

THE
PRESBYTERIAL CRITIC
AND
MONTHLY REVIEW.

No. 1.

JANUARY, 1855.

Vol. 1.

“OUR IDEA.”

“THE Presbyterian Critic and Monthly Review” owes its origin to the want, practically felt by its projectors, of some available channel for a fraternal interchange of views, touching the many important questions of church order and policy, which they, as members of the church Judicatories, are called officially to act upon—often without either the means or the opportunity for that mature consideration so necessary to wise and efficient action.

They suppose the same difficulties to have been felt by others, extensively enough to create a demand for some such journal as is now proposed. Nor will the supposition seem extravagant when it is remembered that in the (O. S.) Presbyterian Church—numbering some 250,000 communicants—there must be not far from 10,000 office bearers: Ministers, Elders, and Deacons; and, in addition to these, an unusual proportion of thinking, working, private members—intelligent and inquiring—concerned, not merely for the interests of the one congregation to which they belong, but also in whatever relates to the honor, efficiency and zeal of the whole church. It is not presuming very largely to expect that among such a body of office bearers, and such a membership, a journal efficiently conducted, and in the right spirit, having as a prominent object the elucidation of the principles involved in the acts and measures of the church, shall not lack patronage.

If, in some of its aspects, our plan seems to be a novelty, it is to be borne in mind that the immense expansion of the Presbyterian body, and of the country at large, has placed the church in this country in novel circumstances. The necessity for a fuller and more general understanding of our principles, as a church, must obviously increase, and the proper application of these principles must become more and more important as the field of the church widens and embraces new and diversified interests.

RELATIONS OF OUR THEOLOGICAL SEMINARIES TO OUR SYSTEM OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT.

THEOLOGICAL SEMINARIES are institutions about forty years old in our denomination. Although this is more than the life time of a generation, it is but a short space in the life time of systems ; whose age is to be measured by centuries ; so that we may regard this system of theological training as still a novelty, in our Church. It certainly shows the unsettled relations of a new thing, in some respects ; and calls for the watchful heed, and correcting hand of the Church, until it is far more matured than now, and until we have ampler experimental assurance than we now have of the safety of its workings.

A local abuse has, some years ago, become obvious at some points, arising out of the disposition of candidates for the ministry to remove their connexion from remote Presbyteries, to some one which meets near the Seminary in which they are studying. The plea for this is, that it saves much expense, and loss of time, which would be incurred by journeys to distant places at inconvenient seasons, to attend the meetings of their Presbyteries, and undergo their trials before them. But the consequence is far more serious than any such temporary inconvenience. A few Presbyteries near or around our prominent Seminaries, are so crowded with candidates, that they have no time nor patience to attend thoroughly to their trials. At every spring meeting, they are called upon to wade through the tedious trials of perhaps five, fifteen, or twenty young men whom they do not know, for whom they have no pastoral affection, whom they do not expect to labor in their bounds ; who will ask for a dismission the hour after they receive their license, and never be seen again on their floor. All the examinations of these candidates, literary, religious and experimental, scientific, Hebrew, biblical, theological, historical, must be conducted ; and a Latin exegesis, popular lecture, popular sermon, and critical exercise must be heard from each of the five, fifteen or twenty, until flesh and blood can endure no longer, and the business of the Presbytery is thrust aside. The consequence is, that the trials are huddled over with a disgraceful mockery of faithfulness. The Professors of the Seminary, who probably have seats in the Presbytery, stand aside from delicacy ; saying that it does not become them to sit a second time in judgment on that scholarship which is their own handiwork. Thus the trials of the candidate for licensure are a mere hoax and sham ; but meantime, he goes forth to his distant region with the *imprimatur* of this most venerable Presbytery upon him ; and the people out there, good mistaken souls, think that, because this venerable Presbytery is so large, and basks under such near and direct beams of a theological Seminary, and has so many learned divines among its

Presbyters, its license must be evidence of peculiar scholarship ! Whereas it is, in fact, the most worthless of all similar documents which are issued throughout our Church.

Now the easy and obvious remedy for this abuse is, for Presbyteries to use a little firmness, and refuse to dismiss their own candidates for such a purpose. The Seminaries do not desire the continuance of such an abuse, nor are they blameable for it : and certain we are, that the afflicted Presbyteries near our Seminaries which now groan under the burden of these multitudinous "parts of trial," will not complain when the evil is arrested.

It is to be feared that a far more serious lack of adjustment has grown out of our Seminary system, than the one just described. Because there is a mature course of study covering three years, pursued in them, the Presbyteries are far too much inclined to take for granted the candidate's scholarship. It becomes a matter of course in many cases, that he who has passed through the full three years, and received his certificate of proficiency from the Faculty, shall have his license. There is too much disposition on the part of Presbyters to take for granted the Faculty's decision ; and to make the Presbyterial trials a merely decent form, instead of an actual and thorough test of attainments. This statement may be repelled as unjust ; and no doubt there are many Presbyters who desire and labor for a more faithful execution of this Presbyterial duty, and who would earnestly join us in saying that the trial and licensure of candidates is made by the constitution a Presbyterial function, that the Faculty of a Seminary is not a Presbytery, and that any custom which either formally or informally transfers to such a Faculty the virtual responsibility is mischievous and unconstitutional. But yet, what is the customary result ? Where is the young man who has been refused license, having passed through a Seminary course. Is it not notorious that among so large a number of Seminary graduates (if we may use the term,) there is as much difference of scholarship as there is of light between the sun and the moon ? And yet we may safely challenge the records of our Presbyteries to produce one case of a candidate, whose imperfections were glaring enough to delay his licensure materially, he having the Seminary testimonial.

When such instances of glaring deficiency occur, there are usually some Presbyters, who are conscientious, who desire to do their duty, and would postpone or refuse license. But the office of taking the lead in such an act is painful, odious and invidious ; and there are always some brethren, in whom goodness of heart has swallowed up good sense, who come to the rescue of indolence and ignorance. " Well, moderator, I doubt whether many of us would not be unable to answer some of these questions any better than this young brother. We all know that it is not the most learned man who makes the most useful minister. With zeal and industry, I don't doubt this young brother will do a great deal of good ; it would be a sin to disappoint that good, by refusing him license, now that the church so

greatly needs ministers." Such are the arguments which we are accustomed to hear on such occasions. It is wholly forgotten that we are a religious Commonwealth, governed by a written constitution, and that every Presbyter is sworn to execute that constitution with exactness ; that a certain grade of scholarship is there required ; and if this requisition is found impolitic and unwise ; the only proper, the only honest course is, to seek first an amendment of the constitution. It is forgotten that the very proof which the Presbytery should have, the only sufficient proof, of that zeal and industry in the candidate, which would make him a useful minister in spite of ignorance, is diligence in improving those means of instruction which the church has provided him for three years ; and that his failure to improve them is the very evidence which the Presbytery is bound to take, showing that he will be as indolent as a minister, as he has been hitherto as a student. It is forgotten that the question for the Presbytery is ; not how useful this young man may be with an imperfect education ; but how useful he might be with the best cultivation he can receive, and that he, and they, owe it to the church and to God, to be satisfied with nothing short of this, his highest usefulness.

We can scarcely conceive of any Presbyterial action more unseemly, and more injurious to the ministry and its great purposes, than these inefficient trials of candidates. Here is a body which sits as a court of Jesus Christ. We do not believe that the civil governments of christian nations ought now to be theocratic ; but the solemnity of the divine superintendence in the government of God's Kingdom is little less than that which awed and elevated the pious judges of the Hebrew Commonwealth. Every church court may say to itself with no little propriety, the words of the 82nd Psalm : "*God standeth in the congregation of the mighty ; He judgeth among the rulers. How long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked ?*" Each Presbyter sits under a solemn oath to execute faithfully the constitution of the church. The body proceeds under these sacred sanctions to perform one of its most important acts, the trying of those who are to be examples and guides to Christ's flock, whose deficiencies, if they have them, may be so extensive a curse ; but it often performs it with a mere mockery of fidelity. The tests actually applied are often so different from those technically described in the constitution, that a school boy may perceive the futility of the proceeding. The candidate is tried in order to see whether he can write Latin, whether he knows well Greek and Hebrew, science and history, theology and interpretation ; and when the trials are carried far enough to make it pretty manifest that he cannot write Latin, and does not know these things in any proper sense, it is moved that Presbytery shall pronounce he does know them, and shall proceed to license. How could it be made more certain that this candidate, so admitted, shall be himself an indolent, inefficient, unfaithful Presbyter all his ministerial life, than by thus signaling his clerical birth day with a general example of Presbyterial unfaithfulness ?

What must be the impression, as to the moral grade and the dignity of the ministry, on the keen, criticising world, or on those men of secular professions, who are pursuing their vocations with an honorable ambition, and conscientious diligence?

Too often the Presbyteries thus relinquish to the Faculties, the virtual responsibility of licensing. But those Faculties do not by any means assume it. They say to themselves, "we are not the Presbytery, the licensing body; however strict our examinations, the Presbyteries may reverse all our verdicts; our action is in no sense final, and therefore we need not be particular." They have no roll call, no police, no "grade of scholarship" accurately applied to all the students, no demerit marks; every student attends recitations and prayers, or studies and writes, with just so much or so little diligence as seems good to his own conscience; and at the end of the three years, every student who has, in form, attended all the examinations, receives his certificate of proficiency. Now is it not the plainest thing in the world, to any one who knows anything of colleges, that where seventy or eighty young men apply for graduation (as is the case annually at our seminaries taken together) and all receive it, the testimonial so conferred ceases altogether to be any evidence of acquirement? At the University of Virginia, nothing is more frequent than the rejection of two-thirds of the applicants in the schools of ancient languages, law and medicine. Wherever there are no rejections, there the testimonials of scholarship *must be worthless*; for among every large collection of human beings, there will always be some inefficient. Thus, the duty of testing the attainments of our candidates is banded from the Presbytery to the Seminary Faculty, and is taken up by neither.

We greatly fear that the result has been produced, which might be reasonably expected: a degradation of theological training, in thoroughness and in conscientious diligence. After all our recent expenditure of money, men, and time on this great cause, the scholarship of our young ministry is losing in depth, what it has gained in extent of surface; in many, the habits of research and knowledge of the learned languages are soon lost, after they enter upon their active duties. The average grade of diligence in the seminaries is not what it should be, and what it is, among the better students of secular institutions. We shall, of course, not be understood as saying that it is as low as the average which we should find in secular institutions, by including all the idle and dissolute who are found there in such numbers along with the diligent. But it is no unfrequent thing to hear candid students in our seminaries avow that they do not there practise as much diligence as they did in the college, when competing for an honour, or studying to attain a standing for graduation, which they knew would be sternly applied. Now the Presbyterian Church should not be satisfied with a diligence in any of her ministry beneath that which is exhibited by the foremost in secular professions. While she has employment and awards for every grade of capacity, even to the humblest, she has no use for any degree of

indolence, or for any but the highest energy. The times demand that she should realize in the zeal of her ministry, the promise by Zechariah : "He that is feeble among them at that day shall be as David, and the house of David as the angel of the Lord before them."

But there are practical difficulties which we fear, will prevent the seminaries from carrying out any such honest system of examinations, as would effectually remedy this state of things. The knowledge that their verdict ought to have, constitutionally, no decisive weight, that it is in no sense final, that it is to be reviewed in all its grounds, and may be utterly reversed, will almost certainly slacken their diligence in making it up. The rejected candidate for their testimonials might at any moment remind them that they were not a licensing body, and might return to flaunt his Presbyterian license in their face. An honest rejection of the deficient candidates would be charged upon them by some, as an arrogant attempt to forestall the independent judgment of the Presbytery, and prejudice the claims of the unfortunate applicant. The Presbyteries would find themselves in a dilemma in weighing the verdicts of the Faculties ; if they disregarded them, they would be slighting the opinions of those best qualified by familiar acquaintanceship, to pronounce on the merits of the applicants for licensure ; if they regarded them, they would be depriving the applicants of a constitutional right, that of having the Presbytery as the sovereign judge of their qualifications.

We would propose, therefore, that the Faculties of our Seminaries should assume a different position and policy, which seems to us accurately conformed to the principles of Presbyterian government. The Presbytery is the master, the judge, the father, of all candidates for the ministry, whether licensed or unlicensed. The theological faculty is but the teaching agent of the Presbytery to train its candidates. Let not the agent assume the functions of master and judge. But at the same time let not the master and judge be ignorant of the results of his agent's labors. In a word, the agent should report all these results to the employer. There his agency ends. This therefore is the appropriate policy for our theological faculties—to keep accurate records of each student's diligence in study, in recitation, and in attention to the ordinances of religion ; of his daily and yearly scholarship as compared with a fixed grade of his energy of character and conscientiousness, as displayed in his academic demeanor. The Faculty should examine at the end of each session into the students' proficiency, and graduate their scholarship accurately. But on all this let it pass no verdict. Let it give no diploma. Let it pass no decree of rejection on any. Let it faithfully report the whole to the Presbytery to which each student belongs. Let the Presbytery when it comes to decide whether the candidate is worthy of licensure, have all the facts before it, so that it may know whether he was remiss or diligent in the recitation room, whether he was neglectful or observant of the means of grace, whether he was wasteful or economical of his time. Then the responsibility of deciding would be wholly placed in fact, as well as in form, where the constitution places it.

It may be objected that Presbyteries might still be lax, and might license candidates concerning whom theological Faculties made unfavorable reports. True; but they would have no pretext, in their relations to the seminaries, for doing so. This unfortunate dividing of responsibilities would be avoided, which is usually the pretext for their neglect by both parties; and though the student who brought bad returns from his teachers might yet be licensed, the knowledge that such returns would be faithfully made, that all his negligences and deficiencies would be publicly reported to that body, which was his spiritual guide and judge, would not a little stimulate to diligence.

Much has been said about the unwillingness of our young men of promise to seek the ministry; and many explanations have been suggested for it. We verily believe that one of the most important is this: that the honor of admission into the ministry has been too easily obtained. The spirited and ingenuous young man feels no inclination to enter the lists for a prize, which he sees bestowed with dishonest and indiscriminating looseness, on the most unworthy competitors. He is disgusted to see that bestowed on indolence and indifference, which he was proposing to win by strenuous exertion. Only the ignoble desire that the prize may be won without exertion or good desert. In illustration, we point to that fact, than which there is none more certain, that in those colleges or universities where a high grade of scholarship is rigidly applied, this strictness is the prime element of their popularity; and this popularity is greatest among the young men themselves: among all those young men who are worth having in a college. On this subject, we would commend to all, the wise remarks of Archbishop Whately, on the University of Oxford; that its history has always shown, literary honors *cease to be sought* whenever they become so easily attainable that nobody fails of getting them. Our unfortunate facility in granting admission to the ministry, has degraded the privilege in the eyes of young men of high spirit and ingenuous impulses. It is only the youth of low aims and grovelling spirit, who is attracted by this too facile reward. Let us elevate the terms of admission, and we shall see more men of elevated character seeking the sacred office.

It may be said, in opposition, that if a Theological Faculty should make such reports of the diligence and scholarship of students, they would be treating them as schoolboys; that such a literary police is a reproach cast upon their principles; that if it has any effect, it can only be by substituting a mere carnal fear, and rivalry, for conscientiousness; thus degrading the nature of the student's motives; and that if a young man has not conscience enough to be diligent, without such stimuli, he is certainly not fit to be a minister.

True: and the very thing we wish to find out, by holding him in the position of a candidate, is, whether he is fit to be a minister. What way so proper to settle that question, as to lay before the Presbytery, the judge in the case, the record of his conscientiousness? And that such a surveillance is an implied reproach on the honor of the diligent student, is certainly not the doctrine of the Apostle, who

teaches us that the same law which is a terror to evil doers, "is a praise to them that do well." The short and complete answer to all such shallow remarks is, that by the same rule, all repressive or punitive legislation in church and State ought to be disused, lest we should seem to imply a suspicion of good people. Let the student show himself a good one, by his conduct; and then the report to his Presbytery will be naught but a testimonial to his honor. Nor is it easy to see how a conscientious student can be made less conscientious by knowing that if he were not so, he would incur certain unpleasant personal consequences. All desire of the approval of the good is not wicked. We can see no harm in a desire to commend one's self to the approbation of God's dear children, seconding the desire for the approval of God. But suppose there should be many cases in which students show none of this high, ethereal conscientiousness, to which even the fear of the blame, and desire of the praise of the good, would be a taint; but in its place exhibit a painful indolence and carelessness? Is not even a little eye-serving industry better than sheer laziness? Practically, we think it is; though either of them would be a sorry quality in a gospel minister. But the philosophy of the mind, and common sense, both concur in teaching that if we would strengthen any virtue which was before weak or deficient in the soul, we must procure the outward exercise of it. It is by acting that it grows. We train our children to kindness by compelling them to forego acts of violence and cruelty. We do not argue that, because an enforced mercy is of no worth in the sight of God, therefore it will be better to permit every indulgence of angry tempers, until their own conscientiousness checks them!

The object of the writer is to commend these thoughts to the reflection and wiser judgment of the Presbyters of our church.

"A THEODICY; OR, VINDICATION OF THE DIVINE GLORY, AS MANIFESTED IN THE CONSTITUTION AND GOVERNMENT OF THE MORAL WORLD." BY ALBERT TAYLOR BLEDSOE, Professor of Mathematics, &c. in the University of Mississippi. New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1853.

THE deepest thinkers have always been the readiest to acknowledge the insoluble difficulties which meet the understanding of man when "sounding on its dim and perilous way" in the discovery of truth: and especially when exploring the plans and dispensations of Him who shrouds Himself in an impenetrable veil of clouds and darkness. They know by many painful experiments, the very narrow sphere in which the human faculties have been ordained and constituted to move; and that the effect of enlarging the circumference of the territory of knowledge, is, according to the striking illus-