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ARTICLE VI.

SUPERFLUOUS CHURCHES.

BY FREDERICK W. PALMER, AUBURN, N. Y.

I. THE SCANDAL.

How to do away with superfluous churches is a problem that must be faced. It comes near being the most difficult religious task in this land of sectarian enterprise. Every denomination has its task cut out for it, and the job will be both drastic and delicate.

The situation and the scandal of it are notorious. In almost every hamlet and crossroads are found little churches with no visible reason for existence, except denominational stubbornness or the factions of the fathers. They violate dictates of economy and efficiency, belittle the big religion of Jesus, and caricature the apostolical idea of the church. Note the churches utterly insignificant in membership and resources sprinkled over the columns of the yearbooks, and one is hard put to it to obey the Scriptural injunction, "Despise not the day of small things." It is not surprising that the National Government has been impressed by these features of every census, and has lately been making a study of overlapping religious effort. As a field for conservation is it not worthy to be ranked along with forests and water power?

Through the courtesy of the Census Bureau, and of Mr. Joseph A. Hill, Division Chief, I have been permitted to see some tabulations and they reveal over wider areas the same discreditable facts we are all familiar with locally.

Here are a few that will serve as illustrations, — all from central New York. In the hamlet of S. are a Methodist church of thirty-two members, an Episcopal of twenty-two, and a Universalist of seventeen. The village of C. supports two Baptist organizations and three Methodist, totaling 227 communicants. In the town of W. are three folds of a combined membership of fifty-three. In thirty-five towns of adjoining counties, there were fifty-two churches with not over fifty communicants each! Of these, twenty-five have thirty members or under, while three report a membership, respectively, of nine, eight, and five. The conclusion is irresistible. In these four counties the churches generally are small. Most of the fifty-two should cease to be, after having thrown in their weight where it will do most good!

Are all denominations alike responsible for this state of things? From the statistical tables some appear to be sinners above others. One minor sect is reported with seven churches of from five to thirty-seven members each, and all but one of them located in towns provided with several other denominations. Another, a prominent division of the Lord's army, maintains ten churches with an enrollment of from nine to twenty-six members; and they, too, located where there are other folds not too large to appreciate what those feeble flocks might bring to their pews and treasuries.

The task of elimination if not done by ecclesiastical surgery will be attended to in another way. I was told awhile ago that within six or eight miles of the village of M. thirteen churches had been abandoned. The slow method by starvation or spiritual atrophy can be depended upon, and the process will be accelerated with the spread of intelligence and a growing sense of the folly and waste. Less discreditable for the cause, more likely to conserve the units of piety in

the wasting church, much better for the dignity of Christianity, to attend to this matter ourselves than to leave it to nature and the contempt of men. Show to a doubting world that ecclesiastical policy is able to rise above tradition and personal feelings in order to do the thing which is right. These churchlets are mostly superfluous. The denominations which are responsible in the several localities must clean house of this reproach. Those that have been most active in creating these unfortunate situations have perhaps excelled in missionary zeal, but they should not be excused on that score.

There is a percentage of small churches which possess a *raison d'être*,—but what? What reasons can be given for the perpetuation of any small congregation or the establishment of a new one which must remain small at least for many years? How large must a church be to possess a valid title to existence? Some time ago a legal decision was asked for as to what constitutes a “respectable” membership,—respectable, that is, in point of numbers. The case was as to the right of enjoyment of a trust fund, and a Pennsylvania judge decided that the “seventeen persons petitioning” did constitute a respectable number! This learned dictum will hardly be held to furnish a criterion.

II. THE CAUSES.

When has a church of a hundred members or less a valid right to existence? Three reasons may be mentioned.

1. When situated in a sparsely settled region and ministering to those otherwise without adequate privileges. But it is safe to say that it is an error to put a new organization in a rural field when there is one or more worthy of the name of Christian nearer than three miles.

2. When there is a constituency of differing antecedents

or language; e.g. some of the mission enterprises for foreigners. Very marked differences of custom and beliefs, as in the case of the Friends, might justify separate organizations. And the same ruling will be felt by many as covering a small but needed Roman Catholic Church in a generally Protestant community, or *vice versa*.

3. When an already existing church cannot furnish religious privileges to the surrounding Christian public because of offensively peculiar usages and tenets or its unwelcome attitude toward outsiders.

Difference in doctrinal belief should be allowed more weight than difference of government, usage, or form. An earnest Universalist or Unitarian group in a town strongly "Orthodox" might claim a certain justification for building a church, which would be denied to a like group of Presbyterians in a Methodist or Episcopalian community. A rigid Baptist would be pardoned for moving heaven if not earth, to get a church of his own where a Congregationalist need not feel the same stress.

Two considerations have, in the past, been advanced to justify or applaud new enterprises, but which certainly cannot commend themselves to-day: denominationalism and secession.

When a denominational leader plants one of his churches, let him ask himself, Am I really seeking to give Christian privileges to people who need them, or am I merely providing a particular kind of worship and preaching for people already privileged? We need to learn that a true believer can get edification in a church with whose forms and usages and government he is not very familiar and in which are features he does not approve. Could I not find means of grace which God could bless to my soul, if I a Protestant, — one of

a few Methodists or Presbyterians, for example,— living where a church of my own sort was inaccessible, should become an attendant and to a degree a supporter of a nearby Roman Catholic church? And I should hope that the case could be reversed with a similar if not equal satisfaction.

When we dissect out the real motive of much church extension, have we not been more zealous of denominational prestige than of the prestige of the Christian religion? Have we not fostered such ill-supported stations as useful units in our ecclesiastical machinery because, forsooth, they provide convenient places for young clerics to secure experience? Have we not criminally expended here much hard-gotten Home Missionary funds which ought to have been spent in virgin fields?

When a plea comes in from a handful of lonely adherents praying for help to form a church where they can foregather to their taste, why should not the authorities proceed as follows: Let them promptly visit the petitioning people, call them together to a communion, or love feast, and then with broad statesmanship and the spirit of Christ, point out that the interests of Christianity are more than Presbyterianism or Episcopalianism, and counsel them affectionately and firmly to cast in their lot with some accessible church. If what they fondly call "the faith of the fathers" is better than that of their Christian neighbors, let them prove it by becoming as leaven in some less-favored denomination. Many a pastor of a village church has thanked God for the presence in his flock, of people of a different form of faith. A dozen Christians without an organization of their own sort, can let their light shine to more effect by giving their ounce of oil to some lamp now weakly burning than by fixing up still another

feeble lamp. The seven-branched candlestick must not be taken literally as a symbol of village Christianity.

The other chief cause of superfluous organizations is secession. The history of what the ungodly call church quarrels is a strange commentary on the mysteries of Providence and of human frailty. Bees must swarm, and a percentage of useful churches were born in painful travail. Corner stones laid in strife have been reconsecrated in the years and proved that God stood within the shadow and made the wrath of man to praise him. The protoplasmic cell of the church sometimes multiplies by division. But the new unit must have the marks of utility and spirituality. How many times disaffection or a cry of heresy has broken a church in twain where patience and prayer would have saved the day! When will Christians learn that though preachers may err and officials be corrupt, the Church can be clung to and loved and served?

Cases of abandonment come readily to mind. Passers by a certain "Corners" used to feel the pathos of the decaying brown building that once sheltered a band of faithful "True Church" adherents. I know of one ambitious venture of bygone days whose edifice is now, or was lately, a warehouse for sorting beans. There was probably a sneer on the lip of the skeptical when a sanctuary in another village became an "opera house." These were not discarded shells of organizations building roomier mansions, but the pitiful legacies of churches that have ceased to be. Of the planting of these enterprises old men tell tales of self-denying devotion. Perhaps their stern founders were right, for each age has its call. But the new day is now with us and brings its new summons.

III. REMEDIES.

Observers of village parishes wonder whether an element of friendly competition may not be wholesome; and many have held that two decently self-supporting churches, each vigorously tilling its field, are better than one; provided their rivalry is free from rancor, and genuine coöperation obtains. Census findings referred to above appear to sustain this conclusion. In a group of counties studied with this in view, taking communities of under 2,500 population containing Protestant churches only, it was found that the ratio of church members to population increases with the number of denominations, the most rapid rise by far being from one-denomination towns (8.4%) to two-denomination towns (22.3%). Evidently two-denomination towns are the better for it! While the tables refer to denominations, they doubtless are equally true of churches, as normally there is one church to a denomination in such towns.

A few more considerations suggest themselves. It may be said that an organization existing has more rights than an organization proposed: the burden of proof must rest on the newer church. Apology for a superfluous church is easier than defense of a new enterprise prospectively superfluous. Again, the futility of a thing should not be sophisticated by the presence of unusual financial or other resources to back it. It does not make it less a crime to foist a needless church on a community merely because there are the means to do it with.

With whom must the facts and conclusions here presented be left? Obviously with the leaders, the headquarters officials, the denominational authorities! They are lifted above the narrowing horizon of the local church and the individual member. They catch the sweet breezes of interdenomina-

tional comity and coöperation. They have learned through varied fellowship to love and respect other Christian folds. Instructed in the history of the past, viewing the broad stream of Christian doctrine, they can assign denominational differences to their subordinate place. With their riper Christian experience and deeper consecration they have insight into the larger interests of the Kingdom, and grace to rise above inherited animosities and the petty prejudices and infirmities of temper which we poor ordinary local Christians are hampered with. In short, the responsibility of dealing with the problem of superfluous churches rests first with the men higher up!

Here and there the task has been faced. The body to which I belong (a Presbytery) has, within a few years, performed one such surgical operation without great suffering on the patient's part. It is ready to operate elsewhere as Providence may guide.

It is unnecessary to remark on the tact and absolutely prayerful spirit with which a superfluous church should be dealt with. Feelings are to be gently considered, pious sentiment instructed and enlightened, and when the deed is done, then gather up the fragments that nothing be lost!

This policy may seem to some cloistered souls like a betrayal of cherished interests, a surrender to the enemy. Well, if ever there was occasion for surrender on strategic grounds to secure a better and impregnable position, here is one. Let the enemy get any comfort he can from it:—it only brings nearer the day of his discomfiture. Far better than the most heroic persistence, it will proclaim to the world the spirit of Christ and a determination to serve Him even to sacrifice.

The whole business will take long years at best. Opportunity may be reluctant, opinion will have to be educated.

But this thing can be done and should be done immediately: a positive policy on this matter can be determined on, formulated and published by each denomination, and until it does this, it must bear the reproach of setting partisan advantage above the Kingdom of God. The following resolution was adopted in the Presbyterian Synod of New York in 1914:—

“RESOLVED, That the Synod of New York expresses its disapproval of the appropriation of Home Mission Funds in the support of a church in any community of five hundred or fewer persons where there exists another Church of an evangelical body, recognized by the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, better fitted to minister to the spiritual needs of the community, except in the case of missions among foreign-speaking or other exceptional groups of people.”

Conservatively phrased to be sure, but it may serve as illustration of something in the way of a proper policy and method.

There is a rather cynical quatrain which runs:—

“Wherever God erects a house of prayer,
The devil also builds a chapel there,
And 'twill be found upon examination
The latter has the larger congregation.”

It will be truer if paraphrased:—

“Wherever Christians build a place of prayer
Somebody soon erects another there,
And you will hear in time this observation
That neither one has half a congregation.”

Suppose in the genesis of almost any of our countless overlapping churches, ecclesiastical authorities whose sanction ratified the project had first conferred with the rival denominations affected, and sought at least their benediction on the enterprise; suppose they had followed such obvious dictate of courtesy not to say Christian neighborliness, “looking on the things of others” and not just on their own!

In the case of the local churches, where one or the other ought to go but the way seems closed for the present, much may be done by way of preparation for the ultimate change. Let the denominational superintendents or the bishops or synods, or whoever is looked to for light and leading, be faithful in instilling the spirit of sacrifice and a broad conception of the cause of religion, whereby in due season the narrow loyalty to the *church* may not die but be born again in an apostolical enthusiasm for the CHURCH. And thus we shall hail the day when neither differing forms of organization and government nor varied usages of worship, nor doctrinal views on matters wherein men of the Spirit sincerely differ, nor dislike of other peoples' religious ways, shall hinder in any way whatsoever the coöperation of all churches, and it shall be the natural thing for organizations that on calm judgment are found superfluous, to combine or merge, or cease to be. Thus shall we put an end to a just reproach that attaches to Christ's Church in some thousands of communities.

The day of such practical sense and Christian comity has dawned brightly on most foreign mission fields. Joint Committees of the Boards are attending to this matter, and the missionaries, being live wires, will mostly put up with nothing less. It is high time that the entire Home Church met this insistent demand. "Is there no central Board of Strategy in our Protestant churches?" said an observant critic to me the other day, "which has the knowledge and the power to determine the placing of new institutions or the amalgamation of old?" Surely there ought to be!