

THE
PRESBYTERIAN QUARTERLY.

NO. 25.—JULY, 1893.

I. NATURAL RELIGION AND THE GOSPEL.

ASSUMING that theology is a science, and that it pursues the method of definition adopted by all sciences, that is to say, one derived from the object-matter about which they are concerned, we define it, with others, to be the science of religion. But religion, comprehensively taken, is easily distributable into two kinds: natural religion and evangelical religion, or, briefly, redemption. The latter member of this division is the gospel. These are the only two schemes of religion that God has given to man. The first was communicated to Adam in innocence, the latter to Adam and his race in sin. The gospel, specifically considered, has been developed in great dispensational forms contradistinguished to each other, not as to their essential, but as to their peculiar and distinctive, features; but, generically considered, it is as a scheme of religion contradistinguished to natural religion. It is, therefore, interesting and important to ascertain the relations which subsist between natural religion and the gospel; and we propose to indicate their points of similarity and difference. What are the elements of natural religion? How do they come to be incorporated into the gospel? And what are the peculiar and differentiating elements of the latter scheme?

I. Their points of similarity.

1. Some of their contents are alike. Taking it for granted that the articles which will be enumerated are, in some sense, embodied in the gospel, the question will be whether they were component parts of natural religion.

(1.) The doctrine of God's existence. It cannot be supposed

V. VOLUNTARY SOCIETIES AND THE CHURCH.

THE July number of THE PRESBYTERIAN QUARTERLY for 1892 gave a plain indication that the question in regard to the relation between the church and the societies had not been settled satisfactorily by the action of the General Assembly some months before. The societies are still working on their former basis; some of the larger aggregations of these societies are still operating, although the multiplication of these unions has been, apparently, arrested. There is still a feeling of uneasiness in many minds, and it will probably continue to exist as long as these anomalies remain. The following paper, which was sent up to the Assembly by the Presbytery of Lexington, at the time when the presbyteries were required to send up their views, may possibly contribute to throw some light on the subject. The author of the paper has taken the liberty to add a few paragraphs which tend to make the positions taken a little more clear, but which in no way impair the authority of the piece as endowed with the *imprimatur* of that large and enterprising presbytery.

The General Assembly having sent down a requisition upon the presbyteries to send up papers containing a regular formulation of their views on the subject of societies for Christian work, in the church and out of it, the Presbytery of Lexington would send up the following answer to the demand. The issue is then divided into two branches, each of which requires a separate consideration.

I. SOCIETIES WITHIN THE CHURCH.

1. It is not disputed that the church is the only divinely appointed organization for doing the work of spreading the gospel. No other body can lawfully ordain ministers, exhibit the sacraments, and officially proclaim the terms of salvation. If any outside body or voluntary organization has any right to engage in Christian work, as it will be seen they have, it is only a right to do such parts of Christian work as will not trench on the commission of the church. This question, however, belongs to the second is-

sue, societies out of the church; the question now relates to the work of the church, whether it is to be done by the church itself, properly organized for action, or by societies within the church, but not a part of it. Two things must be clearly distinguished in settling this question: One is, the necessity for a special organization of each particular congregation in order to do its work; and the other is, the real character of societies which are now existing in the church.

In reference to the first of these, the necessity of a special organization of every particular congregation, we have no hesitation in saying that it is indispensable—just as fully indispensable as it is for the church, considered as a whole, or considered in any other of its parts. The church, acting in its larger combinations, as presbyteries or synods, or as a whole in its General Assemblies, must have a special organization, regulated by law, before it can do any work. The general organization of any particular congregation, the general organization of the session and the board of deacons, is not enough to enable them to do their work; a special organization of each is necessary. It is not enough that elders are regularly elected, ordained, and installed; they are then duly empowered to work; but they must meet and be constituted according to law; they must have their officers appointed; they must have their rules and order of business; and they must bring this special organization into operation every time they meet, before they can do any business. This is equally true of the board of deacons. It is equally true of any part of the members of the church when they meet to do the work of any of the existing societies, whose proper relation to the church is now in question. It is, therefore, equally true of all the private members of every church, if they all are ever to be engaged in combined work in the church, and as members of the church. Just here, in all probability, is one reason why so many members of the church are doing so little in the Master's service. There is no special organization of the private members of the church similar to the special organizations which are found necessary in every other part of the church. They are received into the communion of the church; they are thus identified with the general organization of

the church; that is considered sufficient; and they are then left to themselves to do their work. They are generally willing to work, but they hardly know what work to do, or how to do it. It is evident that a great increase of efficiency would result if they came at once under a special organization which would instruct them, and point out work for them to do.

Now, it is evident that such a special organization of the private members of the church may be accomplished by organizing sections of the church into distinct companies of workers, or by organizing the whole number into one body. This would be a question of expediency, not of principle; in either case it would be the church organized for action. Supposing a church organized by sections, as affording a closer resemblance to the societies now in question, the following peculiarities would appear: Each of these organized sections might be called a society, but it would be a society of the church, a society in the church, and of it, and thus be strongly distinguished from a society in the church, but not of it. It would be the church itself organized for action. Furthermore, this special organization would be ordered by the lawful authorities of the church, and remain under their control. These specially organized members would not pass from under the government of the church by reason of their special organization. The session could regulate their work so far, at least, as to prevent any unlawful methods of work. Their reports could be systematically required, and full knowledge of the nature, efficiency, and success of the work done could be ascertained. It is obvious that such organized sections of a given congregation may be just as efficient as the societies which now exist, and yet not be subject to the objection of having an organization distinct from the church, and no part of its organic life. If, then, it is really the law of Christ that his church itself should do his work, an organization of the body of every congregation is as necessary to do its share of the work as it is of any other part of the church, and it has no more right to throw it off on organizations outside of the church than any church court or board has the right to do the same thing. Another important result may be legitimate from this necessity of a special organization of the members

of the church. If the sessions are empowered "to concert the best measures for promoting the spiritual interests of the church and congregation," and are thus bound to try and develop the full energy of the church, the direction of these special organizations is properly theirs, and they may assign every member of the church to his proper place. If any member should then refuse to work, the fault will be his own, and the government of the church will be free from all complicity in his unfaithfulness. But while every session may have the authority to order these special organizations, under the authority to "concert measures," it is unquestionable that the policy would be greatly promoted in many ways by a provision in the constitution requiring the private members of the church to come under a special organization for work, and defining how it should be done. The want of such an organization is probably the greatest defect in our system, and is responsible for the existence of these anomalous societies. The conclusion is unquestionably sound, that the capability of the church itself, in its private members, to receive a special organization for united and regular work, supersedes all necessity for societies in the church, but not of it. A provision in the fundamental law can be easily made.

2. The second thing to be clearly apprehended in settling the issuesent down by the Assembly is, the real nature of the societies now existing, and concerning which this question has been raised. They are beyond doubt societies in the church, but not of it. They are not the creatures of ecclesiastical authority, but voluntary organizations. They are not legally under the government of the church. All their affairs are conducted under their own organization by their own organs, and on their own responsibility. The very nature of the societies determines them as no part of the organization of the church. Suppose some of the members of a particular church should unite to form a temperance society, and another part an anti-gambling society, another a reading society, and yet another an agricultural club. It is obvious that every one of these associations, though composed exclusively of members of the church, and, therefore, in a sense within the boundaries of the church, is entirely distinct from

the church itself. Neither is any part of the organization of the church. Neither is appointed by any authority of the church. Neither is under the government of the church, or at all responsible to any authority of the church. The church cannot, in any consistent or legal way, take any control of them, even if offered to it. Now, a society may be thus formed of members of the church for the promotion of Home or Foreign Missions, but it would be in its nature exactly the same as those we have just supposed. It would be no more a part of the organization of the church than a society for Home or Foreign Missions formed by persons not connected with that congregation at all. It would be a voluntary society in the bosom of the church. More than fifty years ago the Presbyterian Church was torn with convulsions by this question of voluntary societies and a true ecclesiastical action, and it was settled forever, as was supposed, so far as our church is concerned. The question now in issue involves the same principle under a different form. It is just here that exceptions have been properly taken to the societies now existing in the church. The anomalous character of these bodies has been, strongly proved; and the defect on that side of the question is that they have suggested no remedy apparently but the destruction of the societies. On the other hand, the practical usefulness of these societies, and the noble work they have done has been strongly shown; and the defect on that side of the discussion has been, that no attempt even has been effectively made to vindicate the legal and constitutional relation of these societies to the church. As long as this remains unsettled there will be a growing opposition to them. All can be remedied without injury to the societies or any disturbance of their work, by simply altering their relation to the church. Let them come under the control of the government of the church: they will then form something like one of those special organizations of the church which are necessary to do this part of its work. Let them come under the law, and the constitutional and divinely ordered government of the church. Hereafter, if any members of any church wish to form a working society let them petition the session to be so constituted in a regular way; or, what would be better still, let the sessions seek to have the whole

church under their care specially organized for work, in sections or as a whole, and assign every member to a place where all perplexity about what work to do will be settled for them. The efficient and valuable work done by the societies, as now constituted, proves what can be done by similar organizations in a right relation to the church.

By this simple method all difficulties will be removed, constitutional objections will be quieted, the societies saved, and the law of the King, which requires his church to do her work and not throw it upon organizations outside of herself, will be obeyed, to the advantage of all concerned. It will not be for his glory, for the good of the work, or the welfare of his servants to refuse to do it. Touching that branch of this question which relates to unions between the societies of different congregations reaching throughout the bounds of presbyteries, synods, and General Assemblies, the principle which lies at the basis of these societies will control this question also. If the societies are rightly constituted as societies of the church, they are already coëxistent parts of a common unity in the unity of the church at large; and all measures of mutual encouragement, help, and stimulus to activity are warranted by this common bond already created and existing without creating any new body. On the other hand, if they are merely societies in the church, but not of it, the voluntary principle which warrants the primary factors or units of a larger organization will warrant the formation of such a larger association. The church has no legal control over either; both are in their essence voluntary societies outside of the church and beyond its jurisdiction. But then as soon as these larger organizations begin to appear, the peril of the case, which was not suspected so long as the societies were confined to particular congregations, begins to emerge. A new consolidated body appears, lying alongside the church, absorbing the strength which ought to be exerted in the church itself, and taking the position of a body unknown to the constitution and law of the church. This new body is either a part of the church or a body outside of it. If construed as a part of the church, where is its warrant in the law? If not a part of the church—as it evidently is not—the church in none of

its courts has any jurisdiction by law over it. Not only are these wider organizations objectionable because they result in a body neither a part of the church, nor recognized in the constitution, but because they create the appearance of coördinate organizations with the church, and carry the implication that the organization of the church is insufficient and does not admit of accomplishing its end. A voluntary society truly auxiliary to the church may be tolerated, but a voluntary society which claims coördination with the church, and essays to do its work for it, is another matter. Yet these wider unions are the legitimate developments of the principle upon which the societies in the church, but not of it, are formed; and these objectionable wider combinations or unions only illustrate the falsity and danger of the principle. On the other hand, the true principle of special organizations of the church under rightful authority carries no such dangerous consequences. They create no outside body, for they all already constitute one body. They can exhort one another to good works without any peril to the church. They can do all the good which they desire to do without introducing a great voluntary organization into the bosom of the church with all the hazards attached to such policy. The law of the King, which requires his church to do the work assigned to it and not to throw it on any outside organization to do the work for it, is just as binding and just as important for the church at large as it is on and for every particular congregation. There is no aspect in which the work of the church can be contemplated in which it is lawful for the church to depute it to any other body. By the terms of the proposition it is the work of the church, and she must do it.

2. SOCIETIES OUT OF THE CHURCH.

The second branch of the issue tendered by the General Assembly relates to the lawfulness of Christian work done by outside organizations, or voluntary associations. It is clear, on a very brief inspection of this question, that there are two distinct and opposite dangers to be avoided in the settlement of it: One is the danger of sanctioning the usurpation of the functions which our Lord has conferred exclusively upon the church by any merely

human association; the other is the danger of interfering with the right of association for all lawful purposes, which exists in all men under the broad sphere of civil society, free from all responsibility to the church. No transfer of the rights and duties of the church is lawful. No interference with the liberty of individuals and the right of association under the limits of the moral law is lawful. Even when the ends and purposes of an association are not sanctioned by moral law, the church is limited to a protest, and is not entitled to proceed to any coercive measures. But for lawful purposes the right of association is perfect. Among these lawful purposes is the right to associate for various religious ends. The right to use those means of grace by which sinners are led to repentance is not conditioned on the grant of the church, or the power of the keys. The right to pray, to read the Bible, to attend preaching, to talk on the subject of religion, to encourage to repentance, have been granted to all lost sinners by the Master himself. There are certain of the means of grace, such as the sacraments and communion with the church, which are under the power of the keys, as now committed to the church; but these are the means of grace intended to sanctify the believer, not to convert the unconverted. While the church alone is empowered to ordain ministers, exhibit the sacraments, and establish the official preaching of the gospel, every private Christian, nay, every individual man, has the right to inquire or answer on the subject of religion, and to urge men to the obedience of the faith. Whosoever heareth is authorized to say, "Come." Any man is at full liberty to exercise this right in private or in public, to talk to one man or a thousand. Every man is at liberty to give his money to any object he chooses, under two limitations: First, that the object be lawful and right in itself; and second, that he shall have first provided for all the claims which duty has made obligatory upon him. What one may do, two, or ten, or any number, may do, but under the same limitations; consequently the liberty of association warrants the formation of societies outside of the church, for moral and religious purposes, under the limitations specified. Temperance societies, young men's Christian associations, missionary societies, tract and Bible societies, private mer-

cantile firms or larger voluntary societies for publishing religious books are all lawful. No such society becomes unlawful, except when it trenches upon the functions of the church, or hinders the full discharge of the duties of its members. No member of the church is under any general moral obligation to join any such association, for such an obligation would bind every member of the church to do it. If any moral obligation binds any particular individual to do it, that obligation is special and personal, growing out of the particular circumstances and relations of the individual, but it is not universal law, binding upon all. In truth, connection with these associations is, in general, merely a matter of liberty, not of obligation. This radical character of liberty underlies all action in these societies, even the duties which they determine, just because these duties may be abolished at will by quitting the society. The service of God's kingdom is obligatory in the highest sense of the term. It admits, now and then, of what are called free-will and thank-offerings; these are warranted as occasional things; but the regular and habitual discharge of Christian duties are what they are called,—duties, obligatory as such. All duties are, in one sense, required to be free-will offerings—that is, to be freely and heartily performed; but they are distinguished from free-will offerings proper, as these are not prescribed by law, but all duties are prescribed. A member of the church who is also a member of one of these voluntary societies ought to make conscience feel that he has fully discharged his duty as a member of the kingdom of God, before he devotes himself to the service of an association of men. All grants of money for the purposes of such a society ought to be such as he feels at liberty to give. All his gifts to the church ought to be such as he feels bound to give. All uses of personal influence are of the same character. The claims of the church are paramount. Only on the condition of recognizing this is a servant of Christ at liberty to join these subordinate associations at all. His servants ye are to whom ye obey; his servants ye are whose service ye perform. Christ has not yielded the claims of his kingdom to any voluntary association, no matter how lawful it may be. Duty to the kingdom must be discharged before the liberty of association comes into play. If it

be said that a man may owe duties as a member of these voluntary societies, the answer is clear: it is true that a man may owe duties as a member of a bank, or a mercantile firm; but these duties are the creatures of a voluntary action, and are terminable at will by quitting the association. Such duties are not to be equalled with those which are intrinsically obligatory under permanent relations to God, and are not terminable at will. All human associations, even for moral and religious ends, are subordinate, in the dignity and force of their claims, to the kingdom of God in the world, and ought to be so regarded by all loyal servants of the King.

The attitude of the church towards all these voluntary societies which are under the limits specified as lawful, should be an attitude of cordial good-will so long as these limits are observed. If they fall into error, or trespass on the domain of just ecclesiastical authority, the church can only testify against them; it can do no more. They are outside of the church, not under her authority, nor subject to her restraint. As a rule there is no need for these societies in any church whose own organization is efficient for carrying on the work of sending out the gospel. In the system of independency they are essentially necessary; for that system is organically too weak to execute the apostolic commission. It must go out of itself to find a combination strong enough for that purpose; or it may be in the case of a church in its organization competent, but where the spirit of religion is so paralyzed as to prevent active propagation of the gospel, a voluntary association of its more devoted members may be proper as a temporary expedient. But as a general rule we hold it to be a reliable conclusion from the principles of the kingdom, that when the aims of these societies are coincident with the aims of the church, they ought to be nothing more than auxiliaries to the church. So far as they have other aims the church has nothing to do with them.

In view of these various considerations, the Presbytery of Lexington recommended to the General Assembly:

First, To counsel all the existing societies to form proper relations to the church by coming under its government, and thus to avoid censure and hindrance to usefulness arising from their present anomalous relations.

Second, To discourage the formation of these societies beyond the bounds of particular congregations, as tending to the development of a body unknown to the constitution.

Third, To encourage the special organization of all our churches for Christian work under the direction of the sessions.

Fourth, To express a cordial good-will towards all societies for moral and religious purposes, so long as they stand within their proper sphere and observe the limits within which their action is lawful.—*Paper of Lexington Presbytery.*

The logical and practical conclusion from the principles here advocated is a provision in the fundamental law for a special organization of each particular church, either as a whole when small, or by sections when large enough to make it expedient. Into this one or into one of these sections let every member of the church be assigned by order of session as soon as received into the fellowship of the church.

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