

place amongst their stated observances; and lastly, that it was a voluntary contribution by each according to his ability. I might add the remark, that there is no allusion to any other mode of collecting funds for church purposes. The extraordinary contributions made in the extraordinary circumstances of the church at Jerusalem, were singular only in the amount contributed. For if those who had possessions, sold them and poured the price into the treasury, it was still a voluntary offering, as appears from the rebuke which Peter addressed to Ananias, "while it remained was it not thine own, and after it was sold was it not in thine own power?" Neither then, nor at any other time, did a community of property, or any stated exaction, become the law of the Christian church. The treasury was replenished by voluntary contributions, in which liberality is mentioned as praiseworthy and well-pleasing to God. This was in harmony with the genius of a dispensation under which the law is written in the heart. The exaction of tithes and stated taxes belonged rather to a formal dispensation, whose observance was in the letter.

It may be asked then, is this the whole law of the New Testament? And we answer, no! While the amount is thrown back upon the enlarged and liberal spirit of the man whose heart is warmed by the love of that God whose goodness is over all, and upon the fidelity of the man who is not his own but is bought with a price—divine wisdom has provided for the regular and systematic operation of christian principle by giving us precise directions as to the time, the occasion, and proportion in which the stated contribution is to be made. We have it expressly enjoined upon christians, that they should not neglect the stated assemblies of the church, and we gather from the Acts of the Apostles that the time of such stated assemblies was on the first day of the week. It is true, that we cannot quote a great number of passages in support of this assertion. When we look for evidence of merely human practice, in the writings of a merely human historian, we may require numerous quotations to give certainty. But when we search an inspired record, for evidence of the practice of men under the infallible guidance of the Spirit of God, one instance is as good as a thousand. We do not demand that God should speak oftener than once, to give us assurance of a truth. Hence the confidence with which all Christendom relies upon the solitary example of the church at Troas as establishing the duty of assembling for public worship on the Lord's day. It is not for me to explain how they set aside the avowed object of such a meeting "to break bread." The two facts that "the fellowship," or collection, was one of those stated observances, and that the Lord's day was the

time of their stated assembling, will prepare you for the directions which I now quote from Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, as constituting the express law of the Lord Jesus on the point now before us—"Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come."

Regarding the application of this passage to our present purpose, let me remark in the first place, that the apostle is speaking concerning the *public* contribution, and gives his directions with the avowed object of avoiding hurried collections after his arrival, and then it will be evident that the directions cannot be fulfilled by each privately laying aside a portion of his income to be used for charitable purposes. Doddridge accordingly translates and paraphrases the passage—"let every one of you lay something by in proportion to the degree in which he had been prospered—and let him bring it with him to the place where you meet for public worship, treasuring it up in the common stock." MacKnight translates it "let each of you lay somewhat by itself, according as he may have prospered, putting it into the treasury." In addition to these, it may at least be a matter of interest to you, to learn the testimony of ecclesiastical history as to the general practice of the early churches.

Neander, without entering formally into any inquiry as to the mode in which the treasury was replenished, makes several incidental allusions to the practice of the churches in the first ages, which shew that they were strictly in accordance with the apostolic directions, as above interpreted. In his "History of the christian religion and church during the three first centuries," when describing the brotherly love of the early christians, he says: "The care of providing for the support and maintenance of the stranger, the poor and the sick, of the old men, widows and orphans, and of those who were imprisoned for faith's sake, devolved on the whole community. This was one of the chief purposes for which voluntary contributions at the times of assembling for divine service, were established." Again in the same work, speaking of the relation of presbyters to the church, he says: "From the church fund, which was formed by voluntary contributions of every member of the church, at every Sunday service, or as in the north African church, on the first Sunday of every month, a part was used for the spiritual order."

Such was the simple but yet efficient order of the churches, until the usurpation of the clergy on the one hand, and the policy of the Roman emperors on the other,

subverted the rights of the people, and changed the organization of the church into a corrupt and pliant tool of the government. Then the wealth of the world was poured into its coffers, until, according to Plancke, "The clergy in the several provinces, under the colour of the church, held in their possession one-tenth part of the entire property of the empire."

Those who are tied down in their action by the canons, decrees and acts of ecclesiastical legislatures, or by the arbitrary dictates of sectarian usage, may investigate such a subject as a matter of mere curious criticism, or historical research; and having ascertained the import of such a passage as that before us, or the practice of the first churches in accordance with such directions, they must leave it there as a thing that does not practically concern themselves. But if we are sincere in our professed submission to Christ as our head and to his revealed will as our rule, the ultimate object of our inquiry is, not "what did the apostles direct, and the first christians practice?" but "what does the Lord require us to do?" as intimated in these directions or that practice. And in answer to this inquiry, I believe we have it plainly and definitely laid down: 1st. That the funds of the church are to be derived from the voluntary contributions of the lovers of Christ and his cause. There is not a hint in the scriptures of obtaining money for the service of Christ from worldly men, on any pretext. On the contrary, it is presented as one of the peculiar duties and privileges of discipleship to contribute. And the motives by which giving is encouraged or enforced, are such as could be addressed only to christians. Love to him who, though he was rich, for our sakes became poor—love to the brethren—and the remembrance that with such sacrifice God is well pleased, are the arguments by which they were admonished to give, "not grudgingly or of necessity, but every man according as he purposed in his heart, for God loveth a cheerful giver." The christian of all ages must consider that he is not his own, but bought with a price: that all he has, as well as all that he is to have, is the Lord's; and that he is but a steward, who must render an account.

2. The time and manner of giving is prescribed. It is not left to any time or occasion when our feelings may be moved by a special appeal, or some incidental impulse. It is made a regular duty, in the punctual observance of which, we may rest assured, Christ's cause will be best served, and our own welfare best promoted. "On the first day of the week let every one of you lay somewhat by itself, putting it into the treasury." False and formal religion delights in the observance of days and months, and times and years; and separates its claims as much as possible from the ordinary and