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STATE OF RELIGION.—ARTICLE III.

CONGREGATIONAL RELIGION.

In considering the subject of Congregational Religion, we may, for the sake of order, arrange our remarks under the four following heads: 1. Its instrumental causes; 2. Its efficient cause; 3. Its evidences; and 4. Its consequences.

I. The main instrumental cause of Congregational Religion is the public means of grace, and among these the ministry of the Word holds a pre-eminent position. The gospel is to be preached to every creature throughout all time, for the promise of Christ, given to the disciples when he delivered to them the evangelical commission, that he would be with them to the end of the world, implies there would be the public exhibition of divine truth by the lips of regularly called and qualified ambassadors until the day of the final consummation. It is the plan of God to save, through the foolishness of preaching them that believe; language from which also we may learn that the dispensation of the Word is one of the primary ordinances of the Most High, to bring men from their natural state of guilt, depravity, and condemnation to the possession of pardon, of new nature, and of life eternal. Again, we are told that when Christ ascended up on high, "He led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." This list comprises only New Testament office-bearers. Some of these are ordinary, others again were extraordinary. Chief among the latter were the Apostles, but their office terminated with the lives of the persons by whom it was first filled, and, indeed, there now remains in the Church only that of pastors and teachers, with, it may be, that of Evangelist, for instruction. It is a permanent appointment for bringing men to the knowledge of the truth, and for building them up in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation. Without the ministry of the Word, could there be Congregational Religion? A settled and regular ministry is necessary to the conversion of sinners and their growth, when converted, in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Occasional sermons may be signally blessed to the quickening of those who were dead in trespasses and sins, to the cheering of the dejected, to the encouragement of the timid, to the strengthening of the tempted, and to the increased peace and joy of him who is walking in the comforts of the Holy Ghost; but even occasional sermon is the ministry of the word, and, as a general rule, it is by the labours of the stated servant that these ends are effected.

It would carry us too far from our design in these articles, and it would lead to the undue multiplication of them, were we to enter upon a full consideration of what is implied in the "Ministry of the Word." First, we would have to advert to the office itself, in its author, its institution, and its end, vindicating