

LETTING DOWN THE BARRIERS.

BY F. W. FITZPATRICK.

THE title of this article might convey the impression that the subject was to be a more or less agricultural one. My idea is, however, to touch upon the vanishing differences among the religious sects, the evidences we see about us of the dawn of a broader Christianity than has obtained heretofore. Yet, that title, I submit, is not inappropriate. Can one not imagine or picture Christianity as a great, beautiful pasture, watered by the one crystallike stream and yielding the one general character of pasturage, but cut up by fences and barriers into numberless patches, each with its own flock or herd, cared for each by its own pastor? And further each pastor believes in some one especial kind of dry food; one feeds his flock corn, another barley, another perhaps thistles, and each looking askance at the pastor across the fence and proclaiming loudly that he, number one, has a better flock owing to the especial dry food he is feeding.

Not being an agriculturist of high degree this metaphor or simile may be a trifle involved, but in the main I think you will see what I am aiming at.

Sectarianism has probably always existed in some form or other, but methinks we have seen it in its decadence and that it has passed its own virulent stage. In other words, the barriers are being let down. The opposition of Catholic to Protestant has been most violent and that between Protestant and Protestant has been scarcely less bitter. Each has been the one true form of worship and it has worked to the common loss of all. In nations, in politics, in religion, no great party is truly powerful or is at its best in any respect if it is cut up into cliques and by internal dissension.

I have not yet reached the fiftieth mile-stone in life, but I have seen wondrous changes and particularly in this country. Why, as a youngster, I well remember that if a Presbyterian child strayed into an Episcopal or other church with a friend of that sect, he was a fit candidate for a spanking at home, and did a Catholic attend a

funeral in a Protestant church or indeed as much as have anything to do with Protestants, he spent a rather bad quarter of an hour the next time he went to confession. And who of my age has not heard sermons thundered from many pulpits that "out of the Church there is no salvation," and that Church meant *this* church? And then usually followed a graphic description of the tortures of the damned souls of the unfortunates who belonged to all the other churches! Later, there was less venom in this vying for being the only means of grace, but yet how pitiful is the cutting up of efforts in that direction? Go to almost any of our smaller towns or villages, and there you will find five or six poor, struggling churches, with half-starved preachers attached, each purporting to be doing the best he can for souls, but in the last analysis really struggling for the more material things, the increase of membership, the upbuilding of a more sightly church edifice and the resultant increase in salary.

Sectarian differences mark the social groups, those differences permeate the whole national structure, you might say, and those differences are not untinged with bitterness. How much more beneficent would be the influence, how much finer the temple would be and quite incidentally, how much better a living could be afforded the pastor of one common religious society in each one of those places? And there is a tendency that way, thank Heaven.

Eliminate the bitterness in the differences and soon what is left of the barriers will crumble away. But get people to live in peace with each other and what need is there of fences? The greatest step in that direction, in my humble belief, was taken in 1893, in this country, when for the first time in the history of nations there assembled, at Chicago, a congress, not of a few sects, but a Congress of Religions!

Day by day do we have fresh evidences given us of that same tendency. Here in the nation's capital not long ago, we noted an assembly of ministers and priests come together for the purpose of formulating some united plan of influencing the authorities as well as the individuals into a stricter observance of Sunday. A few days ago I assisted at the funeral of a much-beloved Catholic priest who had been not only a power in his Church but a good and public-spirited citizen. Near me sat a Rabbi, there a Presbyterian minister and beyond a hard-shell Baptist one. And in the newspapers of that day, those same clerics and still others of other sects paid their tribute in prose and rhyme to the memory of one they called their "dear brother." Would such a thing have been believed possible twenty-five years ago?

We have recently seen much comment in the lay as well as the ecclesiastical press anent some rather surprising utterances of the Rev. Dr. Newman Smyth, of New Haven, a Congregational minister. He seems to see signs of the passing of this Protestant age and realizes that for a hundred years now we have been breaking up creeds rather than making them. He thinks that Protestantism has lost its old authority of the Church, and has lost it in its own families. "Romanism," says he, "has authority in the family from birth to death, from baptism to extreme-unction, while Protestantism has lost the voice of authority in the State as well as in the home. It is not merely that worldliness is coming in but much religion is withdrawing itself from our churches. Protestantism has lost power to give to the people a good religious education. It is not meeting much religious thought and questioning among its own people. Protestantism has utterly lost the unity of the Church. The Roman Church was once a strong cable, one end of which was bound to Eternal Power, and the other end of which was firmly fastened to the whole mechanism of human life. It controlled the world and moved it whither it would. In Protestantism, the rope on its human end has frayed out into so many threads. No single strand of it is strong enough to move the whole social mechanism and at best one thread may move a few wheels." He seems to see signs of a coming Catholicism, "to fulfil alike the ages of Roman absolutism and of Protestant individualism. One of these signs is the growth of a common Christian consciousness. For us now, no one church, *no single church in existence is big enough to hold a big Christian man*. Another sign of the coming Protestant-Catholicism is the recovery among us of the truth of the Christian society, the one, continuous Christian society. The two movements within the Roman Church and among the Protestant churches, have a vast deal in common—they may, in the new order, meet and match and complete each other; then the ages of Papal absolutism and of Protestant individualism shall end in the new order in which Christianity shall find still greater fulfilment."

Strong words for a Protestant minister, though if they could be expected from any one sect, the Congregational is that one. Many of us had great hopes that the Unitarians would accomplish, at least to a degree, what the Rev. Smyth sees signs of realization. The Unitarians stood for liberality, freedom of thought, and all sorts of things but, of late, it seems to me their churches have acquired a chilling atmosphere, a species of frigid and unyielding philosophy, an egotistical assumption of sole liberality that constitutes a more

intolerant bigotry even than is found in most of the other sects not supposed to be liberal. So we hardly need look for much help in that direction.

Yet, with Brother Smyth, we see signs all over. One of the recent Brampton lecturers, in the pulpit of St. Mary's, at Oxford, declared that "he saw signs of a new religious order, the greatest that the world has known, drawn from all the nations and all classes, and what seems stranger yet, from all churches."

And yet another sign. In nearly all our churches we see a tendency to get away, not only in the sermons, but in the daily intercourse and life of the churches, from the purely theological, and directing preaching and all the other efforts toward improving the moral, social condition of the people. The essentially religious part is made almost subservient to, or at least but a detail of the daily social life. Few churches are complete to-day without some sort of what might be called club adjunct; though less than twenty-five years ago people rolled their eyes in holy horror because an amusement hall, billiard-room, dining-room, etc. were made part and parcel of a Unitarian church in Minneapolis, the first one to introduce the innovation and of which I had the privilege of making at least the architectural design.

That sort of thing is really common to-day. For instance, a Presbyterian minister named Scudder, in New Jersey, has gotten his people into the broadest kind of notions of that character and, I believe, is building a church accordingly. He favors all kinds of amusements for the young folks in his congregation—cards, pool, billiards, foot-ball, dancing, checkers, and such things. He wants to install a bowling-alley near the church, and he also wants a day nursery for weary mothers with obstreperous children—a place where these may be looked after whilst their tired mothers adjourn to other fields of endeavor for a little social chat or recreation. Says the reverend gentleman: "I don't see why Satan should have all the good things on his side—all the catchy music, the frolicking, the good dances, the pretty pictures and the entertaining games. I have tried to see wherein there was anything wrong in a game of ten-pins or billiards. The only thing that distresses me is that I am able so seldom to make a ten strike. Life is not a funeral procession; young people are led astray through their social natures. Satan has been too long using a lot of bait that the church might utilize to its great advantage and to the devil's eternal confusion." He recognizes the right of bubbling youth and even old age to laugh and laugh loudly. Of course, it is unorthodox and all that, but he be-

lieves in it and says it right out in meeting. And the idea is growing and growing all about us.

And now for the culminating feature of this broadening, perhaps the final step in the elimination of the barriers. A gentleman of very considerable wealth and—perhaps a peculiar combination—sound ideas anent religion and a comprehensive grasp of its influence upon our social structure, has this plan in mind and hopes to put it into tangible shape ere long: He has set himself about to find an enterprising, healthy, and lively settlement or a part of some larger city, where there have not yet been built a lot of churches. There he will establish and endow a species of institutional church, an auditorium, social parlors, billiard-room and all the usual adjuncts of a club as well as those of the regulation church. He will place it in charge, not of an orthodox minister but of some broadminded able man, perhaps a teacher but certainly a good executive. But all the affairs of this organization will be also referred to a sort of Douma, with its President and other officers, elected from among the people, and every one is eligible to membership of the association, simply by reason of his residence in that district or even his desire to form part of the society. The efforts of that society will be in the direction of social and moral betterment and a broadening Christian influence. There will be educational features for the younger folks, assemblies and discussions for the older ones, boarding places for the unattached, work for the unemployed, etc., etc., and Sundays there will be sermons by clerics or laymen, invited or offering their services, or in the absence of such gentlemen, then by the executive officer in charge. Only one subject will be tabooed and that will be anything purely and essentially sectarian. The church, the organization, will be for *all* the people and each according to his own belief, if he so wants, but externally, *de facto* at least, it will be absolutely non-sectarian. It will be the great, beautiful pasture, unmarred by fences or hedges, in which will peacefully browse the one great flock, the human family.

It is not to be a charity affair, all this investment is merely as a loan. It is expected that in course of time the organization of itself, through its enterprise and businesslike management, will be able to assume the obligation that this gentleman for the time being incurs. That first money will then be applied to a similar undertaking elsewhere, and so it is hoped it will progress, on and on in ever widening circles, sweeping down barrier after barrier before it and ever tending on the way to a larger, nobler and broader non-sectarian, real Christianity.