

THE  
PRESBYTERIAN REVIEW.

---

No. 33.—January, 1888.

---

I.

THE FRENCH SYNODS OF THE DESERT.

THE Reformed Church of France found itself in a deplorable condition after the recall of the Edict of Nantes by Louis the Fourteenth, a little over two centuries ago. The majestic tree which was the product of the growth of about one hundred and seventy-five years was felled to the ground in an instant. By a single dash of the pen every privilege granted by the law of Henry the Fourth was forfeited. The Protestants not only lost what their ancestors had won as the reward of almost unexampled patience under adversity and heroic courage in the midst of wars, persecutions, and massacres, but were robbed of those inalienable rights which are the heritage of all mankind. The exercise of the Reformed worship was proscribed. Ministers and pastors, without exception, were ordered to leave the kingdom within fifteen days from the date of the publication of the law. Protestant schools were closed. On the other hand, it was expressly commanded that any Protestants that might have expatriated themselves should return to France, and it was forbidden that any Protestant, man or woman, should leave the realm. Thus, while the teachers of religion were expelled, the laity were compelled to remain in France, but were deprived of every means of instruction and of every opportunity of worshipping God according to the dictates of their conscience. There was nothing said in the revocatory edict of constraining the Protestants to embrace Roman Catholicism. On the contrary, the very last paragraph contained an assurance that, until such time as God might be pleased to enlighten their minds, they would be permitted to dwell in the kingdom, pursue their trades,

### III.

#### THE EFFICIENCY OF THE CONGREGATION.

A TRAVELLER entering a Jewish town nineteen hundred years ago could not help seeing a building differing in form and structure from the dwellings of the people, for it either stood on the highest available ground, or it had a tall pole rising from its roof to show its position and its purpose. At the door was a "scraper," so that filth might be put from the feet of those who entered. A notice-board was on the wall, on which occasionally one might see the names of some who had been doing wrongly. Entering the door one's eye fell on a collection-box, into which donations could be put, and looking forward it rested on a small platform with chairs and a desk, at which one could conveniently stand up and read. The building was large or small according to the population of the town, and was built sometimes probably by subscription, sometimes by assessment, and sometimes by a generous and religious friend of the people ; sometimes even by a Gentile who lived among them, and came to like them and their ways. It was the Jewish "meeting-house," the synagogue in which on the Sabbath-day and sometimes during the week the people met to worship and hear God's Word read and explained.

The synagogue was a prophecy. Coming into existence in connection with the sojourn of the people in a strange land, it developed—by a kind of evolution in human life and ways of which the Providence of God often makes use—into a popular institution. In the United States to-day, a region unknown to the world when the synagogue grew up, there are a hundred thousand "meeting-houses," not one of which is without some element traceable to the synagogue. Even the vessel of ceremonial cleansing water and the lights which—in imitation of the temple—were kept burning in the synagogue have their counterpart to-day in the places of worship of that church which clings to altar, priest, and sacrifice, as if Christ had not fulfilled and so put away the preparatory types and shadows of the law, and Himself taken their place.

The assembly of people coming together in the synagogue to worship was known as the "congregation." The idea of supplica-

tion being connected closely with the building, it naturally came to be called the place of prayer ; and the worshippers, from being called together, became to Greek writers the *ecclesia*, the Church, a word which in so many ways is mixed up with the history of the race since the temple fell and the Hebrews were scattered.

Few side questions in Christian literature are more interesting than the bearing of the synagogue on the formation of the Christian congregation, with its body of ruling elders, its leader specially charged with conducting the services, its prayers, its praises, its expositions of Bible truth, its deacons, even its sexton, and its reverence for the "pulpit Bible." Vitringa and others have labored over the history and influence of the synagogue, and with good results, if only we keep in mind that—as in every deteriorating system—new usages creep in and are not to be confounded with the original elements. The curses against Christians, for example, could have had no sanction from our Lord, could not have existed in His time, and are no more authorized by Him than the prayers for the dead—noticed in the Book of Maccabees—and dwelt upon by the advocates of corrupt Christianity.

Presbyterians have no reason to turn away from the contemplation of the synagogue, for just as the prophet in the Hebrew history took the place of the priest and prepared for the preaching of the Christian dispensation, so the synagogue, in Palestine and in every "city of the Gentiles" where even ten adult Hebrews were found, prepared the way for the congregation, with its ruling elders, its court of discipline, its Scripture-reading and exposition, and its care of the poor. Nor will any intelligent reader of these disquisitions be troubled by the use of the word "liturgy." He will remember (though others often ignore it) that "liturgy" is only the Greek word for "service," and that if a man were to-day describing in Greek the "ministry" or "service" of the most loyal Presbyterian, the word *leitourgia* would be employed as by Luke (i. 23) and the apostle of the Gentiles (Phil. ii. 17).

The venerable institution that thus comes to us is entitled to careful study, if we would make the most of it for the good of the people and for the Divine glory. Whatever views Christian people may entertain as to the General Council, or the Association, or the Synod, or the Assembly, there is no diversity of view about the congregation and its relation to the spiritual health of the community—the subject to which we now crave the attention of the reader. A congregation is to be the means of bringing truth to bear on the people for their conversion and sanctification, and of witnessing for the truth of God among men. What are the ele-

ments that enter into it to make it efficient? The efficiency of many a congregation is seriously hindered by its genesis, if we may apply that word to origin, constituent elements, and organization. A group of individuals, for other than spiritual reasons, goes out of an existing congregation, applies to the most convenient body for organization, and proceeds more with the spirit of an ambitious secular corporation than of a religious community. The inspiration may be in the social ambition or social discontent of a number of leaders, or of a single leader, or a denominational zeal from outside is exercised to detach and set up a new Church, the *raison d'être* for which is mainly to have a representation in the place, and swell the ranks of the advancing army. This is the only sense in which some companies of Christians are of the Church militant. The choice of officers is determined by considerations such as led to organization. Spirituality of feeling or consecration of life is secondary. The extent to which influence, money, and connection can "carry us along" is the primary thought. It does not need to be shown that a process like this grieves the Spirit of God, drives away His blessing, chills the sympathies of God's people in the neighborhood, brings Christian life down in the minds of onlookers, and tempts the Church into following precedents that savor of a secular rather than of a religious society. God, who overrules human folly, may in time bring great good out of a community so organized; but it has unhealthy elements which have to be eliminated through new and better influences. If the eye of the body politic is not single, the body will not be full of light. It would sometimes be a saving in money and in other denominational talents if a Presbytery said to a body of applicants for reception and organization, "Brethren, we do not think your impulses of the sort God calls for in moving forward His cause, and we decline to receive you." Such a course would sometimes be a testimony to regard for the Divine honor rising above denominational self-love.

There is that in the mode of settlement of a pastor which tells on the moral power of a congregation for good or for evil. Has he been the object of the choice of all the people? Did they choose him freely? or had things come into that condition that they must take somebody, and he turned up? Or is he the *protégé* of a section—perhaps the giving section—of the congregation? Is it conceded that he was called spontaneously by them? or did he so manage that they could not well do otherwise? Here is a man doing missionary work, and making a good record. "Come and preach to us as a candidate," says a letter to him. "You are very kind in intention," he replies, "but were I to do so it would look as if I were

doing this work only because I could get no better, and that is not the case." Suppose they say, "Now, that is the sort of man we want," and they give him the call without any "candidating." He has, other things being equal, an immense advantage over a minister who put himself on trial and in competition before them. A minister called to a pulpit on his general record, and without his having raised a beckoning finger to the people, has a good position among the people around. The non-churchgoing will "like to hear a man like that," and be prepossessed in his favor. The estimate of him may be without definite basis, but it rests on ideas of self-respect, manliness, independence, and readiness to work for work's sake, which Christian instincts connect with a "good minister of Jesus Christ."

In recent years we have heard and read a great deal about "environments." The word covers much that bears on a minister's influence for good. The management, for example, of the financial affairs of a congregation tells directly on its standing, and consequently its usefulness. This matter is all too often set in a light that misleads. The Christian man in business is not relieved from regard to laws and rules of business by the fact that he is a man of faith. If he proceeds on any such assumption, he will early find himself in embarrassments. And precisely so it is with a Christian community. When it has to do with property, it has a business side, and on that side to put faith in the room of foresight, prudence, economy, or liberality is to invite failure. Is the minister chosen because he can, it is thought, get the congregation out of debt? Is the congregation so burdened with debt, waiting for some one to be "raised up in the providence of God" to pay it off, that the minister has no encouragement from the people to preach a missionary sermon or mention a "collection"? Did the people, disregarding the plane of their own living, begin an ambitious structure, implying a large outlay? Does the known debt on it deter people from taking a pew? "I cannot afford it," says the poor man, more or less truly. "I don't want to go in," says the richer man; "if I do they will be down on me for the debt." Does the bulk of the pecuniary resources come from a clique, so that the rest of the worshippers relieve their minds of responsibility? Then two sets of evils come. There is an understanding that the givers should choose the minister, and that is bad, for it ignores the Christian standing and obligation of the rest. And there is the further temptation to say when the minister is settled, "Well, the rich set chose him; he is their man; let them take care of him." All this is bad for the innocent minister. All the members of a healthy Church have a voice in

the Church's choice and responsibility, or privilege rather, in the Church's maintenance. New Testament Presbyterianism is on the line of the national Government, "of the people, for the people, by the people." Common sense is to be used in the management of Church affairs as of the Christian's affairs, and to be consecrated in the exercise. The law of the United States puts much in the power of trustees; but the people choose them. Let them choose rightly. Let them not say of A. B., "He is not a religious man, but he is well off. We could not make him an elder, but we can put him into the Board of Trustees." Men who are to manage the affairs of a religious body need more than social standing or business shrewdness. They need the wisdom that cometh from above. Only religious men will feel this need and seek Divine direction. And the Church-building ought to be the product largely of the zeal and efforts of the resident worshippers. Human nature is such that it likes to utilize that into which it has put its means. On the other hand, a Church-building practically dropped in the neighborhood by some distant owner of supposed ample means—an individual or a society—is all too often left for the donor to take care of. It is like a monument in the cemetery—they who erected it are expected to look after it.

On all such matters as these there is a twofold obligation often forgotten. Ministers are to teach their people on these matters. "The Scriptures principally teach what we are to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man." A Church-building has gone up, and is two thirds paid for. "Now," says a shrewd member, "we have done our part. We can carry the remaining one third easily, and let the next generation take that for its share." The thing looks plausible, and the selfishness of which we all have a share rather favors it. "No," says the minister, "we cannot do that. We must dedicate this house to God as a clear gift. We must leave as good an inheritance as we can to the next generation, but debt is not a part of it. The next generation, if it is faithful, will have its own work to do. Let us set it a good example." The result is a little more "effort," to use an abused word. The work is done. No one is exhausted by it. The conscience of every one approves of it, and the people say—and this is good for them, too—"Yes, the minister is right. The Church should owe no man anything for its building."

There is, in the second place, responsibility on the Presbytery. The synagogue was one thing; the council, the *sunedrion*, was another, with local oversight. In too many cases a Presbytery installs a minister, and, *as a Presbytery*, takes no more cognizance of him or

his work until he comes with his "resignation." "Why, what is the matter?" asks a presbyter of his neighbor. "I believe there is trouble in the Church; it has been going on for a long time." But the body which installed him had no cognizance of it. He had no moral support from his peers. No New Testament authority was brought to bear on him or on the people to repress the trouble and maintain moral and spiritual health. This is not an infrequent occurrence, and it is given as an illustration of the inactivity—the defective sense of that responsibility we urge on Presbyteries. Call the session a Presbytery, as do German Presbyterians, and our Presbytery a synod if you like, but there is a body over the congregation, minister and people, with oversight and responsibility. Fidelity on its part would often avert evils, and habituate the people to ask its counsel and be guided by its wisdom. What is the use of us as Presbyteries? Are we a mere "bureau of registration" of calls, settlements, and dismissals? or are we a body for counsel, direction, and good government, having such oversight that a minister in difficulties can go to his peers and count upon justice, and a congregation in doubts can go to its council and secure wise direction?

Our form of Church Government provides two sets of co-operators with the preaching Elder. One of these we know as the ruling Elders, meeting in "session." The efficiency of many a congregation would be promoted by the extension of their activities. To regulate collections, admit and dismiss members, and arrange details of Church life are important official duties. They should be supplemented, however, by personal contact with the people in the intercourse of life, and in their homes. How many when sick "send for the Elders of the Church"? In too many cases they assume that the minister's instincts will guide him to the sick-bed; but as for the Elders, they too rarely count on their help in spiritual life. Yet an elder, doing his common duty as a business man, a farmer, a lawyer, who will speak faithful and kind words to those of his own class, will often exercise a power beyond the minister's. When the Elder is making his honest appeal, it is less easy for the enemy of souls to whisper into the hearer's ear, "He is only earning his salary," than when the minister exhorts. Let John Smith come into the Church and get seats for his family, and let Mr. Brown call as an Elder of the Church, telling why, making their acquaintance, and giving hints as to the best ways of utilizing the Church, and the whole of the Smith family will be in a better mood for hearing and worshipping the next Lord's day, for they will have an actual sense of the Church as a living organism, and of the communion of Christians as real and not merely nominal.

Socialists and Anarchists now make a stir, and in all likelihood will for some time irritate and alarm society. These United States, with their wide range, different States, and individual liberty offer them a tempting field. The neglected condition of the poor, however real or imaginary, is their strong point. The Church has to bear her share, and it is a large one, in weakening this point. We have no parochial divisions. We have no Established Church, which, as in England, may be like a branch of the civil service, putting a minister into every parish, to whom, with more or less success, the parochial poor can betake themselves. That this arrangement effects all that is sometimes claimed for it is unhappily made incredible by the condition, say, of London, where "the Church" has, it is alleged, furnished an inadequate share of the Church accommodation, and where an alarming multitude has no *bona fide* connection with any Church.

But the fact that the Church here has no State-provided machinery of this sort makes it more incumbent to secure the best available machinery. A body of deacons chosen, of course, by the people, having in charge the care of the poor of the congregation, on the one hand securing the needful relief for them, and, on the other, personally dispensing it in the spirit of gentle Christian men—this would be a living and a forcible plea for the Church as a Divine institution, and a partial reply to the sweeping charges recklessly flung at not only all Christians, but at most of those who have secured common comforts, as being indifferent to the miseries of the class which Socialism affects to take under its protection.

In commending the place and work of the deacon, we do not use the word in its New England sense. The New England deacon is to all intents and purposes a Scottish or, better still, a New Testament ruling Elder. We mean by deacons a group of church-members set apart from the rest for the care of the poor. They may be younger men than are commonly called into the session. To have them meet with the session, without voting, make their reports there, and learn by observation how the work is done—as is the case in some congregations—is no mean preparation for the higher place of ruling Elder. It is for such Church officers as we have described to co-operate with the pastor in breathing the right spirit into the Church. A congregation can take to itself an air not very defined, and nowhere noted down in its books, but not the less real on that account, more or less favorable to true spiritual advance. It may be a bureau for mild, not irreligious entertainment. It may be a social ladder with well-defined steps for the feet of those who are known as "climbers." It may be a competitor more or

less successful in the work of "drawing" numbers, and may treat success therein as the chief end of its existence. Or—and this we deem the true ideal of a Christian congregation—it may be a group of Christian families associated together for solemn, decent worship of Almighty God, for learning and teaching one another the saving truth, and for witnessing for it before their fellow-men, and provided with an edifice adapted for these high ends.

We have spoken of "families" and of "teaching one another," and the ideas represented by these words we deem essential to the healthy life of a congregation. Families, as such, should be together. Departures from this rule of nature are rarely taken without loss along the lines of family and religious life. When individualism is pushed so far that the parents go to one congregation, "the girls" strike out for another, and the sons, if they go anywhere, patronize a third, there will be in a few years little home religion under the roof which covers their place of living, or rather boarding. And so, too, the Sabbath-schools, classes, young men's societies, and all the internal organizations of the Church should be in effect the people of the congregation aiding one another in learning, in Christian living and Christian working. Whoever has voyaged in an ocean steamer knows that there are other pieces of machinery than that which propels the ship. One can be set to work to drop and lift the anchor. Another can be employed to heave up the cinders. A third can work for the ventilation of the passages and rooms. A fourth can keep the food required for hundreds of passengers in the needed cool temperature. But one plan runs through all; one will central all; and the subordinate appliances do not run the ship nor interfere with the running. And on the same general principle should work all the subordinate agencies of a living and advancing congregation as God's instrument, like the ship, carrying many human beings through the changes and vicissitudes of life below to the shores of the better land.

Of the distinctive work of the minister we have not here attempted to write. It is an old but a wide subject, and requires an article by itself. To be preacher, overseer, and friend; to lift up Christ and to go down with sympathy and good sense to the lowest condition of the lowliest of His people; to declare, explain, defend, and recommend the truth of the All-Holy One to sinful men, so that they shall be interested and drawn under its influence, and so that the Holy Spirit will employ it for quickening into life and feeding their souls—this is the loftiest work on which a human soul can concentrate its energies. Parents toil, and enlist the co-operation of their sons that they may be lifted to the places of lawyer, physi-

cian, merchant, and the like. Where are there places so noble and lofty as that whose occupants can say, "We are ambassadors for Christ"? Trials, difficulties, hard labors must come to such officers as surely as inconveniences come to soldiers on a battle-field; but brave soldiers deem these drawbacks a little thing compared with duty and with victory. So let it be with ministers; then spiritual, living congregations will love them living, and bless their memories when they have gone to minister in the upper sanctuary.

JOHN HALL.

*New York City.*