

*Discussion Relevant to BCO 23-1,  
as found in The Presbyterian Standard, vol. 47, no. 42 (18 October 1905): 8.*

The following texts are presented as a reference aid for the accompanying article from 1905:

**The Paragraph 128 in view in this article is the text adopted in 1879 and in force until 1925:**

When any Minister shall tender the resignation of his pastoral charge to his Presbytery, the Presbytery shall cite the church, as in the preceding directions, to appear by its commissioners at the next meeting, to show cause, if any it has, why the Presbytery should not accept the resignation. If the church fail to appear, or if its reasons for retaining its Pastor be deemed insufficient, his resignation shall be accepted, and the pastoral relation dissolved. If any church desires to be relieved of its Pastor, a similar process shall be observed. But whether the Minister or the church initiate proceedings for a dissolution of the relation, there shall always be a meeting of the church, called and conducted precisely in the same manner as when the call of a Pastor is to be made out.

**For comparison, the PCA *Book of Church Order* 23-1 reads:**

**When any minister shall tender the resignation of his pastoral charge to his Presbytery, the Presbytery shall cite the church to appear by its commissioners, to show cause why the Presbytery should or should not accept the resignation. If the church fails to appear, or if its reasons for retaining its pastor be deemed insufficient, his resignation shall be accepted and the pastoral relation dissolved. If any church desires to be relieved of its pastor, a similar procedure shall be observed. But whether the minister or the church initiates proceedings for a dissolution of the relation, there shall always be a meeting of the congregation called and conducted in the same manner as the call of the pastor. In any case, the minister must not physically leave the field until the Presbytery or its commission empowered to handle uncontested requests for dissolution has dissolved the relation.**

## Contributed.

### BOOK OF ORDER, PARAGRAPH 128.

Since at least one Presbytery has already rejected the proposed revision of Par. 128, and has proposed a substitute which seems little more satisfactory, it would seem that the time has come when it should be carefully inquired: What are the defects of the present paragraph and what is it hoped to accomplish by a change? Fortunately the object proposed is clearly stated in the overture of Ouachita Presbytery, which was agreed to by the Assembly, viz: that "the law of the church should be made to conform to the prevailing custom of dissolving the pastoral relation." The idea obviously is, not to endorse the anomalous practice of acting in entire independence of the Presbytery, but to construct a law which shall be capable of being obeyed and which shall consequently not be necessarily a dead letter and involve the Presbytery constantly in a ridiculous piece of red tape. The present law is absurd, because it requires what must be in the great majority of cases a practical impossibility; for if it is necessary for church to wait for an official citation to appear by commissioners at the next regular meeting of Presbytery six months off, how can either pastor or church be expected to conform to so cumbersome a provision? That "next meeting," in the paragraph does mean the next regular meeting may be gathered by comparison of the same phrase in Par. 126, where it is contrasted with "the meeting then in progress." At almost every meeting of Presbytery we hear some member blaming a minister for not conforming to what is obviously an impossible rule.

Now neither of the proposed substitutes eliminates this absurd requirement. It is true that other Assembly's substitutes leaves out the words "next meeting," but it leaves us wondering what is meant by "the Presbytery shall cite the church to appear by its commissioners." If "commissioner" means the regular accredited "representative" to this meeting, the proper word should be employed in conformity with Par. 45. The elder, if present, might have received no commission on the subject, and so would not be a commissioner in the sense of Par. 128. How then could the elder speak for his church in a matter which this very paragraph requires shall be done by the congregation, and yet the new wording requires the Presbytery to make a demand upon the elder for an act to which he is not legally competent? Possibly the change of "commissioners" to the singular was not intended to carry the meaning above suggested, but if not the clause has been rendered ambiguous, for it is also conceivable that the congregation might have acted and the elder might be the appointed spokesman. In this case he might "appear"; but "shall cite" cannot be justified as applying to the present meeting, for time must always be given in which to prepare for an official summons. The substitute proposed by Augusta Presbytery implies the church's right of initiative without directly expressing it, and by avoiding the changes which have been made it avoids at once the ambiguity and the possible requirement of an unconstitutional act; but it leaves untouched the old absurd requirement that the Presbytery shall, in case of the failure of the church to act, perpetrate the farce of formally dissolving a union which has in fact been already broken.

Paragraph 128 was intended to conserve the authority of the Presbytery, real or supposed, in connection with the dissolution of the pastoral relation. What is that authority? If the Presbytery forms the pastoral relation, should it not also break that relation? This seems to be the general idea, but the logic is not sound. A potter can make a vase but he cannot insure that it shall not be broken. The church may act as agent in cementing the marriage relation, but it can neither dissolve that relation or prevent it being broken by the parties. It has no authority in the matter. This analogy is a very convenient one for our purpose, one which is frequently indeed misapplied to the pastoral relation. Strictly speaking the church no more forms the relation than she is able to break it. She simply acts as a medium by which the parties enter into the union through their mutual pledges. So in the case of the pastorate. The people together with the minister form the pastoral relation, and the importance of the Presbytery's action in the matter is largely imaginary. The individual church has not only the original God-given right to the ministry of the church, but also the obligation to provide spiritual food for her people through the preaching of the word. This involves the right to choose a pastor and secure him provided this right does not conflict with other people's rights. Whenever this occurs the Presbytery finds a sphere for the exercise of its real

authority. The question may be one between the conflicting claims of the churches who both want the same pastor. Or the church may seek to call some one who is morally or doctrinally unsound. Here the Presbytery's power of veto is simply administering the law of Christ as regards conserving the purity of the church. But outside of such matters the Presbytery has no authority over the pastoral relation. The people by agreement with the minister really form that relation, and what is called technically forming the pastoral relation is nothing more than the Presbytery's giving formal sanction, and cementing that relation by becoming a medium through which the mutual pledges are made. Installation is at best but a ceremony, for the essence of the contract has already been secured by the direct treating of the parties. From this it appears that the difference between the technical pastorate and that which is mis-called "stated supply" is merely one of ceremony. The limitation of the contract in the latter case is an accident and not of the essence of the relation. From the divine point of view that is as regards reciprocal rights and duties the two are one and the same. As regards the Presbytery's part of the business the only difference is that in giving its consent to a church to employ a pastor for a limited time it calls the pastor a "supply"; but this cannot change the fact that he is a scriptural "pastor" of the flock as long as he serves them.

How now about the language of Par. 128 when it speaks of a minister "tendering his resignation of the pastorate to the Presbytery"? Why it is evidently inaccurate language. Strictly speaking, a man can resign an office only into the hands of those who give the office, and those who give it are the ones who do so by their votes. A minister can, therefore, only resign his office into the hands of the individual church. The pastoral relation is not a contract for life, neither is it a contract at the will of the Presbytery. As the consent of the parties was necessary to forming the relation it is absurd to hold that the consent of the Presbytery is necessary to break it. The Presbytery may upon occasion advise against dissolution, but that is all it can do; and the protection which some think the minister enjoys in the technical pastorate is mostly imaginary. The Presbytery has no real power to prevent the dissolution. It cannot interfere with the autonomy of the individual church without contravening the principle, clearly recognized in Par. 120 that the people have a right to choose a pastor. Of course this right to choose a pastor does not imply the right to go without preaching; and if the church cannot find a pastor, the Presbytery may rightfully send them one. But the requirement of a present or "continued profession of readiness" to receive a particular man as pastor clearly implies that that willingness may not always continue. But this is necessary to a successful pastorate, and how can the Presbytery change this fact? Can they contravene the very principles laid down for the forming of the relation? How then can they oppose the people's will in the matter of a dissolution? Where then does the authority of the Presbytery come in? and where is the protection which the installed pastorate is supposed to afford? It is purely chimerical.

The principles of common sense should be conserved, as well as the real practice of the church conformed to, by recasting the paragraph in some such shape as this: When either a minister or a church shall seek to have the Presbytery dissolve the pastoral relation, the parties concerned—the church being present through its representative—may be requested to state reasons for or against the granting of such request; and unless the case is one which seems to require the Presbytery's interposition, the request shall be granted and the relation dissolved. No church shall apply to the Presbytery for a dissolution of the pastoral relation without having had the question duly decided by a congregational meeting constitutionally called.

PRESBYTER.

### LOOKING FOR THE HANDFULS.

By Rev. Theodore L. Cuyler, D. D.

When Ruth was gleaning in the barley field of Boaz, the generous farmer commanded his young men to "let fall some of the handfuls of purpose for her." They were told to "leave them, that she might glean them;" and they were not to rebuke her for gathering them up. So she gleaned in the field until evening, and beat out what she had gleaned, and it was nearly a bushel of barley. Happy, honest toiler! She received her reward. Instead of consulting a false pride and loitering the day in idleness, her brave industry brought her more than the ephah of grain. It made her the wife of lordly Boaz, the mistress of his mansion, and the ancestress of the promised Messiah. So they who humble themselves are often exalted.