

CHAPTER VII.

DUTIES OF A CHURCH.

Though some of the duties of a church have been incidentally referred to in preceding chapters, the subject is too important to be dismissed without a more distinct consideration. It is plain that Christ, in providing for the formation of churches, recognized and sanctified the social principle. A church is a society – a social institution. Its members, while they sustain a supremely sacred relation to their Head, sustain important relations to one another. They are “no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God.” Eph. ii. 19. In this passage two metaphors are employed, one of which represents a church as a commonwealth, and the other as a family. Fellow-citizens with the saints, of a spiritual commonwealth, is one of the Apostle’s conceptions. This citizenship denotes a state the opposite of that indicated by the terms “strangers and foreigners,” or rather strangers and *sojourners*. The citizen has duties to perform and privileges to enjoy, which do not concern the stranger at all, and the sojourner to a very limited extent. The citizen occupies not only an honorable, but a responsible position, and fellow-citizens are expected to act in concert. The other conception of the Apostle represents a church as a household, a family of God. A literal translation would be *domestics of God* – that is, belonging to his family. The point we make is that the members of a church, whether considered as fellow-citizens of God’s commonwealth, or as belonging to his family, have something to do. Their duties are urgent, imperative, sacred.

1. They owe duties to one another. – Paul in one place refers to the self-edification of a church. His language is “unto the edifying of itself in love.” There is something at fault with every church that does not build itself up on its most holy faith. There should be constant growth

in grace. And as the thrifty plant or vigorous tree grows in all its parts, so should there be spiritual growth in all the members of a church. They must abound in supreme love to Christ and in fervent love for one another.

Christian love is the great duty of church members, which, when faithfully performed, secures the performance of all other duties that they owe one another. If they remember the words of Jesus – “a new commandment give I unto you that ye love one another” – they will not forget the many ways in which this love may express itself. Toward the pastor it will show itself in respect for his teachings, in obedience to his admonitions, and in imitation of his example, so far as he follows Christ. It will provide an adequate pecuniary support for him that he may give himself to his work, unperplexed with cares concerning the things of this life.

Christian love will prompt the members of a church to do good to one another as they have opportunity. “To do good” is a very comprehensive phrase. It is generic and includes under it all the specific methods of doing good. It embraces all forms of labor for the welfare of the body and specially those which concern the soul. It does not overlook the interests of time, but looks supremely to the interests of eternity.

There is another inspired expression deserving special notice – “forbearing one another in love.” This implies that church members will have occasion to exercise their forbearance. Alas, they often have. Their long-suffering is tried, their patience put to the test. Sometimes it seems wonderful how much they can bear and forbear. It would be inexplicable, but for the words, “IN LOVE” forbearing one another in love. Love covers a multitude of faults. It makes Christians look leniently on the frailties, weaknesses, and imperfections of their fellow Christians. It makes them bear patiently what they cannot approve, and bear it till it assumes a form that calls for the

exercise of that discipline which the Lord Jesus has given his churches “for edification, and not for destruction.” “Forbearing one another in love,” would be a suitable church motto.

In treating of the duties which church members owe one to another, it is well to refer briefly to the duty of

Seeking out and encouraging whatever ministerial gifts there may be in the membership.

This is a very important matter. We doubt not there are many young men in our churches who ought to preach the gospel. They have impressions on the subject. They look on the work of the ministry as so responsible that they recoil from it with trembling. They feel their incompetency; and, in view of ministerial duties and trials, repeat the stereotyped question, “Who is sufficient for these things?” These are the very men who need to be sought out and encouraged. Their views of the greatness of the work of preaching the gospel are correct. Their self-distrust is altogether commendable. The ablest of the Lord’s ministers once felt as they now feel. They need instruction. Let them be encouraged to speak and exhort in prayer meetings, and soon it will be seen that they possess ministerial gifts. It devolves specially on pastors, and the more judicious of the brethren, to train these *future* ministers for usefulness; and, wherever money is needed for the education of any of them, the churches ought cheerfully to furnish it. There is no pecuniary investment so productive as that made in ministerial education. But it must ever be remembered that piety is the preacher’s first and most important qualification, without which the greatest talents, and the richest stores of learning, will make him as “sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.”

2. *A church owes duties to the world.* – The term world is here used to denote impenitent sinners. Every Christian by the very process which makes him a Christian is brought under obligation to do what he can to lead others to Christ. And when individual believers are

embodied in churches their obligations not only remain in full force, but the facilities of usefulness are increased. Church members must recognize these obligations, and avail themselves of these facilities. They must labor for the salvation of souls under the distinct impression that the grace which has saved them can save others. Thus only can they labor in faith and hope. The following are some of the methods in which church members may perform their duties to impenitent sinners.

1. *By personal conversation with them about their souls.* – Christians must not forget that the faculty of speech has been given for important purposes, and should be used accordingly. Few things are more to be desired among church members than a consecration of the power of speech. Conversational talent needs to be improved and sanctified. How can the tongue be so worthily employed as in speaking of the “great salvation?” What theme so momentous, so precious, so sublime? Christians must not only “speak often one to another,” but they must converse with the impenitent about their souls.

It is not important that their ideas be presented with logical precision and rhetorical beauty; but it is indispensable that the love of Christ animate their hearts, and prompt their speech. The members of every church should see to it that every impenitent sinner within the bounds of the congregation is conversed with on the subject of religion and urged to accept the salvation of the gospel. It must not be said in truth by even one of the unregenerate “no man cared for my soul.” Such a declaration truthfully made would be a reproach to any church. Let it not be made; but let church members show their interest in the welfare of the impenitent by personal conversation with them on the weighty concerns of eternity.

2. *By the maintenance of Sunday-schools.* – The Sunday-school is not designed to supersede, but to aid family instruction. It must be remembered always that religious training in

the family can not be dispensed with. Parental obligations can no more be transferred than parental relations can be changed. But it may be assumed as a fact, that those parents who are most faithful in “bringing up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,” most gladly avail themselves of the aid furnished by Sunday-school instruction. And then how many ungodly parents are to be found every where who are incompetent to give their children religious training, and who would not, if they were competent! Are these children to be uncared for? No, nor those whose parents are dead. The sympathies of all generous hearts are enlisted in behalf of orphans. All children are suitable subjects for the Sunday-school. Whether their parents are pious, or ungodly, or dead, let all the children be gathered together to receive religious training on the Lord’s Day. Superintendents and teachers of Sunday-schools must remember that Scriptural instruction is the one thing to be kept in view. Literary instruction, properly so-called, is given in week-day schools. The impartation and reception of Scriptural knowledge are the distinguishing features of the Sunday-school. Great care should be exercised in the selection of Sunday-school libraries. Books inculcating erroneous views must be rejected, and the literature provided for the children must be religious and evangelical.

Sunday-school teachers should make it a point to urge, by personal appeal, the claims of the gospel on every scholar. Every such appeal ought to be preceded, accompanied, and followed by earnest prayer to God for his blessing. Without his favor no effort to do good will be successful; with his approving smile no effort will be unsuccessful.

It is proper to say a few words as to the relation of Sunday-schools to the churches. Ordinarily, these schools are formed by the churches and are permitted to use their houses of worship. They should be carried on under the general direction of the churches, and be held responsible thereto. A church should regard its Sunday-school as one of the agencies by which

to meet its obligations to train the rising generation in the fear of God. And when this is the case the church is really at work in the Sunday-school. It would be a happy circumstance if facts would authorize this definition of Sunday-school: -- A CHURCH ACTIVELY AT WORK ON THE LORD'S DAY FOR THE GOOD OF THE CHILDREN.

“The classes in the school,” it has been well said, “should be composed, not simply of *children*, but also of the grown up people in the neighborhood – grand-fathers and grand-mothers, fathers and mothers, and men and women. The school should be considered one of the regular meetings of the church. Pastors should summon the *entire* people to assemble on the Lord's Day, either as teachers or as scholars. It should be considered as strange for fathers and mothers to stay away from the Bible classes as for boys and girls to absent themselves from the Sunday-school. That pastor who will speak to his congregation on this topic three minutes before sermon each Lord's Day for one year, and then work to get up classes as he may be able through the week, will be astonished at the results. And ten years of such efforts by all the ministers of the gospel, would work a complete revolution in these churches. Instances might be given to show that a church sometimes more than doubles its power by employing its private members in this way.”

3. *By the distribution of the Bible, Religious Books, Tracts, etc.* -- This is another method by which a church may do good to the impenitent. God has given to the world one book. It is unlike all other books. It carries with it, wherever it goes, the credentials of its inspiration and claims the reverence due to a communication from heaven. The Bible is God's gift to the world. It was not given to the white man, nor the red man, nor the black man, *as such*, but to universal man. This volume alone unfolds the way of salvation by telling the wonders of the cross. It is revealed truth by means of which the soul is regenerated, sanctified, and prepared for heaven.

Who is to see to it that this precious book is distributed at home and abroad? It can not be reasonably expected that God's enemies will do it. His friends must engage in the work. They know something of the value of the Bible, and their sense of its worth must prompt them to circulate it. Every church should consider itself, by virtue of its constitution, a Bible Society, and should aid in the great work of disseminating divine truth throughout the world. It is a question that may well be pondered with solemn interest: *Will God, in his providence, long permit any people to return his word, if that people do not give it to others?* Let every church think of this.

The distribution of Religious Books, Tracts, and Periodicals is a work kindred to the circulation of the Scriptures. Religious Books are reproductions and expositions of some of the truths of the inspired volume. A good book brings a portion of divine truth into contact with the conscience and heart. And this is the reason why the unobtrusive tract is so useful.

A special use should be made of the tracts and pamphlets that set forth the distinctive principles of the denomination. THE PUBLICATION SOCIETY is publishing a very large variety of tracts, pamphlets, and books. Copies of these should be circulated by hundreds of thousands. As a people, we claim that certain great truths have been committed to our care. For what did the Lord commit them to us? – to pass them over as unimportant? We dare not do this. These principles are not ours to do with as may seem most agreeable. They are Christ's. He has honored us with their custody, not for ourselves, but for others. Upon us he has placed the especial responsibility of commending them. In common with all other Christians it is our duty to bear testimony to all truths, but *specially to our distinctive principles*. We owe it to Christ our Lord, and we owe it to our brethren dearly beloved, but in error, to make known these principles to the very utmost of our ability.

The mission of Baptists will not be attained by apologizing to the world for an existence, by asking pardon of other denominations for differing from them, or by begging that we may not be esteemed as bigots. We must become aggressive in spirit, positive in the advocacy of our principles.

And these truths can be made known best by the free and widespread circulation of our denominational tracts, pamphlets and books. Let them, then, be freely used. Tracts cost but little – only one dollar for a thousand pages sent free of postage. What an irresistible, all-pervading power might be called into being by the churches, if they would be address themselves with determination and perseverance, to the gradual but perpetual distribution of these tracts, pamphlets, and books!

How greatly might converts be guarded from erroneous views and practices, be indoctrinated in the principles of the gospel and faith of the church, and be made substantial Christians, if with the hand of fellowship, the pastor could give to each one received the best small work on Baptism, another on Communion, and another still on the Duties of Church Members! And the pastor should not hesitate to ask the church to supply him with these aids in his work.

5.By sustaining the cause of missions. – The missionary enterprise is usually referred to in its two aspects – Home and Foreign. There is full Scriptural authority for the presentation of both these aspects. The commission of Christ to the Apostles of itself furnishes it: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature: He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” Mark xvi. 15, 16. It is clear from this commission that the gospel is to be preached at home and abroad; for it is to be preached in all the world. It is to be proclaimed to all the nations; for it is to be proclaimed to every creature.

“Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” Acts i. 8. This was the programme of missionary labor in apostolic times. How suggestive the words, *Jerusalem – all Judea – Samaria – uttermost part of the earth.* This was the plan and zealously was it executed.

It may be laid down as an axiom that no church, not animated with the missionary spirit, can be in a healthful, prosperous state. The missionary spirit is the spirit of the gospel – the spirit of Christ. Of every church it ought to be said in truth as of the Thessalonians: “From you sounded out the word of the Lord.” The sound should go forth till it reaches the remotest limits of the earth. It is the sound of the word of the Lord. The word of the Lord is the gospel by which sinners of all nations may be saved. “For whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have no heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?” Romans x. 13-15.

Indifference to the cause of missions is cruelty to immortal souls. How are sinners in our own land, or in foreign lands, to be saved without the gospel? Ought not those who have the gospel to send it to those who have it not? Earth’s wretched millions are starving for “the bread of life,” and this bread is in the custody of the churches. Dare they refuse to distribute it among the perishing at home and abroad? No church can perform its duties to the world without sustaining the cause of missions – without giving, according to its ability, to spread the gospel of the grace of God. Praying without giving is presumption, and giving without praying indicates a self-dependence, offensive to God. Let it be said, as of Cornelius, so of every church: “Thy prayers and thine alms are come up as a memorial before God.” When prayers and alms go together, there is a happy conjunction.

NOTE – The subject of this chapter – Duties of a Church – might be expanded into volumes.

Our narrow limits have required its compression. It may be said, in conclusion, that a church with the New Testament for its charter of incorporation is *constitutionally* a society, organized for the promotion of all Christian objects. These objects should be prosecuted so zealously by all church-members as to make it apparent that no secret or secular association is needed to carry forward any benevolent or Christian work. And besides, whatever good church-members do, should be done in their *Christian* character.