

*On the duty of churches to provide for the instruction and improvement of persons called by them to the ministry; previous to their entering on the work. – 1797.*

Beloved Brethren,

The answer we are about to give to the query inserted for discussion in our Minutes of the last year, respecting the obligations of the churches, to make provision for the instruction and improvement of the persons they call to the ministry, will be in the affirmative. But under such limitations and explanations as you will find in the following view of the subject; which, with all plainness and Christian candor, we submit to your serious consideration.

The question evidently respects those persons who have received no education, or so small a proportion of it, that they remain ignorant of important subjects of knowledge; such as are either comprehended in the nature and evidence of religion, or intimately connected with them; and who, of course, are unacquainted with some of the best means of attaining divine knowledge, and of communicating it with advantage to others. To those who are already acquainted with these subjects, the question will not apply.

Preparatory to the discussion of the reasons on which we found our answer, let us inquire, What are we to understand by an obligation? What by the instruction and improvement to be bestowed on candidates for the ministry? What by the service to be performed by a church in respect of such improvement?

Obligations are either of duty, of gratitude, or of voluntary engagement. The first, in religion, supposes divine appointment; the second, benefits received; the third a regular and lawful pledging of our truth and honor. There are instances where all these reasons of obligation are combined, and act with united force, to stimulate to action, or restrain us.

The education, or improvement, contemplated in the query, does not consist in a gingle, or pomp of words; in idle speculations; trifling criticisms; or a vain philosophy: but in solid, rational, and useful knowledge. In knowledge which comprehends an acquaintance with the construction, force, and beauty of language; the right exercise of reason and judgment; and with the laws and powers of nature, of the material world, as established by the Great Creator; to which it adds, just views of God himself, his perfections and government; the nature, properties, and powers of created spiritual beings; their relation to God, and to each other; their dependence, duties, and obligations; the history of events, in which the providence of God, the interest of the church, and the truth of religion, have been, and are deeply concerned; and which, especially, brings us into a clear and well digested acquaintance with the doctrines of revelation, concerning our gracious Redeemer and his glorious salvation.

The duty of the church, in respect of such improvement, according to our ideas, consists in an attentive, conscientious regard to the subject; in a prudent faithful use of the best means in their power for obtaining the benefit; and in contributing freely of their substance to defray necessary expenses, in the case of poor candidates. To which may be added, the exertion of talents by those who are able to give instruction.

That the churches are under obligations to pursue this course, with persons called by them to the ministry, will appear – from the importance of such attainments to those

who fill the sacred office – to the church, and to the cause of God in the world, in general; for the support and defense of which, ministers are appointed. The improved minister not only appears to great advantage in his ministrations, as “A workman who need not be ashamed, rightly dividing the ‘word of truth;’” but is really fitted for a wider field of action, and more extensive usefulness, than he could hope to attain without such assistance. He is freed from many embarrassments, under which he must otherwise labor; and performs his work with more acceptance, profit and pleasure to his hearers. By such assistance he is prepared for an investigation of the facts and doctrines of the bible; and enabled to explain them, for the instruction of others. Many of these, relating to remote antiquity, consisting of mysterious and sublime subjects, and profound reasoning, and expressed in all the rich variety of figurative language; require the most enlarged and correct acquaintance with things, both human and divine to do them justice. How often, for want of a proper knowledge of the history of the times to which a subject or fact relates; or of the construction of an expression, sentence, or argument, respecting some interesting truth, have men, even while they stood in the place of teachers, run into gross and pernicious errors, and been instrumental to draw others into the same mistake. Or, at least, have given, in their discourses, such a mangled, disjointed account of the subject as to fill the enlightened friends of truth with shame and sorrow; and furnished occasion to the enemies of religion, for ridicule and triumph. The ignorance of the clergy, during the middle ages of Christianity, has, with great reason, been assigned as a leading cause of that flood of error and corruption which overspread the church during this period. It was this also, which contributed to make them the willing, convenient tools of arbitrary, rapacious monarchs, and of those presuming, lordly Pontiffs, who claimed sovereignty over the church, over nations, and the consciences of men.

A man of plain good sense and real piety, may be greatly useful as a teacher, though not possessed of scientific knowledge, especially among a people not greatly improved by science, and while the preaching of the most obvious and practical doctrines of the gospel is principally required. But when controversies on intricate and delicate subjects arise; when men of genius and learning appear in opposition to the truth, and labor to subvert the faith; if there are not, at least some, able and learned advocates to stand forth in their defense, the cause of God, according to the ordinary course of events, must suffer. The infidel, or Deist, denies the authority of the scriptures, and with pretensions to learning, confidently asserts, for the encouragement of his associates, and to the grief and embarrassment of the uninformed Christian, that Christianity is an imposture; that both history and reason make against it. Others who profess to believe the scripture, yet endeavor to undermine its most sacred and precious doctrines, or change its ordinances, by criticisms on its history and original languages; as well as by subtle reasonings. To instance in one or two cases: the universalist asserts that the Hebrew and Greek words, which are used to declare the future punishment of the ungodly, do not express eternal duration; on which, with other arguments, he founds the consolation of the vicious, and inspires them with the pleasing hope of enjoying, after a comparatively short suffering, a happy immortality, as well as the pleasures of sin in time. The Socinian encourages his proud reasoning against the sacred mystery of the trinity, endeavors to degrade our Redeemer, and sap the great pillar of our hope, the divine atonement, by similar criticisms: pretending that he can prove some of the most expressive sentences in the book of God, which militate the most against his sentiments,

to be spurious, and to have been added by Trinitarians since the days of primitive Christianity. These, with a variety of other cases which might be produced, serve to prove, that the faithful defender of truth must, in discharge of his trust, call in learning to the aid of zeal, candor, and piety, if he would labor with success. And if some thus qualified, are necessary; more are desirable. Yea, that in this respect, “The weak may be as David, and the house of David as the angel of the Lord.”

A consideration of additional weight, is taken from the part the church is appointed to act, in calling persons to the ministry and from the necessity of our performing the work of God in the best manner we are capable. If the church is to exercise a judgment and care with respect to the persons who enter on the ministry; that those who have gracious qualifications and spiritual gifts may be encouraged; and presumers restrained; then, certainly, reason teaches, that the approved, should not only be encouraged, but assisted in obtaining all necessary and useful qualifications. If this improvement is of such vast importance to the cause of religion, the interest of the church, and the honor of God; how can a church be excusable in calling a person to the ministry, without making suitable exertions to obtain it? Is it not required that we should honor God with the best of our services; and is not his displeasure strongly expressed against those, who, while they have “A male in their flock, vow and sacrifice to the Lord a corrupt thing?” Such are our services when not our best. We are also informed, that “To him who knoweth to do good, and doeth it not; to him it is sin.” The governing spirit and sentiments of a church having ordinarily great influence with its ministers; it may be naturally expected, that while a church is inattentive to this rule of duty, very little attention will be shown to it by those they call to the ministry. But should they be disposed to do so; yet having no prospect of assistance from the church, they must be discouraged, if in indigent circumstances, and reduced to the necessity of either engaging in the work under a conscious and great deficiency; or of relinquishing what, with pure motives and generous sentiments, they would willingly engage in for the glory of God. But nothing is more common than for zealous minds, in the ardor of their desire to engage in the active duties of this office, to overlook their deficiencies. The most of those, however, who engage from right motives, soon feel their want of the qualifications we have stated, and then lament they have failed to obtain such assistance. If they do not discover their want, their case is to be lamented.

Another reason in proof of the obligation of churches, is the practicability of the measure. We do not mean that it is universally practicable, or necessary, to bestow on all who are admitted to the ministry, what is commonly called a liberal education. The age, matrimonial connection, and other circumstances of some candidates may obstruct it: the poverty of the churches they are connected with, and the want of learned men among them, may also greatly prevent it on their part; and these circumstances must be considered as affording providential direction. But in every case, where the duty is faithfully attended to, some useful information may be arrived at by the help proper books, which may be obtained without great expense; and by the occasional assistance of those who have themselves obtained some advantages. A good acquaintance with the language in which a person is to perform his ministrations, and the study of divinity, are certainly, with a little exertion, practicable to all. In other cases, and especially with respect to young men, it would not be difficult to go much farther. The greatest difficulties may be expected in the first exertions; and particularly among churches who

have been in the habit of neglecting this duty. For when learned ministers are procured in some churches, and, from the encouragement given to education, seminaries of learning begin to be generally formed among them, the difficulties are chiefly surmounted. But the greatest obstacles to the execution, or adoption, of such a plan, are low contracted sentiments, and an avaricious disposition. For where there is really a willing mind, and just sentiments, much can, and will be done. It is obvious that the same sentiments and disposition which obstruct a measure of this nature, operate likewise to the neglect of that necessary and important duty of supporting gospel ministers, actually employed in the church; and this is common in some places, notwithstanding God hath positively appointed, "That those who preach the gospel, should live of the gospel." This neglect frequently extends also, to houses erected for the worship of God, which are in many instances found to be mean and contemptible, while those who worship in them, and are guilty of all these neglects, dwell at ease, in affluence, and can spend considerable sums for their own personal convenience, pleasure or vanity. O! how long shall it be said in truth, of churches as well as individuals, "All seek their own; not the things which are Jesus Christ's?" How long shall that solemn interrogation remain in its full force: "Is it time for you, O! ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses, and my house to lie waste?" In primitive times it was otherwise, when the "Deep poverty of a church, contributed to the riches of their liberality." But we are not to estimate our ability in such a case as this, by what an individual church can do. A subject of such vast importance should be the object of united efforts; churches should combine their strength, and bring their contributions to a point of common interest and usefulness. In this case we may not only hope, soon to see, many persons furnished with useful education for the ministry, where the cause of God now languishes for want of them; but also seminaries of learning erected for this purpose, and libraries stored with the most valuable productions, of genius, learning and piety, formed for the diffusion of necessary and useful knowledge.

The scripture example, and doctrine, have been considered by some, as making against the education of ministers; and while this is believed, it is no wonder if some well-disposed and pious persons are backward, from conscientious motives, to engage in an undertaking of this nature; though we fear the true reason why many embrace this sentiment, is the indulgence it gives to their enthusiasm, indolence, and selfishness. But we shall undertake to show, that scriptural authority is in favor of our argument. If our Savior *did* choose a number of men to be ministers, who had not received liberal education, previous to his calling them; *yet* the learning Paul, Luke, and Apollos, did not occasion their rejection. The apostles, who were of the former description, were taken under the immediate care and teaching of Christ himself, for more than three years (the time of his personal ministry) before they fully entered on their great work. They not only saw his example and miracles, and heard his public discourses, in which he spoke as never man spoke; but in times of retirement and privacy, he explained all things to them, by particular instruction: and even after this, he bestowed on them inspiration and miraculous gifts, in addition. Grace they had received before. In these miraculous gifts, which included the knowledge of languages, they possessed much more than can be expected from the most liberal education now. Christ therefore, by his example, has shown us the importance of knowledge and improvement, in persons called to the ministry; and as he does not bestow miraculous gifts in these days, such improvement (opportunities being afforded) is recommended to us as the object of our pursuit, in the

use of rational and common means. That miraculous teaching has ceased, is evident; for may we not ask, who has received the knowledge of languages, of history, of reasonings, or even of the more humble parts of science, reading and writing, by any other than human means? The conferring on the apostles their endowments, in an extraordinary manner, was admirably adapted to give evidence to the truth of the gospel, and the power of the Redeemer; for which reason divine wisdom chose such as were originally unlearned and ignorant men; but no conclusive argument can be formed from hence against the use of *ordinary* means in the *ordinary* days of Christianity. Setting aside the extraordinary endowments of the apostles; how great must have been their advantages from the personal instruction of their Lord, when he condescended, in the capacity of a man, to act as the minister of his own gospel? And how considerable, though vastly inferior to theirs, might be the improvement of a student for the ministry now, in employing the same space of time they did, under the care and teaching of an able and enlightened servant of the Redeemer? This would be but just copying, after the scriptural example. If we attend also to the discourses of Christ, we will find him treating on subjects of nature, on the political state of the nations, the transaction of business in civil and social life, and the interpretation and decisions of law, as well as on subjects purely divine; and that, with such accuracy and depth of thought, as plainly demonstrate that he intended his disciples should understand them well; and consequently that, when, as ministers, they should have occasion to handle these subjects, they might do it with judgment and propriety. The conduct of the apostles, in this respect, was similar to the Lord's. In Paul it is very conspicuous: Timothy and others, were taken to attend him, to receive instruction, in the quality of disciples. The particular instructions given to Timothy in writing, and which refer to others already received, were designed by the Holy Ghost, and are accordingly preserved, for the benefit of ministers in all after ages. By these he is directed to give attention to reading, and to study, to show himself approved; and he is exhorted to hold fast the form of sound words, as well as sentiments or doctrines, which he had heard of the apostle. The exhortation to the Colossians to beware that they were not spoiled through philosophy and vain deceit, respects the Platonic, Pythagorean, and other systems of heathen philosophy, which formed the different systems of heathenish religion; and which, being founded on, or intimately connected with the most erroneous principles, were, in their nature and tendency, subversive of true religion. But we cannot consider the apostle as discouraging the study of philosophy, as founded on, or connected with Christian principles; which hath truth, and the wonderful works of God for its objects; for in this case, he would have condemned himself; and, what is more, censured the conduct of his Lord: who as we have had occasion already to observe, discoursed on such subjects.

We pass over the arguments which arise from the scriptural representation of faithful ministers, as able to feed the church with knowledge; and to bring out of their treasures, things new and old – The exhortation to grow in knowledge, as well as in faith and love – And the censure passed on those who, while they ought to have been teachers, stood in need of being again taught, themselves, the first principles of the oracles of God. These with a variety of other subjects, illustrative of our general argument, confined as we are to narrow limits, we must necessarily omit. In fine, the scriptures are so far from discountenancing the plan which is here laid down, that they furnish strong, and, as we think, conclusive arguments in its favor.

But that no mistakes may take place in your minds, we add, that it is far from being our intention to represent human learnings, as a sufficient, or the principal qualification for the gospel ministry. We only consider it as an handmaid to grace – an assistant to spiritual qualifications: and are assured the learned, as well as the unlearned, must depend, for their ultimate success, on the mighty aid of celestial grace. We acknowledge also, with pleasure, and with gratitude to God, that some have been raised up, and still exist in the church, who, though they had but small advantage from education, are not only men of piety and zeal; but able ministers of the New Testament. Learning by some has been idolized; and it is no wonder that when thus put, in our estimation, into the place of gracious qualifications and the Spirit's influence, it should be rendered impotent, and be as dry breasts. But this furnishes no just reason for its being despised or neglected, in respect of its right use and application. For this use (as we have seen) matter of fact, the highest reason, the authority of scripture, and the example of Christ, plead.

If, therefore, it is enjoined, by divine command, that we render our best services to God, and be zealous for the honor of his sacred cause – If in this view we are taught to pray that his kingdom may come, and that he may send forth laborers into his harvest – If our obligations to our Redeemer are infinite, and the reasons for our gratitude without number – If we have by solemn, covenant transactions, surrendered ourselves to God, and engaged all we are and have to be laid out, ordered and disposed of by him, for his own glory – And, if this plan of preparing candidates for the ministry, by a previous course of study and improvement, is a measure evidently calculated to answer the noblest purposes in religion, and is supported by scripture, reason, and experience; -- Then, surely, we may conclude in the most decided manner, that the churches of Christ are under real and great obligation, to reduce it to practice; and that the obligation extends to the best improvement of their ability and opportunities.

Permit us, therefore, dear brethren, to exhort you, in the exercise of tender affection, and with concern for the honor of our Redeemer, to a serious and faithful discharge of this duty. If ever the call of Providence united with the voice of reason and revelation, to enforce a duty, we may consider it so addressed to us on this occasion. How numerous and bold are the sons of Infidelity, and the advocates for error, in various forms? How many of these possess the advantage of education, some to a superior degree! On the other hand, how small, comparatively, is the number of our ministers who have received any considerable advantages of this kind, to fit them for the contest; and how many, in consequence of the former remissness of churches, mourn, at this time, their want! The improvements which have been rapidly made in this land of light and liberty, where population, wealth, civilization, and science, are daily advancing; furnish also, powerful motives to action, and afford a pleasuring hope, that becoming exertions will be crowned with abundant success. O! Let it not be said, that our supineness retards the happiness and rising glory of our beloved country! But especially, let it not be said, that it renders our love to Christ, and zeal for his cause, doubtful; that it is the means of keeping the church in a state of childish weakness, while it should be growing up to maturity – That it leaves the avenues of approach open, and the battlements of Zion in a manner unguarded to the assailing foe!

For the general adoption and success of the measure we advocate, much depends on the spirit and exertion of those now in the ministry; and we earnestly entreat them to

give it their most firm and determined support. Some have suggested, that those ministers who have not enjoyed the advantages of education themselves, are, and will be averse to the undertaking; from an apprehension that their popularity and influence would be lessened by the introduction of such as are possessed of superior advantages.

But as the reasoning on which such an objection is founded, is fallacious, as far as it applies to truly pious and useful men; so the supposition conveys such an unworthy idea of the persons capable of forming it that we can scarcely consider it admissible that such can be the sentiment of a *Christian minister*. Such, surely, would rather say, of any one who could better perform the service of their Lord, “He shall increase, but I shall decrease.”

We need not inform you, dear brethren, that a plan, of a public nature, founded on this principle has been already established among us; that when under consideration, it had the general approbation of your delegates in Association; and that it has already begun to produce good effects. Some churches are entitled to much commendation for the support they have given it. Happy should we be, could we say as much of all!

We shall only add, that if the reasons we have adduced, operate as we think they should, and the churches are disposed to come forward and make becoming exertions; the way is open before them; the work is already begun – the business in a train; and if regularly pursued will, we doubt not, not only answer the important purpose of fitting young candidates for the ministry, by leading them through a previous course of suitable studies; but might be made exceedingly beneficial to those already engaged in the work, by furnishing them with the most proper books for attaining useful knowledge.

It affords us much pleasure to find, by your letters, that peace and unity generally abound among you; but we are sorry to consider that the languishing state of religion, so often lamented, still continues.

Our meeting has been peculiarly peaceful and harmonious. We thank God, the father of mercies, for such favorable opportunities of cultivating Christian acquaintance with each other, and for the exercise of reciprocal, brotherly affection. Let us, dear brethren, unite in fervent and constant supplications at the throne of grace, that we may be visited with a refreshing from Jehovah’s presence; that we may behold, and hail the triumphs, of our all-conquering and gracious Redeemer. With earnest desire for your present and eternal felicity, we remain,

Your affectionate Brethren, &c.