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A SERIES

OF

T R A C T S

ON THE

DOCTRINES, ORDER AND POLITY

OF THE

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P R E S B Y T E R I A N C H U R C H

IN THE

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EMBRACING

SEVERAL ON PRACTICAL SUBJECTS.

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INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY.

THE efficiency of the church of God depends instrumentally on the character of its individual members. It is in vain that we look for a living, energetic, aggressive church, whilst those who compose it are indifferent to their obligations. The decline of a church may uniformly be traced to the declension in personal piety on the part of its members. They have ceased to wrestle with God in secret; they have allowed long intervals to elapse without self-examination; they have absented themselves from the place for social prayer; they no longer go up to the house of God, panting for the refreshing, vitalizing streams of the water of life; and even sacramental occasions have become mere formal observances. Their conversation does not savour of the gospel; they are not found labouring for the upbuilding of the Redeemer's kingdom; their associations, habits, and general tone of feeling are, to a great extent, those of the world. The aggregate of such a lapsed state of individual piety makes a cold, formal, lifeless church.

Such an unhappy and sinful dereliction of Christian duty does not usually at any one time pervade the whole church of God, or even the entire membership of any individual church. Almost always there are those who, even in the darkest and most inauspicious seasons, keep alive the coal within their own hearts. They have lived too long, and too much under the powers of the world to come, to be carried away by the seductions of this present life. They have had too much bitter experience of the emptiness of the world's broken cisterns, to turn aside to them again. They have felt too strongly the attractions of the cross, and the sweet

endearments of a Saviour's love, to be easily drawn away from them. They have known too well, by sorrowful experience, how cheerless is a state of spiritual declension, what compunctions of conscience attend it, how it provokes the chastening rod, and how bitter is the remembrance of the past, when the soul has been brought back from its wanderings, to desire again to expose themselves to similar calamities. Especially, too, has God's grace now gained too strong a hold upon their hearts, to let them go. But whilst there are, all the while, some such in the church generally, and in individual churches, the great mass of those who name the name of Christ not unfrequently seem to be borne away from their Christian integrity by adverse currents from Satan, the world, and their own imperfectly sanctified natures, until they scarcely remember what manner of persons they profess to be. The habitual life, indeed, of many professed believers is little else than a fixed state of spiritual declension. The disease with them has assumed a chronic type. It would be difficult to detect, at any time, in them indications of a living, active piety. A stupor has fallen upon them, as to the claims of Christ's kingdom. It would seem to be sad irony for them to repeat, in application to themselves, Paul's language, "For me to live is Christ."

One of the sorest evils under which the church of Christ labours, is the fact that so large a portion of her membership act as if there were no claim upon them whatever, to lend a hand towards advancing her interests. Many enter the church apparently with the feeling that the only thing to be accomplished by it is, that their church connection, in some undefined way, may at last bring their own souls to heaven. They do not regard taking upon themselves the Christian profession as an obligation the most solemn and unrepealable upon their part; to cultivate, by every instrumentality, personal piety; and to engage in all available

methods for sustaining the institutions of the gospel, and spreading abroad the truth as it is in Jesus. Upon what other ground than this can we account for the fact, that so many live and die, apparently under the impression, that whilst others are called to seek after eminent piety—to bear the burdens of the church—to engage in every good word and work, they are as much exempt from any such obligation, as if provision had been made in the church for two distinct classes, one of which was to do the work, and the other simply to look on as spectators, and at last share a portion of the spoils? One would think that they have taken their ideas of the great society of believers from some of the scientific and literary associations, where a portion of the members are practical, working-men, and others are mere “honorary” members, whose names have been enrolled simply as a complimentary distinction. Where is the scriptural authority for such a difference? Does not our common Lord and Master say to all alike, “Go work to-day in my vineyard?” Does not the stern rebuke from his lips, “Why stand ye here all the day idle,” fall alike upon all who toil not? What obligation rests upon any portion of the church’s servants, which does not lay its strong hand equally upon all?

This lurking idea, that a portion of God’s people are under obligations which do not apply to others, shows itself in the practical workings of every individual church. Who can point to a single such company of professed believers, where the whole body is enlisted as one man in the service of Zion? Let us take a single church as a sample. The present number of elders is insufficient, and an addition to their numbers is wanted. The minister and his associates in the session look around them amongst the communicants for suitable persons to fill this high office. But there are few, if any, who seem to be men of the right stamp—astonishingly few, considering the large numbers embraced on the

roll of the church. Some, indeed, are unfit because of their youth, their inexperience as Christians, their lack of sound judgment, and from other similar reasons; but among the many who are old enough, discreet enough, and have been long enough in the church, but here and there one of the proper stamp can be found, for the sole reason, that the great majority of them have been so deficient as to personal piety, and Christian activity, that neither their brethren nor themselves regard them as possessing the spirit required for rulers in the church of God. One would think that such a want of what would seem a natural and indispensable requisite in a professor of the religion of Christ, would itself be enough to arouse the indifferent; but such is not the result. The fact, that they have not piety and zeal enough to fit them for office-bearers, gives them no uneasiness; others, they think, are better Christians than themselves, and ought to fill such offices: but their own deficiencies occasion but little, if any concern. We beg leave to ask, why the few who may be regarded as suited for such positions, are in any way more under obligations to be living, active Christians, than the many.

In that same church, too, numerous and varied interests of a practical character are to be cared for. The Sabbath-school must have a corps of teachers; the weekly lecture and prayer-meeting must be attended; contributions must be made for the stated objects of benevolence, and for special purposes which certain unforeseen emergencies require; the poor and destitute without the church, as well as within it, must be provided for; and a great number of minor claims for co-operation and labour come up constantly. Some how or other, and to some extent, perhaps, these various instrumentalities are carried on. But by whom is the work done? A few—a mere fraction of the whole church—are engaged as Sabbath-school teachers. The same persons, by their presence, sustain the weekly lecture and the prayer-meeting. When

appeals are made for objects of benevolence, the same persons give the money and do the work of collecting. They are also helpers of the poor, the visitors of the sick, the distributors of tracts—in short, they are the working corps of that church, on whose agency, to human observation, not only its efficiency, but its very existence would seem to depend. Where is the great body of professing Christians in this church all this while? How does it happen that all the responsibility and toil is devolved on a few? Why is it that whilst a small portion of them are bearing the heat and burden of the day, the great majority are doing nothing? Is it in accordance with the principles of God's word, with their own covenant vows, with the claims of the church and the world for all the labour which all the lovers of Christ's cause and of souls can bring to them, or with common sympathy and justice for our brethren, that the majority should pass their lives in idleness, whilst the few are making all the sacrifices, and enduring all the hardship? Is it true that the mass of professing Christians were called into the church merely to go along as passengers, whilst a little band of their brethren work the ship? We shall never see the church what she ought to be, until, by some means, each member is brought to feel that he has a work to do. In giving, praying, and doing, every one must be led to take his part just as much as if the whole interests at stake devolved, instrumentally, upon himself. Then the aggregate of such individual piety and efficiency will make a living, energetic, efficient church.

The idea that every church member is not individually responsible for a portion of the work to be done in the Redeemer's kingdom is simply preposterous. It would be answer enough to give to those who excuse themselves for doing nothing, to say, "Produce your certificate of absolution from service in the church." As work is enjoined by Christ on all his disciples, none can be exempted from

its performance unless they can show a special edict in their behalf. "Go work in my vineyard," is the injunction of the Master upon all who take his name upon them. "Faith without works is dead." "Ye are my friends if ye *do* whatsoever I command you." "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city." The sentences meted out at the judgment day, are to be in accordance with what has been done, or what has not been done. Active service, therefore, is an essential ingredient of the Christian life. An empty profession, or a mere routine of devotional exercises, will not suffice. Satisfactory evidence that we are united to Christ, can only be found in the fact that we are labouring faithfully to do his will in every way in which we can find opportunity.

Some may plead, that they have no talent for usefulness. We might answer this by saying, that if this be true, then they have no right to regard themselves as the people of God, since activity is inseparable from a genuine Christian character. But is it true that any have no talent for usefulness? We think not. Some, doubtless, are less gifted by Providence than others; but even some of those who might have urged this plea, have been amongst the most honoured instruments of good. Roger Miller was an obscure layman, poor, uneducated, and unknown; yet he accomplished more for Christ by his devoted labours among the poor in London, than do many ministers of the gospel in a long life. Harlan Page had but few endowments beyond those of any private church member; but with a heart on fire with the love of Christ and the love of souls, he was the instrument of doing a work which has made his name to be remembered and honoured, and his works of love to be held up as an example in the church. How many pious women, whose secluded position would have seemed almost to bar against them the doors of usefulness, but who could not be

content to fold their hands all their days in indolence, have scattered abroad thousands of tracts, raised money for objects of benevolence, visited the chambers of the sick and sorrowing, wrought with their needles for religious enterprises, and in a thousand ways made themselves blessings to a world that lies in wickedness. It is a great mistake to imagine that a high degree of talent or peculiar gifts are requisite to a useful life. This was just the plea urged by the unfaithful owner of the one talent in the Scriptures. As he had not been endowed with five, or even two, as had been the more favoured, he refrained from using his one, and buried it in a napkin; and for his unfaithfulness was cast into outer darkness. The plea that he had so little capital to trade upon, did not shield him from his Master's displeasure; it was his business to use what he had to the best advantage. To the same responsibility will professing Christians of this day be held, when they are summoned to give their reckoning.

To those who excuse themselves upon the ground of lack of talent, we might say, "You have talents which fit you for other employments; why cannot these be turned to good account in doing the work of Christ? You can carry on an arduous and complicated business; you can enrich yourself and your family by your ingenuity and industry; you can take an active part in politics, in agricultural pursuits, or in scientific investigations; you can carry on an interesting correspondence with various friends; you can make yourself agreeable and entertaining in the social circle; you can conduct with admirable judgment and tact the affairs of domestic life; you can spend hours of many days of the week in shrewd trafficking in the shops." No talent then? There is not one who makes this plea, who is not giving a practical refutation to it, in the pursuits of every day of his life. These gifts, to which we have just alluded, show that there is a power, which, though now dormant as regards

religious obligations, need only be turned into that channel in order that the happiest results may ensue. Would the talents which are so successful in the counting-house, or the market-place, or professional life, or the social or domestic circle, be of no value to the church? If but for a single year the church could command the ability of her sons and daughters, so successfully developed in worldly affairs, in co-operating with her great enterprises, she would present an aspect of power and prosperity, the aggregate of which ten ordinary years would not equal. But alas! the tithes are not brought into the Lord's store-house, and hence Zion languishes.

It is indeed lamentable to look abroad, in our great cities for instance, and see the untold power of the church which is lying dormant. Great merchants who, from poverty, have amassed hundreds of thousands; professional men, whose well trained minds give them position and influence over a whole community; energetic young men, who are gaining confidence and a good name by their successful devotion to the interests of their employers; gifted women, whose social qualities invest them with a charm in every circle; and yet, out of the vast mass, making an accumulated force, which, with the blessing of God, might shrink from no undertaking, however arduous and seemingly hopeless, but here and there one who seems to have any proper sense of the true obligations of a Christian profession!

With each successive year, large additions to the number of communicants are reported, but what is the gain to the church? Mere numbers avail nothing unless each individual brings with him a contribution in some shape, to add to the body of which he becomes a part. Most of those who make a profession of religion seem to have the idea that the church is to do them good, by imparting to them wholesome instruction; by opening up to them sources of spiritual enjoyment; by comforting them in times of sorrow;

by preparing them for death, and introducing them into heaven when they die; but as to their doing good for the church, and by their very profession coming under an obligation to co-operate with all the heart, and mind, and strength, in her every enterprise, it is a thing which does not appear even to be thought of. The suggestion to them of such an idea is met with a look of bewilderment or surprise.

So long as this state of things lasts, it is impossible that the church can ever accomplish her great mission. If some may be excused from active service, why not others? and if a part, why not all? The effect of an inert mass of unproductive professors, must, more or less, have an unfavourable influence upon the whole body. It is not in human nature, even when partially sanctified, to escape the deleterious impression of an unsympathizing, inactive spirit, in those who are members of the same church, and bound by the same profession with themselves. The fact that so many are indifferent and useless, will inevitably suggest to those who have higher impulses and purposes, "If my brethren, who are under the same obligations with myself, care nothing for these enterprises for good, then why should I give myself so much concern about them?" So that the evil done is two-fold—the church loses the labours of those who do nothing, and she also loses a part of the power of those who are disposed to engage in every good word and work, because of the discouragement cast upon them from their unproductive, useless associates.

The church is a great organization, having in view as its specific end on earth, in addition to the sanctification of its own members, the honour of its Divine head, by extending his kingdom through the world. In this respect, it has its grand end and aim, just as distinctly as an association for building a railroad, or a steamship; and it follows, of course, that all who enter the organization, are to be ex-

pected to contribute to the accomplishment of the end in the one case as in the other. Do men become members of joint-stock companies, without either contributing, as owners of the stock, or in some other capacity? And yet, judging from their conduct, a large portion of those who enter the organization of the church, in no visible way add one iota to its means for carrying out the end of its institution, in the uplifting of fallen mankind, and bringing a revolted world back to its allegiance to God. The efficiency of any organization is but the aggregate of that of its individual members. The golden treasures which California and Australia are pouring into the lap of the world, are the aggregate results of individual toil in the mines. The beautifully curved and graded track over which trains freighted with travel and merchandise glide as with the wings of the wind, was the product of the united toil of a thousand hands; and the prowess which drives back a hostile foe, and carries victory over prostrate legions, is the combined result of the courage, daring, and strong arms of the individual soldiery. In either case, for the individuals engaged to have said that they could do nothing, would have been to leave the work undone. The fact that each one felt that he must do something, and that he strove with all his might to do it, was the secret which secured success. "England expects every man to do his duty," said Lord Nelson, at Trafalgar; and the church expects every man, woman, and child, to do their duty, Jesus Christ says virtually to his professing people. A great work is to be done. Valleys are to be filled up, mountains to be levelled, the way of the Lord is to be prepared, a hostile world is to be conquered, the kingdom of the Son of God is to be established on earth.

It behoves every professing Christian also to consider by whom can the work of the church be done, if neglected by him. Upon whom can she more properly call, or with a greater prospect of success? True, God can raise up others

to serve him more faithfully than a race of heartless, indifferent professors; but we are taking things as they now are, with both the world and the church, and we put the question, To whom can the church look with more propriety to do her work than to those who have voluntarily come forward and entered into covenant with her and with her Divine Head? The unregenerate world cannot be expected to do that which professing Christians shrink from undertaking; the few faithful ones in Zion who are ready for every work of usefulness, are, after all, human nature with limited capacities, and cannot do their own work and that of a thousand others. It results, then, simply in this, that each professing Christian who will at all consider his obligations is confronted with the great work of his divine Master on earth, and asked the solemn question, Will you do this work or not? If he can answer affirmatively, and at once put his hand to the plough with the resolution never to look back, happy will it be for him, and for others who may be blessed through his instrumentality. If either in word or in deed he replies negatively, the ghosts of his murdered opportunities, and the souls whose blood is upon his skirts, will one day rise up to confound him.

It is surprising what even one Christian can accomplish in the course of a lifetime, or of a series of years. What in the progress of its doing seems to be but little, when it has been repeated scores or hundreds of times, and carried on year after year, in the summing up, makes an amount of good over which there is abundant reason for thanksgiving and joy. The habitual and persevering repetition of comparatively insignificant efforts, is what usually makes the life of usefulness. To lay a straw across your doorway each morning, would seem to be a trifling thing; but continue to lay straws there every morning year after year, and you stop the ingress to your house. The coral insects, who busily ply their work in the sea-depths, add but an atom of

matter to their structure each day; but laying these atoms day after day, and others doing the same, the jagged reef at length rises from the ocean beds, lifts its head above the surface, the angry billows are dashed and broken upon it, great ships are wrecked against it, and vegetation having spread its green mantle over it, men make their homes and ply all the busy pursuits of life upon the masonry moulded and fashioned by the daily atoms of the coral insects. A beautiful spectacle is it to see, what once in a while is our privilege, a Christian professor laying out his whole strength for God—forming his plans, economizing time and money, labouring with his counsels, his prayers, and his donations, and by every practical means, day by day striving to promote the great end of serving God. Who can, without admiration, contemplate such a character as that of Lady Huntingdon? High station, an abundance of this world's goods, and fashionable society, as well as a title of nobility, were her birthright; but all these faded from her view, when once by faith she got a sight of the cross. From that time forth the world, with all the fascinations for which she seemed to have so remarkable an adaptation, was regarded as a thing forgotten, and Christ and his cause was the all-absorbing theme. She sought the society of the most spiritually-minded; made her house the home of faithful men of God; expended her money, and even her jewels, to build chapels; founded and sustained a school for training ministers and missionaries; went to the fashionable watering-places in the gay season, not to seek pleasure, but to take advantage of the presence of congregated thousands of the thoughtless, to reach them with the word of life, and turned her mansion in London into a place of preaching, in order to entice the nobility to hear the truth. How natural, for one in her circumstances, to have argued that the idea of bringing the most noted men of rank from parliament and the drawing-rooms of the metropolis, to listen to preachers

whose words were like burning coals of fire upon the conscience—preachers who were strangers to honeyed sentences, time-serving, and seeking the favour of man—how natural to have argued that to bring such men to hear such preachers, was simply an impracticability—that in the nature of things there must be an aversion and incongruity between things so opposite. But so did not this noble woman argue; but opening her mansion, she invited the peers of the realm, and they came—even Chesterfield among the number.

The reader may reply, however, that all this was beautiful and noble in this devoted Christian woman, but that they are not the Countess of Huntingdon—they have not her position, her means, nor her widely-extended sphere of influence. This may be true, but if, according to your measure, you are not breathing the spirit and doing the work of a Lady Huntingdon, you would not be what she was, with all her rank, title, possessions, and accomplishments. He that is faithful in much, is faithful also in that which is least; and whoever lacks the heart to trade with his one talent, would be equally recreant even if he were endowed with five. It is according to that which we have, and not according to that which we have not, that God accepts us.

In every church and congregation there should be many who would breathe the spirit and do the works of a Lady Huntingdon. In many churches there are such—not so conspicuous, of course, but still known and read as constant, faithful, active, useful friends of God and man, in every department where good may be done. We have known such Christians, whose ingenuity in doing good seemed almost as much to be admired as the actual results accomplished. They were ever devising some plan for reaching others with what seemed adapted to the peculiar spiritual wants of each. If a book fell into their hands which seemed calculated to be useful, copies of it were immediately bought and given to friends, or loaned diligently to various persons,

from whom the promise was required that it should be read. If a tract or a newspaper article struck them as suited to some particular case, it was forthwith mailed and sent off on its errand of mercy. Half-worn clothing, remnants of food from the table, or whatever could be applied to the relief of the poor, were carefully and systematically laid aside, and in due season appropriated to praiseworthy uses, as well as donations of a more costly sort. By a thousand methods, running through every day of life, have some, who name the name of Jesus, given evidence of the spirit of their Master, who went about doing good; and never, until eternity reveals all hidden things, will it be known what have been the happy results of these labours of love. A noble Christian woman, not long since gone to her heavenly rest, whom we numbered among our most valued friends, bore this lofty stamp. She was ready for every good word and work. She was at every meeting for preaching or for prayer; she was by the bed-side of the sick; she was in the humble homes of the poor; she was bearing a tract to this one and bread to that one; she was toiling day after day with her hands, moulding forms of beauty, and plying her needle with exquisite delicacy, that with this handiwork she might gather in hundreds of dollars annually to train up young men for the ministry. For long years was this the habit of her life; when old age and feebleness came heavily upon her, she remitted not her self-appointed task, and at length lay down and died with the needle arrested in its half-finished work. Had this excellent woman naturally superior qualifications for such usefulness? In some few respects, perhaps, she had; but the main qualities, which made her what she was, are such as belong to a great extent to all.

Even, however, where circumstances would in some measure forbid so entire a devotion of the time to the active employments for doing good, and where the sphere must be

less varied and more restricted, there is still an opening for a useful life, if there only be the heart to improve it. How much good can be done by a Sabbath-school teacher who faithfully serves God in that work—prayerfully doing his duty, and year after year instructing successive bands of children and youth as to how they ought to live and how to die. Within your own doors, there may be those who need to be taught; who could better do it than yourself? Your servants, perhaps, are in want of such tuition as you could easily give them; how little of time or labour it would cost you to store their minds with the principles of divine truth, and thus confer on them a treasure of which neither time nor eternity could rob them! That untutored domestic, who has been providentially brought under your roof, knows but little of the word of God, and does not understand even the alphabet of the language in which it is written. How easily could you teach her to read, and thus open up to her fountains of divine knowledge! It is needless, however, to attempt to specify the various methods in which life may be rendered useful, even by those whose circumstances are comparatively most unfavourable. “Where there is a will there is a way.” A heart yearning to do good, will assuredly, in this needy world, find good enough to do. Such a Christian will not be continually putting upon the already burdened shoulders of others that which he should do himself, with the cry ever on his lips, “I pray thee have me excused.” Blessed is he who seeks for opportunities of usefulness, and improves them. Blessed is he whose whole life is fragrant with works of piety and love. Blessed is he who, when his days have reached their utmost bound, and when the night of death is closing in, can say, “I have finished my work.” Blessed, thrice blessed is he, who on his entrance into the unseen eternity, shall be greeted with the inspiring plaudit, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” To be rich, learned, honoured, fashionable, or self-

indulgent, may now seem matters of high concern; but in that day when earth shall be fading from our sight and eternity rushing on, these earthly baubles shall seem trifles and vanity, and the only matter for contemplation in the past which can afford real satisfaction, will be the remembrance that our lives have been spent for the glory of God, and the good of our fellow-men.

How long, then, shall those who name the name of Jesus, continue to fold their hands, and cry, "A little more sleep, a little more slumber?" How long shall they excuse themselves upon the vain and wicked plea, that their influence can be of but little consequence, and that they have not the qualifications for active service? How long shall the storehouse, the workshop, the office, the farm, the household, the vanities of life, absorb the powers which might prove a rich blessing to the church and the world? Reader, if you wear the badge of a Christian profession, make up your mind to strive to do a Christian's work. Live not for yourself alone, but for your generation—for souls that are perishing, for a Saviour's cause that is languishing. Endeavour not to shift to the shoulders of others all the responsibility and toil, but seek to bear it with them. When calls for duty come, instead of regarding them as addressed to some other than yourself, take the appeal home to your own heart and conscience, and with a willing heart respond, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth." "What wilt thou have *me* to do?" When every member of every church in this and other lands, shall be imbued with this spirit, then Zion will arise in her strength, going forth clear as the sun, fair as the moon, and terrible as an army with banners. But whether all in the church shall be thus inspired or not, let each individual resolve for himself, that henceforth, let others do as they may, he will endeavour, by the grace of God, no longer to live a barren and unprofitable life, but to lay himself out to be a helper of the church, and a doer of good in his day and generation.