

CORRESPONDENCE.

"Free Seats and Rented Pews."

To the Editor of the Church Guardian.

SIR,—A few months ago, I read an editorial in a Canadian Church paper, about a remarkable villain who ended his days on the gallows. The editor worked himself into a perfect rage on the matter, and wanted to know what the Church had ever done for the man? In fact, he seemed that it was due to the culpable neglect of the Church and her ministers that there were any scoundrels in the country. It is easy for an editor, musing in his easy chair, to indulge in visionary day dreams of what the Church ought to be and ought to do, but such dreams melt away like the baseless fabric of a vision when it comes to the practical test of parish work.

Allow me to make some remarks on an editorial on "Free Seats and Rented Pews," in your issue of the 23rd May.

Taking the heading first:—Why use different names for the same thing? Is a seat only a seat so long as it is not rented? Does a *seat* become a *pew* when rented? I draw attention to this because the old pew has a bad reputation entirely apart from its being rented; as a matter of fact the old pew did not always bring a rent, as far as my experience goes; it, for the most part, was what some people would call "free," that is, its occupants contributed nothing to the expenses of the church. But these pews are things of the past, and yet half the editorial referred to is taken up with denouncing them. Is it necessary to import their bad odour into the controversy?

I take the ground that in order to raise the necessary revenue, each congregation may use its own judgment whether it will have the offertory, the envelope, or the seat-renting system. There is no principle involved in either. But what about the passage St. James ii. 1-6? Does it refer to pew rents? If it does, nine-tenths of Christendom stands condemned for having set at nought the plain command of Scripture. Commentators say that it refers to the law-courts. It could hardly refer to seats in churches, as there were at the time neither seats nor church buildings. But may not the principle lie underneath? No, because the thing St. James condemns may occur in any meeting even where there is no charge whatever for a seat. I have often seen the very thing occur in a political meeting in a music hall. The words were not used, but the well-dressed, kid-gloved gentry who felt themselves of importance pressed to the front. The thing denounced is as likely to happen in a free as in a rented church. Where does the Prayer Book say anything which can in any way be said to bear on the subject one way or the other? Where in the New Testament is anything said which can give the candid enquirer any clew to the intentions of Christ or His Apostles on the matter? 1 Cor. xvi. 2 will readily occur to some. Well, the rule there laid down is an admirable one, but in the particular case it had no reference to the regular expenses of the Church at Corinth, but to a special collection to be made for the poor saints at Jerusalem. I quote from the editorial, "If we study the Bible from beginning to end, from back to back, we shall find in every book laid down this principle. That God will have His cause supported in the world by free-will offerings." When I read that passage, and thought of the stringent tithe system of the Jewish Church, the minute directions of the Mosaic Law as to the various offerings, I must say I was astonished. It is astonishing how hobbies will run away with the best of men.

You object strongly to the term applied to pew rents that "it is a mere matter of business." Every congregation ought, as a matter of honesty, in some way to provide the revenue necessary for carrying on the work of their church. This must be done in a business way, or in a haphazard, unbusiness way. Unfortunately too many congregations

adopt the latter plan. St. Paul tells us not to be slothful in business. Well would it be for many of our parishes, and for some of our Dioceses, too, had their affairs been managed in a business fashion. I have yet to learn that business principles are sinful, or that it is wrong to manage church finances on a sound business basis. The opposite course has given us a good crop of mortgaged churches and parsonages, and of clergymen unpaid and left to a hopeless struggle with poverty.

It would be interesting to know how many churches there are in the Dominion of Canada which are *really* free as far as the seats or pews are concerned. My impression is that there are very few. By free seats I understand seats which may be occupied at choice by any persons entering the church, as it is in a music hall for instance. If seats are appropriated on any pretence whatsoever, so that certain seats are looked upon as those in which certain persons always expect to sit, then they cannot be called free. In some so-called *free* churches the revenue is raised by a subscription list or by envelopes, and seats are appropriated by the different families in the congregation. This to me appears to be a worse system than pew rents, because the holders may not be disturbed without giving great offence, because more space is appropriated generally than is required, and because persons quite well able to pay often avoid paying, and still hold on to the seats. It is wonderful how people, otherwise intelligent, can persist in calling seats free under such systems. They cling to a mere form of words and ride their hobby with satisfaction.

"But rented pews keep the people out of the Church." Is this the case? The pews are rented in the Roman Church, and yet it is the best attended of all. Ah! but the Roman must go to Church or peril his salvation. True, but so also must all. But our people do not believe this. Yes, there is the rub. Nevertheless it is true. It is unbelief keeps our people out of the Church, not pew rents. Make the Churches as free as air, abolish even the offertory, never ask the people for a cent, and yet, so long as they believe that it makes no difference to them whether they attend public worship regularly or not, so long will we have empty Churches. But let a man once be convinced that to neglect public worship is a great sin for which he surely will have to answer at the bar of God, and he will be in Church, pew rent or no pew rent. Good men, shocked at seeing the great neglect of public worship which prevails, and casting about for a cause, have missed the real one, and have forced themselves to believe that free Churches even in name are the great panacea, forgetting the example of Rome on the one hand with her strict pew rents and crowded churches, and the Irish Church of bygone days with her unrented, and yet empty seats.

Rented seats keep the poor away! Thank God there are very few people in this country who cannot afford to pay for a seat in Church if they wish to do so, and there are fewer congregations, if there are any, where accommodation in *every* part of the Church is not provided for any who have not sittings of their own. It is not the poor who ask for free seats, on the contrary I find the poor are independent and like to have their own seats. It is an utter mistake to suppose that the pew rent system gives the rich man an undue influence in the Church. It is just the reverse. Rented pews make every man alike, whereas under any of the so-called free seat systems, the rich man is absolutely necessary to make up deficiencies. My own experience is that the free-seat system educates people *not* to give. The few give their own share, and also the largest part of the share the others ought to give, but avoid giving. When a man rents a pew he expects to pay for it, but if he sign a subscription list, or takes envelopes and afterwards desires to escape payment he readily discovers that the clergyman has been preaching popery, or has not visited him often enough, or has in some way done something which has offended his majesty, and so he declines to pay.

But, I am not defending the pew rent system as

being perfect and denouncing all others. This would be to follow the example of those who make free seats their hobby. Every plan we may try has imperfections. I have tried the envelope plan, the subscription list and the pew rent. I believe they are each mere human devices, and a congregation may lawfully adopt whichever it chooses. One system may work best in one congregation, another in another, or even in the same congregation a change of methods may be desirable at different times. What I deprecate is the air of superiority assumed by the advocates of free seats as against pew or seat rents, the assumption that they have scripture, antiquity and the prayer book on their side, and that those who tolerate rented seats are but poor benighted creatures.

I grant that in theory the thing looks well. What more good and pleasant to behold than an assembly of brethren joined together in christian love, emulating each other in good works, whose delight it is to make their Church a house meet for God's presence, a house of beauty, denying themselves in order to give to it, to beautify it; careful that those who minister in it shall not want; each member contributing honestly his tenth. Such a congregation would be a grand sight. Perhaps there are such. We cannot make all our people communicants; we cannot make them all regular Church-goers; we cannot make them all honest; the tares will continue to be mixed with the wheat. The love of money is one of man's strongest passions how then can we expect to make our people do what is right in this the hardest of all for them when we fail to do so in matters which are easier to them? Suppose that the preaching of the Gospel could be carried on without any cost whatsoever, would it be to the advantage of the people that their spiritual ministrations cost them nothing?

I fear I have drawn out this letter to too great a length. Although it is contrary to your views I would ask you to give it space.

Yours truly,

F. L. STEPHENSON.

Almonte, 4th June 1883.

BOOK NOTICES, REVIEWS, &c.

New Testament Autographs, by J. Rendel Harris, (Supplement to the American Journal of Philology.

A reverent textual criticism of the New Testament has brought to light much that has helped the student to understand more clearly the truths of God's word. In the present instance the patient and painstaking author has discovered a key by which he has been able to draw conclusions with regard to the sacred text which cannot fail to interest the Philologist and the Theologian. His own words explain what he has effected.

In the course of an examination of the columnar arrangement of the text of the oldest MS. of the New Testament, my attention was drawn to a remarkable numerical peculiarity in the arrangement of the lines and columns of the several books and from this my mind was forced to the conclusion that the Scribes of the New Testament produced epistles more uniformly written and at the closing page more frequently filled than is the custom at the present day; and that it was, in fact, possible to reproduce the original pages by a simple process of numerical sub-division, if only the MS., had preserved the lines of the original writing. The working out of this scheme, and the deductions which the author has drawn from his observations, are extremely valuable. We have also a representation of what the pages of the original MS. or Papyrus must have been like as they left the hands of the Apostolic writers.

"Wilford's Microcosm" for June quite equals its predecessors, which is saying very much in its favor. We have before advised the clergy to subscribe for this very valuable magazine which occupies a most important field of usefulness. As a Religio-Scientific monthly it deals with subjects intimately connected with the work of the ministry, and affords information not otherwise accessible to the country clergyman. A. Wilford Hall, New York. Price \$1 a year.