives "a catalogue of authorities against the stage which contains almost every name of eminence in the heathen and Christian world. It comprehends the united testimony of the Jewish and Christian churches; the deliberate acts of fifty-four ancient and modern general, national and provincial councils and synods, both of the Eastern and Western churches; the condemnatory sentence of seventy-one ancient fathers, and one hundred and fifty modern Catholic and Protestant writers."¹

And in more modern times, every one of the great evangelical denominations has placed itself on record, both by the official acts of councils, conferences, synods or associations and the opinions of its ablest men, as opposing the modern theatre. Surely the almost unanimous judgment of the wisest in the church in all ages, and the official judgments of the churches themselves, should have much weight in settling this question for every one who is really seeking to know the right.

But there are some who are ready to say at this point, "You have drawn your own deductions from the history of the institution, and I am not ready to accept them. And as to the authority of the great men in the church, and the many decisions of church synods, I am a Protestant, God's Word is my sole source of authority, and I must have a 'thus saith the Lord' against my attending the theatre. Otherwise I will continue to so attend."

Let us see if we have not for these a "thus saith the Lord." God's Word is our rule of faith and practice. And I believe the Word of God forbids the consistent Christian's attending the theatre of to-day.

I. *The Bible forbids worldliness.* Theatre-going is worldliness. Therefore, the Bible forbids theatre-going. Does the Bible forbid worldliness? Hear it speak:

"Be not conformed to this world."

"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

"To keep himself unspotted from the world."

¹Johnson's *Plain Talks About the Theatre*, page 6.

"God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."

Is theatre-going worldliness?

As defined by the *Century Dictionary*, worldliness is a pleasure in the things that belong to the external life and a disregard of spiritual pleasures. Surely attendance upon the theatre of to-day would come under the scope of this definition.

As defined by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, it includes "attendance by our members upon theatrical exhibitions and performances," and constitutes an offence against God and the church.

As defined by those of other denominations that demand holy living, and as defined by those Christians whose standards of life are the highest, attendance upon the theatre is worldliness.

As defined by God's Word, it is "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life." And the passage means not that a custom shall include all these three to be worldly, but any one of them. And now line up squarely to your conscience. Remember the theatre as it is and you have seen it. Think of its immodesty, its surroundings, its influences. And yourself answer, as you must answer in the great day, whether the theatre is worldly; and attendance thereupon worldliness. And if your answer is no, what in all the universe would you call worldly and worldliness.

Theatre-going is worldliness. Therefore, the Bible forbids, plainly, clearly, unquestionably, the true Christian's going to the theatre.

II. *The Bible requires growth in grace.* Theatre-going prevents growth in grace. Therefore, theatre-going is in conflict with the requirements of God's Word.

Does the Bible require growth in grace? It says:

"Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

"That we may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ."

Does theatre-going prevent growth in grace?

The gifted Hannah More, who in her younger days had written for the stage, and intended studying to become an actress until

she realized the true nature of the life, wrote, "The fruits of the Spirit and the fruits of the stage, perhaps, exhibit as pointed a contrast as the human imagination can conceive."

Dr. Howard Crosby said, "No Christian can frequent the theatre and exhibit a high type of faith."

The representations there are not of those things that promote growth in grace. Rarely are the great Christian virtues of truth, honesty, temperance, patience, industry, chastity, repentance, represented on the stage. They do not lend themselves to it. And when so presented, they are so surrounded by evil as to really do more harm than good.

Do you recall a single regular attendant upon the theatre, whose life displayed deep piety and consecration?

Of sixty prominent Congregational ministers consulted as to the "effects of theatre-going upon the Christian life and usefulness," two favored "occasional theatre-going," six said "it is the exception, and not the rule, where theatre-goers are active and spiritually minded." All the rest "believe in the expediency of total abstinence for all good people as the theatre now is."

Growth requires a proper atmosphere. The theatre is the wrong atmosphere for Christian growth. It prevents growth in grace. Therefore, theatre-going is in conflict with the requirements of God's Word.

III. *The Bible forbids the Christian's giving offence—that is, causing others to stumble.*

The Christian's attending the theatre causes others to stumble. Therefore, the Bible forbids the Christian's going to the theatre.

Does the Bible forbid causing others to stumble?

"But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea."

"Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block."

"Give none offence."

"If meat maketh my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth."

Does attending the theatre cause others to stumble?

It keeps others from coming to Christ.

Nearly every town or city minister has had this given as an excuse for not becoming a Christian.

It leads young Christians who are weak into the wrong paths.

It gives the adversary a handle to attack the church.

It brings reproach upon the name of Christ, whatever you may think of the weakness of those who thus cavil.

It makes criminals of others who may have been led there by our example. M. Beguerel, director of the city prison in Paris, says, "If a new play of a vicious character has been put upon the boards, I very soon find it out by the number of young fellows who come into my custody." You, going to a good play, start some friend, who has neither the strength nor the inclination to stop at good plays. Through evil plays his heart is corrupted. You have caused him to stumble.

Therefore, the Bible forbids your going, as a Christian, to the theatre.

IV. *The Bible forbids impurity.*

The theatre is impure, and attendance upon it tends to impurity. Therefore, the Bible forbids the theatre and attendance upon it.

Does the Bible forbid impurity?

"Keep thyself pure."

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

"Call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

"Hate the very garments spotted by the flesh."

Is the theatre of to-day impure?

Note this carefully. I do not say all actors are necessarily impure. This I do not believe. Nor are all plays impure. There are some good ones. Nor are all attendants thereupon impure.

But what I say is this.

The theatre as an institution, judged as a whole, for the very exceptions from the rule, taking into consideration the actors, the plays, the surroundings, is impure, and its effect is immoral, unholy and impure.

This, I think, is proven—

1st. From the character of the actors.

Oh! you may say, look at Mary Anderson, Henry Irving, Joseph Jefferson, Ellen Terry.

Yes, look; they are the marvels, the exceptions. Look, on the other hand, at the lives as displayed through the proceedings of our divorce courts. Look at the salacious evidence given there. Look at the co-respondents named publicly in so many cases, and

often in the papers. Mark how many of both sexes have two, three, even four living husbands or wives. It is a sad fact that the immodest exposure required on the stage to-day; the constant and close companionships under all circumstances and away from home restraints; the constant playing and imitating the passions of the heart and life; the influence of the impure in the company;—these and other things render a high, pure life very hard.

2nd. From the indecency of the boards and posters, that face the young, the modest and the decent at almost every step in our cities. The advertisements either slander the plays, or the plays are gross, sensuous and impure.

Is a place so advertised the place for a pure Christian?

3rd. From the character of the majority of the plays popular to-day.

The New York *Post* says of the most of these modern plays that they are “a mass of meretricious rubbish.”

Take the plots of nine-tenths of the plays popular during the last ten years, as reviewed by the press critics, or read and tabulated by Dr. Herrick Johnson in his famous *Plain Talks About the Theatre*, and what do we find them to be? They are meretricious, obscene and debasing. They gild vice. They strike at the sanctity of home and the sacred marriage bond. That which appeals to the intellect is growing beautifully less; and that which appeals to the senses and the passions is ever increasing. They are impure. They can be proven impure. Written by the lascivious, many of them French, they are the channels by which the lewdness of their hearts is poured into the minds and hearts of our young people.

Far better have the sewers of Paris, that Hugo so graphically describes, pouring into your houses, than this mass of Parisian heart filth pouring into the minds and souls of your young people.

4th. From the nature of certain accessories of the stage. What do I mean? This:

It tears from woman's brow the brightest gem that glitters there, and presents her in indecent apparel, or lack of apparel, to the public. Indecency flaunts itself thus upon the stage.

The wit of the theatre is often obscene. Double meanings, plays upon words, compromising situations and indecent allusions are heard and seen there.

You would kick the man out of your house for less than you sit and smile at in the theatre.

The patronage of the theatre is against it. Especially in the larger cities, the depraved, the immoral, the drunkard, the gambler, the fallen, form a large part of the audience. Their tastes are catered to and their patronage sought.

5th. Because notable actors and playwrights acknowledge its impurity and impure influences.

Cibber said, "I grant that the stage is a nursery of vice and folly."

Dumas said, "You are right not to take your daughter to see my play. Let me say once for all, you must not take your daughter to the theatre. It is not merely the work that is immoral, it is the place."

Macready said, "None of my children shall ever, with my consent, or on any pretence, enter a theatre or have any visiting connection with actors or actresses."

Knowles, upon his conversion, renounced the theatre as utterly evil.

Montague Stanley, upon his conversion, turned his back forever upon the stage.

These might be multiplied. They are enough. The theatre of to-day stands convicted of impurity. You can't touch pitch without being defiled. You can't attend an institution that is impure without its leaving a stain, more or less dark, upon your heart.

Therefore, the Bible forbids the theatre and your attendance upon it.

In closing, let us notice certain objections that many will make to the above paper.

First. I agree with you, one says, but let us reform the theatre; let us elevate it; let us refine it. How?

Shall it be done by legislation?

You are confronted with the practically insurmountable difficulty of securing satisfactory legislation. And that is followed by the equally great difficulty of enforcing such a law, with the worldly masses opposed to it.

Shall it be done by the reputable Christians attending and elevating it by their presence?

Facts show the impossibility of this.

Never in the history of this country did so many Christian people attend the theatre, and never, according to the critics of many reputable secular papers, was the theatre as low as now. If Christian patronage will reform it, why has it not done so, and why is it not doing so now. The trouble is, those reformers already need reformation themselves, for their tastes, insensibly but surely, are getting depraved like the others.

History as quoted by Prynne, Collier and Johnson, shows that you cannot reform it for any length of time. An ineradicable taint is in it.

Second. I agree with you, says another, but I will attend only the good, pure plays and avoid the others.

By going even where a good play is given, you are supporting, encouraging and helping an institution, nine-tenths of whose influence is hopelessly bad. You are countenancing by your presence and aiding by your money in the support of that which is assaulting those things which the family circle holds most sacred, is gilding vice, is degrading womanhood, is polluting the hearts of the young, is shamelessly flaunting vice and lust from the billboards, and everywhere is assailing the Sabbath.

You should not countenance the vile and vicious. You should not patronize the man who panders to licentiousness.

Come out from among them, as a true child of God, and be ye separate.