

Presbytery and its Vacant Churches.

An abstract of a sermon delivered before the Presbytery of Clarion in session at Eligo, September 29, 1875, by Rev. D. W. Cassat, and requested for publication in the papers within the bounds of Presbytery.

"But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad as sheep having no shepherd."

The figure of our text is one that would entice the reader to inquire, "Why? Scarcely anything would be more expressive to an oriental mind of exposure to certain destruction than a flock of sheep scattered over the mountains without a shepherd to defend them from the wild beasts, as well as the thieves and robbers who haunt them in that land. Such thoughts filled the mind of our compassionate Saviour as he saw the multitudes of people surround him on the hills of Galilee, and knew the certain and awful destruction awaiting them unless he should interpose his saving arm."

This subject is one of great importance on an account of the growing tendency towards Congregationalism in many of our churches. It is a question which involves some of the fundamental principles of Presbyterianism.

Our "Form of Government" gives the following as the reasons for the existence of the Presbytery as a church court, that "The church being divided into many separate congregations, these need mutual counsel and assistance, in order to preserve soundness of doctrine and regularity of discipline, and to enter into common measures for promoting knowledge and religion, and for preventing infidelity, error and immorality."

If all the churches "in our vacant churches and assistance" surely the vacant churches, those that have no pastor to look after their interests—flocks without a shepherd—have an especial claim on Presbytery for aid and assistance, such as a weak or invalid member of a family has on that account a stronger claim on the other members for care and protection.

1. In what does the duty which Presbytery owes to these vacant churches consist? Every vacant congregation has certain duties to perform for itself, and being when vacant directly under the care of Presbytery, it is the duty of Presbytery, to see that these churches perform their duties which are set forth in our "Form of Government."

"Considering the great importance of weekly assembling the people for the public worship of God, in order thereby to improve their knowledge, to confirm their habits of worship and their desire of the public ordinances; to augment their reverence for the most high God, and to promote the charitable affections which unite man most firmly in order thereby to promote that every vacant congregation meet together, on the Lord's day, at one or more places, for the purpose of prayer, singing psalms, and reading the holy Scriptures, together with the works of such approved authors as the Presbytery shall recommend, and they be able to procure, and that the elders or deacons be the persons who shall preside, and select the portions of scriptures and of the other books to be read, and to see that the whole be conducted in a becoming and orderly manner."

The O. S. General Assembly of 1847, declared it to be the duty of Presbytery to investigate the ruling elders representing such congregation concerning the observance of this recommendation.

This decision makes the duty of Presbytery clear on this important matter. The elders representing these vacant churches should be required to report at a regular meeting of Presbytery, whether their churches meet for worship, recommended, and in case any vacant church fails to send a representative for one year Presbytery should, by committee or otherwise ascertain the reason of such failure, as well as its general condition.

2. But in the next place it is the duty of Presbytery to furnish as much preaching as possible to these vacant churches, and see that the ordinances of the gospel are regularly administered. In order to accomplish this in the best way Presbytery should appoint a standing committee on Vacant Churches, who should have control of the whole matter, with power to act in the interior of the meetings of Presbytery and report in full at each regular meeting. This committee would take the place of the committee appointed at each meeting, and be able to discharge their duties far more efficiently. As hitherto managed the matter of supplies by Presbytery is very unsatisfactory. It favors far more of Congregationalism than Presbyterianism. Nominally, they go to Presbytery but practically they control the matter themselves. The majority of vacant churches that apply to Presbytery simply ask leave to supply themselves, and their request is granted, usually, without asking any questions. When asked to report at the next meeting, they usually say that there will probably be no representative present, or if there is Presbytery is satisfied with a simple affirmative answer. Without inquiring by whom or to what extent they have been supplied. But there are some churches that do not honor Presbytery even with the formality of asking permission. They will employ whoever they please without recognizing the right of Presbytery to know who is supplying them. This is not consistent with the principles of our church polity. We should either give up some of our Presbyterian principles, or enforce the right of Presbytery having the oversight of all the churches under its care.

If the standing committee suggested above were appointed it would then be the duty of every church as soon as it would become vacant to apply to this committee stating how often they wished to be supplied, and how much they were willing to pay for such service. They should also have the privilege of suggesting the name of any unemployed minister or student whom they wished to supply them. On the other hand all ministers and licentiate that wish to preach in any of our vacant churches should apply to this committee for work, stating their preference for any particular church. If this plan was cordially adopted, it would secure loyalty to Presbytery from both ministers and churches, which in itself would be a most important point. But the great object is to furnish the means of grace, so far as possible, to all the vacant churches, and at the same time assist these churches in obtaining pastors or themselves doing so.

We believe this plan, which is substantially the same as that recommended by the General Assembly, would secure both these objects as well as any that could be adopted. A minister brought before a church through a judicious committee, if acceptable to the people, would be more likely to prove a successful pastor than one who would apply on his own authority, or be introduced by a friend, if he was not acceptable to the people he would not be mortified by their rejection, for he was simply sent as a supply to the church. It would, in a great measure, do away with the whole business of ordination, which is a most unnecessary and severe ordeal to every modest minister old or young. If a church that pays a good salary becomes vacant the session soon have plenty of offers, and are perplexed to decide whom they should hear. If there were some minister of Presbytery on whom they could throw the responsibility of rejecting men they would gladly do so.

Brethren should be willing to seek their fields through Presbytery. They should say, as did one lately, whose ability is equal to his loyalty, "I would not become a candidate upon my own motion before any church, but I should feel bound by my ordination vows to go to any church which Presbytery might direct me to supply."

In brief we would say that the duty of Presbytery towards the vacant churches under its care consists in seeing that these churches faithfully perform their own duties as set forth in our "Form of Government," in furnishing them with the preaching of the word so far as possible, and in affording them the best facilities for securing pastors.

I will consider briefly in the second place the great need for the performance of this duty, and the exercise of this care by Presbytery. It is well known that there is quite a number of small vacant churches in our Presbytery that are not able to support a pastor, and the most of them being of the kind of railroad communication, find it difficult to secure supplies for themselves. The territory in which some of these churches are situated is destitute of evangelists; preaching by any denomination. This is emphatically the case in a large portion of Elk county. With the exception of St. Mary's—which does not belong to our Presbytery—we have but one small church—Elkton—with a membership of sixteen scattered over a district of country having a radius of eight or nine miles. This organization has been neglected until it has scarcely an existence, and the whole territory of country, was for a considerable length of time destitute of the gospel. This year a local Methodist minister has been preaching there part of the time. But there are many persons there who are anxious to have Presbyterian preaching, and it is our duty to give it to them if it can be done. The whole county, having a population of at least 9,000, is destitute, so far as our denomination is concerned except St. Mary's. At Wilcox a Dutch Reformed Presbyterian church has occupied the ground. The great majority of the people do not belong to any church. It is as truly missionary ground as any of our Western territories, and the fields are white already to the harvest—would that there were reapers sufficient to gather in the harvest. The great majority of the people do not belong to any church. It is as truly missionary ground as any of our Western territories, and the fields are white already to the harvest—would that there were reapers sufficient to gather in the harvest.

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