

VII. NOTES.

THE PRESBYTERIAN PASTORATE.

THE influence of the pastorate, in the Presbyterian Church is eminent. The emphasis and honor placed upon the relation constitute it a decided if not a distinctive feature of the Presbyterian polity. True there has always been provision in our standards, and ample need in our work, for the other offices of the ministry; but for a long period of time the pastorate has seemed the only practical relation contemplated by Presbyterianism between preacher and people. Indeed, the Form of Government by which our church has been shaped and its policy directed makes mention of no other ordinary and perpetual officer in the ministry; while devoting a whole chapter to bishops or pastors, it refers only incidentally to the evangelist at the conclusion of a long chapter on the election and ordination of bishops or pastors; and though our Revised Book of Church Order shows decided advance in this direction, there is yet wanting that full recognition and regulation of the evangelistic office and work which their growing importance and increasing need imperatively demand.

Such emphasis in the progress of the years has developed the pastorate in Presbyterianism to an extent unknown in any other branch of the great ecclesiastical family. Through this long course of special development we are prepared to appreciate at once the elements of its strength and the elements of its weakness. The former have long been recognized and justly valued. There is undoubtedly a range of influence and a leverage of power afforded by a long and successful pastorate that is not at all overdrawn in the amiable Cowper's classic picture. But even a virtue, if exaggerated, may sometimes trench hard upon the borders of a vice; and so we believe a conviction is growing in our church that we have perhaps unduly emphasized the pastorate. Study and observation have suggested the suspicion that there are elements of weakness also in our application of the pastorate.

The present writer's attention was directed incidentally to the matter several years ago by a study of the Acts of the Apostles. We were struck with the absence from apostolic usage of precedent for our practice. If there is in the New Testament any special warrant,

either expressly set down or by good and necessary consequence deduced therefrom, for the confinement under specific contract of one minister exclusively to one charge for a term of years, definite or indefinite, we failed to find it. Our theory is a development under the wisdom of experience, and derives its authority from expediency. It may be providential, but it cannot claim to be scriptural. Of course this, if true, does not condemn the theory. We believe in the indwelling and guidance of the Holy Ghost; and under his blessed and precious ministry the church may have been led into the large wisdom of unfolding growth; but while it does not condemn the theory, it nevertheless leaves the matter distinctly open, under the varying development of succeeding years, and the yet larger wisdom of still wider experience, to such modification as the exigencies of growth may suggest.

The pastorate we believe to be the ideal of established conservative work. For the thorough culture, the systematic and comprehensive development of a congregation, already strong enough to be self-sustaining, it is easily and far superior to any other arrangement yet known; but its very virtues in this direction unfit it for other and equally important work; its excellencies here become defects there. Because of its very fitness for conservative work, it must necessarily fail as an instrumentality for propagandism; its strength in one becomes its weakness in the other. Believing this, we are therefore shut up to the conviction that our policy, in its undue emphasis of this relation, has stood decidedly in the way of our aggressiveness.

1. In the outset we said that the pastorate seems for a long time to have been practically the only relation contemplated by Presbyterianism between preacher and people. We add here, that to this day it remains the only relation recognized in our standards between a preacher and a congregation. And how does our custom accord with our creed ?

The last Assembly Minutes furnish the following figures: Leaving out of count the vacant charges and the Foreign Missionary Presbytery of Indian, we have seventeen hundred organized churches supplied with regular preaching, and of these, nine hundred and twelve are without pastors; *i. e.*, over half of such churches as maintain the stated means of grace do so irregularly, that is to say, in a way not recognized in our constitution. But this falls short of the true state of the case; for when we apply the more comprehensive measure of the whole roll—the only just test—we find that our theory, after the trial of a hundred years, seems to suit the circumstances of only seven hun-

dred and eighty-eight churches out of two thousand two hundred and sixty-two, *i.e.*, in practical application, the constitution *works* in about one-third of the churches under our care! This fact is significant; we take it to be in itself a demonstration that our policy is not broad enough for our work. It suits admirably the strong churches, but proves plainly impracticable in the weak ones. Our theory is not sufficiently elastic for our life; when we put the new wine of a growing work into this skin the result is seven hundred and eighty-eight whole bottles and fourteen hundred and seventy-four broken ones.

2. Even in those instances to which it is applicable, we fear it fails in the wise distribution and economical administration of our strength.

There is in the *application* of our theory no practical provision for the interests of the general cause. Pastorates are instituted at the instance of a congregation and pastor-elect, with often very limited acquaintance and inadequate knowledge each of the other. There is in the arrangement no adjustment of conflicting claims and competitive needs. The only interests entering into consideration are those of the preacher called and the congregation calling. If these are mutually satisfied the pastorate is formed, though, in the opinion of the Presbytery, there may be a half-dozen fields to which the pastor-elect is better suited, a half-dozen preachers who would better suit the field, and possibly a dozen places, in any one of which the pastor-elect would be far more serviceable to the general cause of Presbyterianism. Moreover, if this silent conviction of the Presbytery should be justified by the event, and in the wedding pastor and field prove mismated, it is exceedingly difficult to correct the error; divisions and alienations result, factions and cliques arise, great and often lasting damage ensues.

This twofold danger of damage calls for some balance-wheel to congregational machinery in one direction, and in the other some representation, real and practical, of the work at large; a voice of authority that, in answer to the Macedonian cry ascending from promising mission points and struggling churches, shall say to the minister, Go, and he goeth; and to the licentiate, Do this, and he doeth it.

3. Another result of our system is that the pastor belongs to *a church* rather than to *the church*, to a particular congregation rather than to the cause at large. His installation vows take precedence over those of his ordination; he is ordained to the work of the ministry; he is installed over one congregation; his gifts however diversified, his ability however great, his influence however commanding, are all absorbed by that one field. His sympathies and his interests are in

creasingly narrowed to its bounds. His people are likely to be impatient of any disposition on his part to answer the calls of his brethren or to meet the demands of destitution in the region around. With some honorable exceptions, congregations are jealous of their ministers' labors, and when this is the case, a pastor, knowing that he is under contract with the people, is slow to deprive them of what he and they consider their rights under the call. We have known the evangelistic spirit in a pastor to work serious discontent in his congregation. Some ministers, whose hearts are in the Home Mission work, find it a difficult and delicate business to fill even the missionary appointments assigned them by the Presbytery. The congregation believes that the pastor belongs to them. They have contracted for his time, and feel that they have a right to it, and to all of it. Now, it is notorious that our pastors generally do much less mission work than they might do, and we suspect it is due largely to this feeling. Congregations and pastors need the more catholic spirit that will grow out of a feeling that they *all* belong to Christ, and that their service is due whenever and wherever the interests of his cause are to be promoted. Were this duty and privilege recognized as such, our aggressive work would receive an immediate and wonderful impulse.

4. We incline to the opinion that the influence of our pastorate develops another difficulty in aggressiveness.

Every observer is aware of the slowness of Presbyterian congregations to colonize, and many are familiar with the Motion incident to the effort. A large, strong, influential church ripe for branching, with the growth of the city inviting this policy, resolutely resists it. The formation of a second church is generally an unwelcome project and one which results in a rent oftener than in a harmonious division for the good of the general cause. The mother, instead of lovingly "setting up" a daughter in ecclesiastical house-keeping, peremptorily forbids the bans; and if, encouraged by all the friends of both parties, the daughter persists, the result is long alienation, and the mother becomes friendly and opens her door and her heart only when the daughter has at last struggled through a protracted period of *res angustæ domi* into such a condition as no longer to need maternal countenance and support.

Our tendency is to concentrate on the congregation as the unit, with the pastor as its visible head and coherent force or bond of union. Under a successful pastorate this unity intensifies, and as the prestige and power of the congregation increase, so increases its *esprit de corps*,

until the disposition is to magnify it even to a forgetfulness of the interests of the general cause, so that these interests are not seldom sacrificed to the importance of the individual congregation.

We believe this to be the case with Presbyterians more frequently than with any other denomination; they seem more reluctant to colonize than any other church, and we think that in the majority of instances the root of reluctance is grounded in the influence of the pastoral relation. It is this that makes the sundering so serious.

Another illustration of this spirit is afforded by the many instances of Presbyterians now standing aloof from practical church connection and active Christian work because of disinclination to remove their membership from some cherished church. This is an amiable, but decided weakness, and we do not hear of it in any other church to the extent to which it obtains in ours. This *local* attachment, so distinctive of the Presbyterian Church, we think, in its last analysis, may be traced to our undue emphasis of the pastoral relation.

Such are some of the difficulties and defects which have gradually grown out of the long dominance of our policy. But what of the remedy? This, we believe, is not far to seek nor difficult to apply.

The thoughtful reader cannot have failed to notice in most of these difficulties a constant feature; common to nearly every instance, constituting its element of weakness, there is clearly discernible a constant factor, and that constant factor is *Congregationalism*. The remedy for the manifold defects that under its influence have hindered our progress, is simply a return to the principles of a sound and consistent Presbyterianism; the constant and practical recognition of a fundamental doctrine of our polity, viz., that the power of the whole is over the power of every part, with a resolute and habitual exercise of this power wherever and whenever the interests of the general cause demand it. Let Presbyteries summon sufficient nerve to act always in accordance with their silent convictions. This is the needed balance-wheel to congregational machinery; this the centrifugal force which, for the general progress and growth of Presbyterianism at large, shall check the too prevalent centripetal force that tends to centralize our strength in a comparatively few favored localities, so that the strong grow stronger and the weak grow weaker. Let the episcopal power of the Presbytery be felt along the whole line of denominational activity, and a crying need will be met. When the leaven of Congregationalism is purged out by a pure Presbyterianism we shall see decided improvement in our progress.

We need also a return to the primitive practice of Presbyterianism in the department of evangelistic work. Our church has departed so long and so far from the traditions of its fathers that many consider the evangelistic spirit a distinctive feature of the Methodist Church, being ignorant of the fact that their own church was once the pioneer in this work. In the progress of time it has become almost a lost art with us. Let us return to it and honor the evangelistic office and work; let us promote it and encourage it in every feasible way. We need to place it on a par with the pastorate, as an ordinary and regular office in the ministry, worthy of double honor because of the sacrifices it involves and the service it renders.

When these two reforms shall have been effected most of our deficiencies will vanish and our reproach will be removed.

We close by noting a hopeful and stimulating advance in both directions. We believe that, even during the writer's short experience in the ministry, there has been marked improvement, both in the department of presbyterial oversight and in that of evangelistic work. These are cheering signs, and they contain the promise of increased prosperity. They are the seeds of a great and glorious growth. May the providence of God and the enlightened wisdom of our church foster them to a full fruitage.

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PRAYER-MEETINGS.

It certainly seems to be an anomaly that the clergy hold so persistently to this service, and that the mass of the laity as persistently stays away. Are the absentees living in violation of plain duty? Surely the God-fearing men and women in the churches are more numerous than those found at this service, even making the most liberal allowance for those who would come if they could so arrange it. Moreover, a very fair percentage of those who do attend, do so, it is certain, out of deference to their pastor, and not from any real desire to go. If the pastor's feelings would not be hurt, and if he would not be discouraged by their absence, they would certainly stay away very often. This is my own case, and it is also true of our best and most useful elder. I have never attended but one series of prayer-meetings that I really enjoyed, and that was some years ago. It is easy to say: "A dear case of spiritual declension." Possibly this *is* the reason, of