

The Canadian Independent.

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IS CONGREGATIONALISM FAILING IN CANADA?

A visit to a city under circumstances which evoked reminiscences of twenty years ago suggested the above query. The following statements may lead to the answer. In that city, when we first sojourned there, one Congregational church was established, of which it is not too much to say that for influence, thorough organization, stability, and general Christian character, that church occupied no second place among the Protestant churches of this Dominion. To-day, that church is bankrupt: to an outsider, apparently in the throes of dissolution. Three other churches hived off from it, of which one—through the necessary changes the city has undergone—is defunct; the other two, vigorous, but groaning under the incubus of building debts. It may be questioned whether the combined strength of the three is, to-day, equal to that of the one of twenty years ago. It is not the purpose here to enter into the question of the cause of this state of things, at least just now, but to draw attention to other facts. It has ever been the fate of earnest reformers to succeed, eventually, in securing the result aimed at, though they themselves are worn out in the struggle. The mother who, when young, was the attraction of a social circle, becomes buried in her maternal duties, lovingly rendered, and lives in the children she now leaves to carry on in widening circles the influence she in one circle erewhile exerted. Shall we say that her life became a failure? Follow the individual and family histories of members of that church of twenty years ago and what is found? Many of those families are still retaining and sustaining their old denominational connexion, laying the foundation, we trust, for much future work and love; others have departed to work in other parts of the world; and in that city, as we look into the churches of other denominations, we find foremost among them our old friends of that church of twenty years ago, who are thus carrying the principles and the spirit obtained and nourished in the church of their earlier years, into other and alien communities, which communities are thus being brought, though under other other names (and what is in a name?) to a constantly increasing nearness to the faith and polity of our Primitive Christianity. And that state of things is to be seen, not merely in that city but throughout the whole world over. If that is failure, Congregationalism then has failed, but if the infusion of life everywhere is doing the Master's work, the work has been, nay, we hope is being, done. Our work may be the quiet talking as to Samaria's daughter by the curb stone of a well, whilst others raise the turreted tower or cloud piercing spire, but the things

that are seen are temporal, the unseen endure. Congregationalism has maintained principles which are being gradually acknowledged even by bodies erewhile most antagonistic thereto; "the principles of self government and of personal and congregational freedom are asserting themselves with great force through the entire ecclesiastical sphere," and reverence for conscience, with its freedom, is being associated with all searching for truth. Even where Congregationalism has been denominationally overborne the remarks of Horace regarding Greece as conquered by Rome, might apply.—"Captive Greece leads captive her conqueror," and thus we triumph in the truth we hold and march on to certain victory.

SHORT TALKS ABOUT OUR CHURCH POLITY.

NO. 3. INTERNAL ECONOMY.

By the "Internal Economy," we mean those arrangements which every church will make for the carrying on of its work, the maintenance of worship and collective church life. Of course it will be understood that, while there are certain principles and broad lines of action supposed, the details will be filled up by each individual church as shall seem best to itself. We have no cast-iron forms of procedure, of order, or of worship.

First, as to membership. We believe that none but converted men and women should be admitted into the fellowship of Christ's Church on earth, those who profess Him with the tongue, and whose lives are in accord with their profession. It is the duty of every church to guard, as far as possible, against the introduction of improper persons into its midst, a church may be deceived just as an individual, it may err in its estimate of those who seek its fellowship, but it certainly should endeavour to know them aright. There are three sources of danger in the admission of members. There is first the fact that church membership is now considered respectable. In small communities especially, it carries with it a certain amount of weight and influence, and leads to its adoption by improper persons from unworthy motives. We have heard of a man who openly declared that he had sought connection with a certain church because it was to his worldly advantage. Then there is the fact, for fact it is, that some ministers are more anxious for the numerical results of their labours than for the spiritual results; they want to be able to say that there have been so many additions to the Church during their pastorate as a proof of their success. There is yet further the temptation to which pastor, officers and people are alike exposed, of opening a wide door to men of wealth and social standing without sufficient knowledge of their character. It is thought to be so advantageous to get a large subscription and an influence that may draw in others of a like worldly position, that the essential elements of fellowship—faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and love to His cause—are sometimes lost sight of. All this and everything like it is to be devoutly and prayerfully guarded against; the introduction of members is one of the most solemn duties

of a church and should never be lightly or carelessly done. We have heard of churches that have been rent in twain by men who, if proper care had been exercised, would never have had fellowship. The mode of admission will of course be determined by each church for itself; a common practice is to propose the name at one church meeting, appoint visitors to see the applicant who report at the next meeting, and upon their report with the testimony of the pastor, the vote is taken. Some churches that we know, instead of the visitation, and some in addition to it, ask a letter from the applicant, with the grounds for his application, views, etc. Whether these, or a different mode is adopted is of little consequence, so long as the church in some way has an opportunity of knowing those whom it receives into its midst.

With reference to its officers. These, according to our belief, should be elected by the church itself. No Bishop or Conference has a right to impose upon a church a pastor other than its own free choice, and no Presbytery has a right to interpose and say that it shall not have the man whom it has chosen. But this very privilege is the parent of a solemn duty to choose only to the pastorate men whose character fits them for its important duties: too often the man of fluent speech, of ready tongue is fixed upon with scarcely a thought as to other and more important matters. Not only is he "apt to teach," but does he wear the white flower of a blameless life? What has been his record in previous fields of labour? Is he truly a pastor of the flock, does he care for the lambs of the fold? Has he a large, loving, sympathizing heart? Has he executive abilities as the head and leader of a church? It may be said, you are putting before us and bidding us look for an impossible character, for an angel in fact; perhaps so, better a high than a low aim even if cannot be fully reached.

Here will be apparent the value of taking counsel with other churches and their pastors. Few churches, country ones especially, are in a position to know and examine the antecedents of ministers who come to them. They only judge by the papers presented, often old and worthless. Their safest plan is without doubt to seek the advice we have indicated, and to act upon it. We have no hesitation in saying that three-fourths of the ministerial difficulties which are constantly occurring, and which are so disastrous to churches, might thus be avoided.

The only other officers that we positively trace in the early church are "deacons." Men whose duties relate as we believe to the secularities of the church, who attend to its finances, have the care of its poor, serve tables, and all similar duties arising in such a connection. We know that some good men amongst us claim that the office of deacon is spiritual as well as secular. While not agreeing with this view, we would say that the deacons should without doubt be as far as possible men who combine spiritual with secular gifts, able, if needs be, to conduct the prayer and other meetings of the church, to visit and comfort the sick, and help in such ways the one man

pastor. These will of course be chosen by the people, not by the minister or any clique. As to the manner of their choice, by nomination, ballot, open voting, or any of the details that may arise, they are all perfectly immaterial to the principle involved, and each church can follow the plan which seems best to itself. So also with reference to the permanence of the office; there used to be an almost superstitious feeling on this point. "Once a deacon always a deacon," was the firm belief of the great majority, but of late years there has grown up a conviction, especially in Canada, that this is not a matter of principle, and that with our migratory population, with the marked change which a few years makes in every congregation, it will best conduce to the efficiency of a Diaconate, to get the best men into office, and to limit their term of service. The churches adopting this idea, alike with those holding to the permanent plan, violate no New Testament principle as to the office.

Although we only find these two offices distinctly noted in the apostolic churches, there were doubtless others as their various needs suggested. There was a treasurer to the little company following the Master, and a treasurer must have been a necessity in the infant church at Jerusalem, when the believers sold their possessions, and bringing the proceeds laid them at the apostles' feet. One doubtless was chosen for this matter. So also it must have had a secretary who wrote to the Gentile churches the result of the conference at Jerusalem. In our modern churches there is a vast variety of such extra officers: elders, directors, committees, choir leader, and so on—not to mention the Sunday School teachers, who are truly church officers—all perfectly legitimate and in harmony with our principles—and all chosen, as they should be, by the people. Many other details of church working might of course be touched upon, but it would far exceed our limits. Church-meetings, Divine service, discipline, dismissals, Lord's Supper and all such can be determined by the church meeting in one place, as also what is sometimes a source of irritation, the order of worship. Let each church for itself adopt the order it feels most profited by, and all will be well. We have worshipped in churches of our order covering a wide area of diversity, from the severely simple to the most ornate, where the English Church prayers were used in their entirety, Psalms of the day and responses chanted in full cathedral style. Yet the pastor of that church is the author of a work advocating our distinctive principles and one of the most distinguished chairmen of the Congregational Union of England and Wales. If the church prefers that form who shall say it nay? In the practical working of our principles the oil that will make the machinery move easily is love, the manifestation of the spirit of 1 Cor. xiii. With this spirit prevailing we would not hesitate to give any question to a meeting of the church, for the majority will not override the minority, and the minority will not offer a factious opposition to the majority. It is sad when either of these things takes place, and says but little for the spiritual life of the church. Alas, that it ever should