

SPECIAL
ARTICLES

Our Contributors

BOOK
REVIEWS

CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

(By Rev. C. H. Cooke, M.A.)

I believe in the light, and not in the darkness; and it has occurred to me that a little information regarding the course followed in Church Discipline might be useful in preventing misconceptions hurtful to the cause of religion.

In the Presbyterian Church the Session has jurisdiction over the congregation, and is the "court" before which all persons charged with any offence must appear. Every member of the Church is bound to obey its constituted authorities, and if a member refuses to come before the Session when cited to do so he is liable to suspension for contumacy. An ecclesiastical court could not permit its authority to be defied any more than a civil court could.

Under our system no person charged with an offence can be unjustly or unfairly dealt with, for the following reasons:—

(1) The accused has a right to be present when every witness gives his testimony, and to cross-examine the witness.

(2) The evidence of the witnesses, so far as either party may wish, and the statement of the accused, are taken down in writing, and each one's evidence, or statement, is read to or by the party who gave it, and is signed by him. Thus no mis-statement of what the accused says, or of the testimony of any witness, is possible.

(3) The judgment come to by the Session must be based, not on their opinion of the accused person, but on the evidence and statements written out and signed by the witnesses and the accused.

(4) When the Session comes to a finding, and renders judgment, if the accused person thinks any injustice has been done him, he has the right to appeal to the Presbytery which has jurisdiction over that Session, and if the Session's finding and judgment are not sustained by the written evidence the Presbytery will overturn that judgment.

This is usually explained to an accused person, so that no advantage may be taken of his possible lack of knowledge of his rights. In any case with which I ever had to do such explanation has been given. . . .

It will thus be clearly seen by any one who has the least intelligence that, so far as securing justice to an accused person is concerned, it really makes little difference what qualifications the members of Session have, or what their personal feeling towards an accused person is. The Session might be composed of imbeciles, or it might be composed of Supreme Court judges, but in neither case would it matter, for the Presbytery, in the case of an appeal being taken, does not look at the qualifications of those who compose the Session, but only at the written evidence. Nor, again, would it make a particle of difference if every member of the Session were a personal enemy of the accused person against whom judgment is given. If the evidence supports the Session's judgment, the Presbytery will sustain the Session; if the evidence does not support that judgment, the Presbytery will sustain the appeal against it. With this fact before them, no Session, even if so inclined, would be foolish enough to render a judgment not sustained by the evidence in the case. Nor would any minister be so foolish,

as to allow it to be done, for the minister is the member of Session who, chiefly, has to defend the Session's action before Presbytery. . . .

Let me now make clear the spirit in which our whole procedure in the case of offenders is conceived and carried out. Our Lord, in Matthew 18: 15-18, says: "If thy brother trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he will hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church; but if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." The spirit and purpose that lie in these directions are obvious. They require, first of all, that we make a kindly and earnest effort to win an offender to a better mind. But, if not, then these directions no less require us to deal with the offender, without flinching, in another way. Wrong cannot be allowed to continue. Now our whole disciplinary procedure is conceived and carried out in this kindly but firm spirit. This will be made plain by recounting the several steps that are taken in the case of an alleged offender before judgment is finally rendered against him:—

1st. Before the Session takes up the matter at all, the minister usually tries, by kindly conference, to bring the offender to a better mind and a right attitude. The minister may even send him a letter setting forth the injury caused by his conduct to the church and to the cause of religion, so that the offender may have opportunity to think over the matter quietly, without the heat which is sometimes engendered in personal conference.

2nd. When such personal attempts on the part of the minister prove unavailing, the Session takes up the matter. But no formal charge is made at this stage, or judicial process entered upon, the idea being that it may still be possible to "gain thy brother." The Session merely requests the alleged offender to meet with them, the object being to give him an opportunity to establish his innocence, or, if not innocent, to bring him to a voluntary confession, and, by appealing to his better nature, bring him to repentance. If the Session is successful in this, no formal process of discipline is entered upon, and the whole trouble is ended.

3rd. If the alleged offender refuses to meet the Session for such a kindly conference, or if he does appear and nothing comes of it, it is the Session's unpleasant but solemn duty to lay a formal charge in writing against him, and cite him to appear at another meeting. Our Book of Forms says: "At this meeting the accused is to be solemnly and affectionately dealt with," the object being to bring him to repentance if guilty, in which case there might be no need to go to the length of suspending him from church privileges, thus settling the trouble by "gaining the brother." If a Session really desires such a happy outcome, it will not likely cite witnesses to this meeting, because an offender is more likely to come to a right attitude when witnesses are not called than if they are. A Session that takes this course is acting in a more kindly way, however, than even the Rules of Procedure require.

5th. Quoting the words of our Book of Procedure, "If the accused refuses to obey the first citation, he is again cited to appear" at another meeting, "with certification that if he does not appear, the court, besides dealing with him for contumacy, may proceed with the case as if he were present." At this meeting, again, it is still open to him, if guilty, to confess his wrong, and express his regret or state that he will change his attitude, and thus open the way to a settlement of the matter without the Session being compelled to go to such an extreme as is necessary if he does not do so, and if the offence as proved by the evidence calls for it. . . .

It will thus be seen that our whole procedure in cases of discipline is conceived in the spirit of kindness, and with the objects Christ had in view. "If the offender will hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." That is to be had in view all along, and the reader will please note that instead of giving an offender only three formal opportunities to hear and respond to an appeal to his better nature, as Christ directed, he is given four or five of such opportunities. But if an offender will not meet the minister or the Session in the right spirit, if he defies and condemns the court to which by the constitution of the Church he is subject and to which he has promised "due obedience in the Lord," what else can the Session do, if the evidence shows him to have been guilty of a serious offence, but suspend him? Christ said: "If he will not hear the Church, let him be to thee as an heathen man and a publican." That does not mean that we are to hate him, for we must have Christian love for the heathen and the publican. But it does mean that we must not allow him to remain in fellowship with us as a brother in good standing. It means also that we may not give him countenance and encouragement, neither by our words nor our actions. And any individual who refuses to treat such an offender as Christ has directed, any individual who sides with such an offender, is in reality disobeying Christ, and standing with the offender instead of standing with Christ. And any one who does this need not be surprised if, in the Day of Judgment, Christ regards him as one who has thus made his choice.

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Happiness does not come until we have ceased to seek for it, nor does peace abide through self-sacrifice.

We have discovered that men who boast of the breadth of their opinions do not require a long plummet to measure the depth of their convictions.

Seldom does the sin of indolence come farther to the front among grown-ups than on rainy Sundays, and its pleadings for self-indulgence should be met with as deaf an ear as ever justice turned toward a criminal demanding undeserved mercy.—Ex.

We should not oppose the conversion of children. It is thought that quickest of all the little child will adjust itself to the demand of the Lord Jesus for the "new birth." More than that, so easily may a little child be molded, so facile is a little child to a rightly-directing touch, that it may even unconsciously meet this demand of the Lord Jesus, and, yielding its childhood to Christ as Lord and Master, grow up in Christ.