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THEATRICAL EXHIBITIONS.

THE theatre is an amusement which occupies much of the time and attention of multitudes in our large cities and populous towns; and, unhappily, attendance on this place of resort is not by any means confined to such as are commonly called the dissipated and licentious. Many sober citizens think themselves justified in appearing within its walls; and even some *professed Christians* are seen in that school of vice and debauchery; and a few of them openly and systematically attempt to vindicate the practice. How this has happened, it may be a point of some difficulty to ascertain; for nothing is more certain than that the ancient pagans always condemned theatrical exhibitions, as immoral in their character, and as utterly improper to be countenanced by the virtuous and decent part of the community. And it is equally certain that the Christian church, in all ages in which even a tolerable adherence to Christian principle was maintained, has still more pointedly condemned and denounced them. Nay, in early times, all who frequented the theatre were excluded from the communion of the church, without respect of persons.

But, by some strange concurrence of circumstances, this evil, criminal and pestiferous as it evidently is, has crept, under a sort of disguise, into the Church of Christ; and has come to be considered by many, as an amusement lawful for Christians! With respect to most other sins which we are in the habit of reproofing, they are freely and generally acknowledged to be such; and when any of those who belong to the communion of our churches fall into them, they

are dealt with as the circumstances may require. But we have here the strange phenomenon of a great and crying sin, which some professed Christians not only indulge, but which they openly endeavor to justify; to which they freely introduce their children; and, as if this were not enough, in behalf of which they take serious offence when the ministers of Christ speak of it in the terms which it deserves. Rely upon it, reader, this practice will not stand the test of examination. It is corrupt and indefensible throughout; and the more speedily you become convinced of this, and act accordingly, the better will it be for yourself, and the better for society.

Fellow-mortal, be persuaded to attend seriously to this subject. Turn not away from it. It is a most important concern. And if there be in the practice in question all that evil which there may be demonstrated to be, it certainly will not alleviate the load of your guilt to be obliged to say, that, though warned, you refused to consider the subject.

Theatrical exhibitions, then, may be shown to be criminal, and productive of much evil, in a great variety of respects. Bear with a sincere friend to your temporal and eternal happiness, while he endeavors, with all plainness and fidelity, to state them. And,

I. To attend the theatre is *a criminal waste of time*. You will not dare to deny, that every moment of your time is given you by the great Author of life; and that you must render an account to Him for the manner in which you spend it. Neither will you deny that life is short; that there is much important work to be done; and that no one can be sure that he has another day or hour to live. To creatures situated as we are, every hour that passes over us must be incalculably, nay, infinitely momentous; because we know not but there may be suspended upon it the destiny of our immortal souls, and all the never-dying interests of eternity. Placed in circumstances so solemn as these, can any rational, conscientious man consent to sit for a num-

ber of hours in a playhouse, attending to amusements which, to say the least of them, are as perfectly vain and frivolous as they can be? Can you appeal to the great Searcher of hearts, and say that you think this is right? Can you say that it is acting as an accountable and dying creature ought to act? No; the most determined advocate of the theatre that lives, would not dare to say this. He would be shocked at the thought of seriously adopting such a principle. Either, then, the scriptural precept to *redeem time*, and the scriptural rules for disposing of time, must be utterly rejected, or theatrical amusements must be pronounced criminal. Either men are not accountable for the manner in which they spend their time, and are not bound to devote it to the glory of God and the promotion of their own moral and spiritual benefit, or it is a grievous sin to squander precious hours in an amusement, of which the lightest censure that can possibly be passed upon it is, that it is wholly unprofitable.

II. But we may go further. Theatrical entertainments are not merely unprofitable—not merely a criminal waste of time—but they also directly tend to *dissipate the mind, and destroy all taste for serious and spiritual employments*. Let me appeal to the experience of those who have been in the habit of attending the theatre, whether this amusement is not strongly unfavorable to every thing like a religious frame of mind? When you return from the playhouse, after witnessing the most *decent* play that was ever exhibited, have you any taste for prayer, for reading the Scriptures, or holding communion with God in any sacred exercise? Is there not something in the sentiments uttered in the theatre, in the scenery displayed, in the dress, attitudes, and deportment of the performers, and in the licentious appearance and libertine conduct of many of the spectators, which is calculated, to say the least, to expel all seriousness from the mind; to drive away all thoughts of God, of eternity, and of a judgment to come; and to extinguish all taste for spiritual employments? Need we wait for an answer?

Every one, who has the least experience on the subject, knows that these things are so. He can bear testimony that few things have a more direct tendency to give the mind a vain and frivolous cast; to make it familiar with licentious images and objects; to destroy a taste for devotion; and to banish that spirituality which is at once the duty and happiness of the Christian.

And will any man, who means to stand on Christian ground, venture to deny that whatever has this tendency must be criminal? That whatever draws off the heart from that which is sober, useful, and pious, and inspires it with a prevailing taste for the gay, the romantic, the extravagant, the sensual, and the impure, cannot but be deeply pernicious? Alas! the theatre does not instruct a man how to live, how to suffer, how to die. It does not tend to inspire those serious, practical sentiments which become one who remembers that he may be called to-morrow to quit this transient scene. On the contrary, its direct and only tendency is, to make men forget their duty and their real happiness, and altogether to beguile the feelings proper for one who has no continuing city here, but who ought to be continually seeking one to come, whose builder and maker is God.

III. But what has been said is not the worst. The theatre *is now*, and ever *has been*, a school of vice and profligacy. By far the greater part of the most popular plays, though they may, and, doubtless, often do contain many good sentiments, yet also contain much that is profane, obscene, and calculated to pollute the imagination, to inflame the passions, and to recommend principles the most corrupt, and practices the most pernicious. How common is it to find in the language of the theatre the most unqualified *profaneness*, and even *blasphemy*! How often are *mock-prayers* and *irreverent appeals* to the Majesty of heaven exhibited on the most trivial occasions! How often is the dialogue interspersed with such unchaste expressions or allusions as cannot but grievously pain the ear of modesty; and these pro-

nounced and set forth in a way calculated to give additional force to the evil! Can such exhibitions be innocent? Are they such as a disciple of Christ can witness with safety, or encourage with a good conscience? If they are, then it is difficult to say what is criminal, or what may not be justified.

How shall we account for it, then, that *decent females*, who would be shocked at the least approach to obscene language in their presence in private, and who, if it were uttered, would think their reputation sullied, if not ruined, by being found in such company a second time, can yet go every week to the theatre, and there listen to such language, and sometimes in very gross forms, without, perhaps, a blush, and without the smallest apparent consciousness of doing wrong? However painful the alternative, we must necessarily conclude that *such females* have less real delicacy, less truly virtuous principle, than they would wish us to believe.

Nor is this the whole of the evil. Of many plays which cannot be charged with profaneness or indelicacy of *language*, the *general moral* is detestable; such as no person of real virtue, to say nothing of the Christian, can contemplate without abhorrence. Piety and virtue are made to appear contemptible; and vice, in the person of some favorite hero, is exhibited as attractive, honorable, and triumphant. Folly and crime have palliative, and even commendatory names bestowed upon them; and the extravagance of sinful passion is represented as amiable sensibility. Pride, revenge, false honor, duelling, suicide, the indulgence of unhallowed love, conjugal infidelity, and making the applause of men the governing rule of life, if not openly commended, are yet so depicted as to make them appear objects of envy rather than of abhorrence. Provided a man be frank, generous, and brave, he may be an abandoned libertine, an invader of conjugal purity, a spendthrift of other men's property, a defrauder of the fatherless and widow, a despiser

of God, and a trampler on his laws; and yet, on the stage, may be, and often is, celebrated as the possessor of an excellent heart.

Now, can any man of decent character—above all, can any man who professes to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, go to a place, or encourage representations, in which sentiments such as these are almost continually brought into view, and often under the most alluring aspect? Is this a school to which we ought to be willing to introduce our *sons* and our *daughters*, even if we had no higher aim than to prepare them for virtuous, dignified, and useful action in the present life? It is, indeed, as wonderful as it is humiliating, that we are driven to the necessity of asking such questions; and still more so, that thousands, who call themselves Christians, *act* as if they might be confidently answered in the affirmative!

IV. Those who go to the theatre, not only contribute to the support of an amusement such as has been represented, but also *contribute to the encouragement and support of a set of licentious play-actors.*

That we ought not to countenance any class of wicked persons in their sinful course, or, by any means, to encourage them to continue in it, will be acknowledged by all who believe that there is a difference between right and wrong—that there is any such thing as sin. But what are the prevailing character and lives of *players*? Can any one who values truth, say that they are commonly, or, indeed, are ever, excepting in very rare cases, persons of decent, sober character? He certainly cannot. They are generally a licentious, immoral people. And, indeed, from the nature of their occupation, it is hardly to be expected that they should be otherwise. They are constantly engaged in *personating* different characters, and, perhaps more frequently than otherwise, very bad characters; in other words, a large portion of the time of *all of them* is employed in personating, displaying, and recommending vice, which itself, can scarce-

ly fail to corrupt their principles and habits. Add to this, that the nature of the intercourse which takes place, and must take place, between performers on the same stage, more particularly between those of different sexes, can scarcely fail of corrupting their morals. Were general purity, both of principle and of practice, to be maintained under circumstances such as these, it would be almost a miracle. Accordingly, in all ages and countries, play-actors have been generally found triflers, buffoons, sensualists, unfit for sober employment, and loose in their morals. It is not pretended that there have been no exceptions to this character. But the exceptions have been so few, and their circumstances so extraordinary, as to confirm rather than invalidate the general argument. And is it even true that there ever has been a complete exception? Was there ever a player who exhibited a life of steady, exemplary, Christian purity and piety? I never heard of such a character; and until I do, I shall venture to say there never was one. Yet this is the profession which all who frequent the theatre contribute their share to encourage and support. They give their presence, their influence, and their money, for the maintenance of a class of persons whose *business* it is, directly or indirectly, to recommend error and crime, to corrupt our children, and to counteract whatever the friends of religion and good morals are striving to accomplish for the benefit of society.

If this representation be just; if attending on the theatre is a criminal waste of time; if it tends to dissipate the mind, and to render it indisposed for all sober, useful, or spiritual employments; if hardly any man living would DARE to retire, and, upon his knees, ask the blessing of God upon it before he went, or implore the sanctified use of it after he returned; if theatrical exhibitions are often—very often—indecent and profane, and always demoralizing in their tendency; and if their patrons, by every attendance upon them, *encourage and support sin as a trade*; then, I

ask, can any man who claims to be barely moral—placing piety out of the question—can any man who claims to be *barely moral*, conscientiously countenance such a seminary of vice? Especially, can a disciple of Jesus Christ, who professes to be governed by the spirit, and to imitate the example of his Divine Master; who is commanded to “live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present evil world;” who is warned to have “no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather to reprove them;” who is required to “crucify the flesh, with the affections and lusts;” and “whether he eats or drinks, or whatsoever he does, to do all to the glory of God:” can a disciple of Christ, I say, who is commanded to “shun the company of the profane,” to “avoid the” very “appearance of evil,” and to pray, “Lead us not into temptation”—can HE be found in such a place without sin; without polluting his conscience, tarnishing his profession, and offending his God? I would fain hope that no one could hesitate a moment as to the answer which ought to be given to this question.

Perhaps some will consider this as taking an unnecessarily strict, and even *puritanical* view of the theatre, as an amusement. This is so far from being the case, that the sentiments which have been expressed, are those in which the wise and the virtuous, in all ages, have been entirely unanimous, even from the origin of the practice. As was intimated in the first page, all the sober *Pagans* pronounced the theatre a school of vice. *Plato* tells us, that “plays raise the passions, and pervert the use of them; and, of consequence, are dangerous to morality.” *Aristotle* lays it down as a rule, “that the seeing of comedies ought to be forbidden to young people; such indulgences not being *safe*, until age and discipline have confirmed them in sobriety, fortified their virtue, and made them proof against debauchery.” And even *Ovid*, in his most licentious poems, speaks of the theatre as favorable to dissoluteness of principle and manners; and afterwards, in a graver work, ad-

dressed to *Augustus*, advises the suppression of this amusement, as being a grand source of corruption.

In the *primitive Church*, too, as has been already hinted, both the players and those who attended the theatre were debarred from the Christian sacraments. All the early writers who speak on the subject, with one voice attest that this was the case. And some of them, as well as some of the early synods and councils, employ language, in reference to this amusement and the class of people who conduct it, expressive of the strongest abhorrence. Not only players were excluded from the privileges of the Church, but also all who intermarried with them, or in anywise openly encouraged them; thereby declaring that they considered the whole institution, in all its connections and influences, as altogether pernicious, and to be detested.

And almost all the reformed churches have, at different times, spoken the same language, and enacted regulations of a similar kind. They have declared it to be “unlawful to go to comedies, tragedies, interludes, farces, or other stage-plays, acted in public or private; because, in all ages, these have been forbidden among Christians, as bringing in a corruption of good manners.” Surely, this remarkable concurrence of opinion, in different ages and countries, ought to command the most serious attention of those who wish to know what is their duty.

To these authorities it may be of use to add the judgment of a few conspicuous individuals, of different characters and situations, all of whom were well qualified to decide on the subject: individuals, not of austere or illiberal minds, and who have never been charged with the desire of contracting, to an unreasonable degree, the limits of public or private amusement.

Archbishop *Tillotson*, after some pointed and forcible reasoning against it, pronounces the playhouse to be “the devil’s chapel;” “a nursery of licentiousness and vice;” “a recreation which ought not to be *allowed* among a civil-

ized, much less a *Christian* people." Bishop *Collier* solemnly declares, that he was persuaded "nothing had done more to debauch the age in which he lived, than the *stage-poets* and the *playhouse*." Lord Chief Justice *Hale* informs us, that when he was a youth at college, the players visiting Oxford, he was so much corrupted by frequenting the theatre, that, for some months, he almost wholly forsook his studies. By this habit he not only lost much time, but also found his mind filled with so many "vain images" and "false sentiments" that he began to be alarmed for himself, and determined to abandon a course which he saw was leading him to ruin. On going to London, he resolved never to see a play again; and rigidly adhered to his resolution. Even the infidel philosopher, *Rousseau*, declared himself to be of the opinion that the theatre is, in all cases, a school of vice. Though he had himself written for the stage, yet, when it was proposed to establish a theatre in the city of *Geneva*, he wrote against the project with zeal and great force, and expressed the opinion, that every friend of pure morals ought to oppose it.

After this amount of reasoning and of testimony against the theatre, is it possible that any, who are not determined to set at defiance all considerations of duty, can hesitate a moment? Even if one-half of what has been said of this amusement be true, then every father of a family—every good citizen—every friend to social order and happiness, ought to set his face against it as a flint, and to discountenance it by all fair and lawful means. But, reader, if you call yourself a *Christian*, or have any desire worthily to bear that hallowed name, can you ever again be seen within the walls of a theatre? Can you ever willingly permit any one over whom you have any influence to be seen there? Say not, that the habits of society are such that you can scarcely avoid it. The question is short. Will you obey God, or man? Will you timidly or meanly give way to that which you must acknowledge to be wicked? or will you dare to

do what is right, though all the world were against you? Will you take the Scriptures, or the maxims of a corrupt world, for your guide? The question is left with your conscience in the sight of God.

Attendant on the theatre, whoever you are, if the foregoing representations be correct, then your conduct carries with it a degree of guilt which ought, surely, to alarm you. Every time you go to that scene of temptation and vice, you sin against your family, if you have any, against the purity and order of civil society, and against God, as well as against your own soul. Can you think of this, and still go with a quiet conscience? How will this subject, think you, appear in a dying hour? It is related of the late Rev. Mr. *Hervey*, a well-known and eminently pious divine of England, that being once on a journey in a stage-coach, the theatre became the topic of conversation. A lady in company, who was much attached to this amusement, expatiated largely on the pleasures attending it. She observed, that she found much pleasure in anticipating the performance, much in witnessing it, and much in recollecting and conversing upon it afterwards. Mr. *Hervey* listened with respectful attention, and, when she had done, said, "Madam, there is one pleasure growing out of the theatre which you have omitted to mention." Delighted to think of her opinion being confirmed by a person of his respectable appearance, she asked him with eagerness to what he referred. "Madam," said he, gravely, "I refer to the pleasure which the remembrance of having attended on the theatre will give you on a dying bed!" This seasonable remark proved better than a thousand arguments. It made a deep and permanent impression. The lady never again went to the theatre, and became eminently pious. Every lover and frequenter of the theatre will soon lie upon a sick and dying bed. How will the amusement then appear? How will the remembrance of having yielded to its allurements then lie on the conscience? Think of that hour, and be wise in time!

Attendant on the theatre, did you ever hear of that awful catastrophe which caused the tears of so many to flow, a few years since, in one of our cities—when a theatre, in the midst of its performances, and unusually crowded, was *destroyed by fire*—and *seventy-five persons perished in the flames*? Did you ever hear of that heart-rending scene? Did you ever try to image to yourself how YOU would have felt, if you had been there? Think of A THEATRE IN FLAMES! and ask whether you would be willing to meet death in a playhouse—to pass, as it were in a moment, from all the polluted vanities of such company, and such a scene, to the immediate presence of a holy God. How tremendous the thought! yet no one can tell that a like calamity may not happen at any time when he allows himself to be present in such a place. But, fellow-mortal, if you never should see a *theatre in flames*, you will see a WORLD IN FLAMES, and a holy Judge descending to his “great white throne;” and “the heavens and the earth passing away, so that there shall be no place found for them.” And you shall see “many great men, and rich men, and mighty men, hiding themselves in the dens, and in the rocks of the mountains; saying to the mountains and rocks, Fall upon us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of his wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand?” Will attendance on the theatre, think you, be a means of preparing any man to meet that Judge, and to stand the trial of that great day? May God, of his infinite mercy, open the eyes and turn the hearts of infatuated men, that they may see their folly and danger before it be for ever too late!