

## ON THE SUPPORT OF A GOSPEL MINISTRY.

BY A WORKING MAN.

On the question regarding the proper mode of distributing the Sustentation Fund, the writer of this paper feels it would be presumption in him to give an opinion; but there is another question of far more importance, which every member of the Free Church, and of every other Church, may come to a decision on—that is, the duty of all Christians and of all church-going people to support their own religious instructors, and, over and above, to extend the gospel blessings to those who are without them, according to their means and opportunities. The neglect of this has given rise to all the difficulties and vexatious annoyances in which we are now involved; and, without making any apology, we feel ourselves at liberty to say a few words by way of remonstrance in this matter. We are conscious that a large number of the adherents of the Free Church act towards their pastors in a manner in which they would think shame to act towards any other individual, or set of individuals, whom they might call to their employment, and which is not only inconsistent with their duty as professing Christians, but is contrary to reason and common sense. There is an idea that has taken hold of the minds of some persons, that they are not called upon to give anything towards the support of their ministers, far less towards the cause of Christ generally, until they get all the little comforts and conveniences which they think they are in want of; that, if actually they have no money, as it were, lying useless beside them, they are under no obligation, human or divine, to give anything for religious purposes; hence the invariable excuse for not giving—"I can't afford it"—"I am not able to spare it;" a vague and meaningless expression in the sense in which it is often used. The truth is, neither the poor nor yet the rich can give anything according to this loose way of speaking—the one requiring all for present wants, and the other for future wants, and those that have got what Agur prayed for, have just enough, and no more.

We believe that multitudes persuade themselves, or rather Satan persuades them, to act in this way, and they are content to live, if we may so express ourselves, as so many religious papers on the bounty of others, hindering the progress of the truth, while they ought to be helping forward the good work, and distributing the bread of life to those that are "perishing for lack of knowledge." The whole difficulty of upholding in full efficiency a gospel ministry in this country, and the cause of all the grumbling that we hear from day to day at the constant cry for money, is that men and women, members of churches, place religion among those things that they cannot afford to pay for, instead of placing it, as it ought to be placed, among the foremost of those things which they cannot want, however small a man or a woman's income may be; for, however inadequate to procure for them even the first necessities of life, yet no Christian man or woman is at liberty to keep the support of the gospel out of the calculation. "Will a man rob God?" is the awful and solemn question of inspiration, and may well ring in our ears when spending the bounties of his providence without any reference to his will, or acknowledging the obligations that lie upon us to give of our substance as the Lord has prospered us. If we were thus giving, every congregation in any part of Scotland, with three or four hundred adherents, might support a minister with the greatest of ease, and without being the least indebted to their neighbours for religious ordinances, and that, too, without anything of a sacrifice, or impoverishing themselves by so doing. All that is required is to get men and women to be as honest in religious matters as they generally are in their worldly affairs; or, in other words, if they would pay their religious teachers, of whose

services they avail themselves, just as they would do any other individual who labours for them in worldly matters. "The labourer is worthy of his hire," in whatever sphere he labours, and it does not alter the thing, or lessen the obligation, that the amount is left to their honour and sense of duty. The debt is due, for the labourer has been hired, and he must have his wages. Even men who make no pretension of being guided by religious motives consider a debt of honour the most binding.

We are too ready to look upon paying our minister as an act of generosity—a benevolent action which we may let alone without the risk of being called dishonest—and we flatter and excuse ourselves with the idea that we must be just before we are generous, and must pay our legal debts, provide for ourselves and our families, and after that, if there is anything over, then we will show our generosity, and our benevolence, by giving something for the support of the gospel. There cannot be a doubt that a fallacy of this kind possesses the minds of a great number of our church-going people, hardening their hearts, and searing their consciences, which make them deaf to all the solemn appeals that are made to them; who hear them all for others, and think that they are meant for those that have abundance, and do not know what to do with it; "as for them they can't afford it."

What we wish is, that all classes, whether rich or poor, young or old, married or single, should place religion among the first necessities of life, and among the foremost of those things which they cannot want, and consequently must pay for in proportion to their other expenditure. If so, we are very sure our fears would soon be dissipated, our difficulties would vanish—and not only see our present ministers in comfort, and beyond the fear of want, but would enable the Free Church to enlarge the field of operation, "lengthen her cords and strengthen her stakes," and go, as it were, light-hearted, and with a cheerful countenance, to the work given her to do, by the removal of this incumbrance of worldly care.

As we are addressing ourselves to Christian men and Christian women—at least to those that profess to be so, and who would be offended if we were saying any other thing—we ask, in all sincerity, Are you prepared to want your minister? Are you prepared to forego the privilege of assembling yourselves together in the house of God? Would you like your children after you to do without these privileges? If not, you must pay for them; you must place the support of them among those things which we cannot want, and never after use the expression, "I can't afford it." You might as well say, "I cannot afford to pay the tailor or the shoemaker," or any other of whose services you avail yourselves.

The Author of the gospel has not seen meet to send angels to preach to us, but, in his unerring wisdom, has ordained that these glad tidings should be proclaimed to us through human instrumentality, by men of like passions as ourselves, who are compassed about with the many weaknesses, infirmities, and shortcomings which we ourselves are liable to, who require food and raiment, and have their yearly accounts to pay as well as those who hear them. How is he to pay them if he does not get his wages? And the duty of paying him does not belong to one part—it belongs equally to all that avail themselves of his services, whether rich or poor. If the plea, "I can't afford it" is a good and valid one for the minister, it is equally so to the tailor and the shoemaker; if it does not answer the one, neither will it answer the other. We know some will say that we are descending too far, and that this is a vulgar and nonsensical way of treating so sacred a subject—but we really cannot help it; nor do we think it is descending half so far, nor yet so vulgar, as seeing men and women, well clad, and apparently well fed, and living in comfortable houses, who take the labour and service

of ministers from Sabbath to Sabbath, and from year to year, without paying for it. We hear a good deal about taking high ground, and speaking to men on this subject, and to appeal to their benevolence and generosity and their duty as Christian men; but we think there is as much need for taking low ground. Were we pleading with a man in behalf of his neighbour, or asking him aid for sending the gospel to the heathen, or for any other benevolent or charitable purpose, we might then appeal to his heart and conscience, and address him, as it were, from a higher elevation in the solemn and persuasive language of the Bible—"Look not every man to his own things, but also every man on the things of others; he that worketh let him work more, that he may give to him that needeth. For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be made rich." "Verily, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." But surely we need not take very high ground to tell a man that he ought to be honest, that he should "owe no man anything," that he should "provide things honest in the sight of all men;" and we humbly think there is something dishonourable in the conduct of those who avail themselves of the services of a minister, and the accommodation which others have provided, without bearing a reasonable share of the expenses necessary for his maintenance. And we need not wonder that earnest-minded men, who are doing their utmost to support a Christian ministry in comfort and respectability, who are giving their time and their means to the cause of Christ, in this and other lands—we say, we need not wonder that they are vexed and disheartened by the selfish indifference of a number of cold and heartless adherents, who are more or less numerous in every congregation of the Church; nor need it surprise us though their inventive faculty was at work, and their ingenuity put on the rack, to devise some scheme which in some of its provisions would lay hold on these men; for it is undeniable that if we could get those that give nothing or next to nothing (we mean in proportion to their other expenditure) to pay at least for their own share of the burdens, then we would have what the generous and the benevolent give over and above their own proportion, and also what the rich give of their abundance for providing gospel ordinances to those that are actually and absolutely unable to provide for themselves, and to make an aggressive movement towards the reclaiming of the masses of heathenism which are found in all our large cities.

We know that some will be ready to say that the clergy ought to content themselves with less incomes, that it is contrary to their profession to have too much of this world's goods, that some of them have a great deal more than many of those who contribute to their support, &c.; but the fair way of judging of a man's income is by comparing it with the income of others in the same standing in society; and we are sure that if the income of the clergy, generally, were tried by this rule, it would be found that they are the worst paid class of men in all the country. It must be remembered that a man cannot help his own standing in society. When once he engages in a profession he must keep up, in some measure, the dignity and honour—in short, he must have the whole arrangement of his household in harmony with the respectability which the public associates with the office he holds. But it would be asking him to make "bricks without straw," unless we give him the means of so doing; and surely what the Free Church has fixed as the least on which that can be done will not be considered too much; for we could with more comfort live on £40 per annum as a workman, than £150 as a clergyman.

We by no means insinuate that the poor are greater defaulters than the rich in this matter. There are individuals among the poor, and also