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REVIEW.

*Archibald Alexander*

ART. I.—*The Case of the Dissenters, in a Letter addressed to the Lord Chancellor.* Fifth edition, London.

AT present, no subject excites a deeper interest in Great Britain, than that of church-reform. The success which attended the late effort to promote a civil reform in the constitution of the empire, has not satisfied the friends of liberty and equal rights, but has rather stimulated and encouraged them, to render their work perfect, by extending the reform to the ecclesiastical establishment of the nation. It is a singular, and we believe, an anomalous fact, in the history of the world, that three different forms of Christianity should be established by law in the same empire; so that he who in England enjoys the privileges of a member of the established church, in Scotland is subjected to all the privations and inconveniences of a Dissenter; and, *vice versa*, the legitimate member of the Scotch establishment is a Dissenter as soon as he crosses the Tweed. But in Canada, Roman Catholics, who are barely tolerated in Great Britain, enjoy the patronage and favour of the Government.

preached to the volunteers, and introduced his noble hymn to the tune of "God save the king," the first stanza of which is as follows :

Come thou incarnate word,  
Gird on thy mighty sword,  
Our prayer attend !  
Come and thy people bless,  
Spirit of holiness  
On us descend.

Some of his hymns composed for Sunday Schools are distinguished for simplicity and pathos. But of all his poetical effusions, none perhaps is more interesting than the beautiful hymn which he repeated on his death bed, and a part of which we here transcribe, as it appears in Mr. Sidney's volume for the first time.

Gently, my Saviour, let me down,  
To slumber in the arms of death,  
I rest my soul on thee alone  
E'en till my last expiring breath.

Dear Saviour, let thy will be done,  
Like yielding clay I humbly be,  
May every murmuring thought begone,  
Most peacefully resigned to die.

Bid me possess sweet peace within,  
Let child-like patience keep my heart,  
Then shall I feel my heaven begin,  
Before my spirit hence depart.

Then shall my raptured spirit raise,  
Still louder notes than angels sing,  
High glories to Emanuel's grace,  
My God, my Saviour, and my King.

For a Christian, this is epitaph and elegy enough.

ART. VII.—*Hints towards a more Complete Organization of Particular Churches, with Reference to Christian activity.\**

*J. W. Alexander*

WE have few more prolific writers than Dr. Sprague, and none whose productions are more uniformly popular and instructive. In composition, as in music, that is found to be agreeable to the unsophisticated taste, which flows most readily, and naturally

\* Hints, designed to regulate the intercourse of Christians. By W. B. Sprague, D. D., Pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church in Albany. Albany: Packard & Van Benthuysen, 1834. 12mo. pp. 269.

from the performer. The works of our author are very remarkable for their gentle fluency of thought and diction, and for the absence of those pangs of preparation, and overwhelming loads of ostensible erudition, which characterize many otherwise good books. We are not aware that Dr. Sprague has given to the world, any production of a merely theoretical kind; it has been his aim to address the mass of our intelligent population, upon topics of universal interest and practical moment. To justify our remark we need only refer to the Letters to a Daughter, the Lectures to Young People, and more particularly, the able work upon Revivals of Religion.

The modest title does not invite attention so strongly as the contents would warrant. These *hints* are much more than hints, forming as they do, a popular system of the Christian Ethics of Social Life. They are designed to raise the standard of religion, and so to add strength to the church. Beginning at the fireside and the circle of home, the author contemplates the believer in all his social connexions, and expounds the scriptural precepts which relate to each. The great ends of religious intercourse are first held up to view; the improvement of the individual, and the salvation of his fellow-men. The basis of this intercourse is laid open, as consisting of the sameness of relation, character, pursuits, and destiny. The hinderances are detailed, whether arising from the mock politeness of the age, and the want of moral taste, or from the deeper evil habits of the soul. The humble Christian is taught *how* he must meet and move among his brethren, with frankness, with fraternal kindness, with dignity and with devotion. And the occasions on which these tempers are to be displayed in fit action are well described, as well the public as the private cases. The case of a believer in a state of apathy, or of despondency, or of temptation, or of grief, is presented, with its appropriate rule; and also the more general occasions of social duty. The family connexion, and the intercourse of high and low, rich and poor, the exchange of epistolary tokens, or of argument, all have their place. Christian intercourse is shown to have its abuses, and due cautions are well and truly interposed. And the motives and duties which are peculiar to the present age are pointed out in a lucid and satisfactory manner.

But every believer has a class of duties, which he owes to the unconverted world; with the statement and inculcation of these, the second part of the work is occupied. The whole is admirably clear and practical, and adapted to the use of true Christians in every branch of the church. In a word, we are happy to commend it, as a work well fitted to be presented to pro-

fessors of religion, and a useful directory in regard to those claims which religion is making upon them—not at distant intervals or solemn occasions—but every hour that they live.

But we are not ready to yield unqualified praise, even where we greatly admire. The faults of the book are chiefly negative, and they are apparent in all that proceeds from the accomplished author. There are no sins against correctness, delicacy, purity, or propriety; all is fluent, harmonious, fair and smooth. But we feel that Dr. Sprague is sometimes too smooth, too flowing, and that his gentle manner approaches at times to monotony. His thoughts are given too fully, and the reader is not often enough left to fill up links in the discussion. We could desire the gifted author sometimes to give vent to strong feeling, even at the risk of a roughness or a discord. Greater condensation, and an occasional descent to the racy, idiomatical phraseology of common life, though they might cause a ripple in the glassy current, would awaken attention, and penetrate the heart. As it is, the impression of the work is that which proceeds from the aggregate of its excellencies; what we desire is, that more effect should be given to single passages. And the power to do this is abundantly possessed by the author; for in many cases the simple hinderance to force is undue amplification. The excision of many parts, in themselves unexceptionable, would, in our judgment, increase the weight of what remains, in the direct ratio of its density. None of us, indeed, seem sufficiently willing to transfer to prose what Waller has said of verse:

“Poets lose half the praise they should have got,  
Could it be known what they discreetly blot.”

We regard the whole subject of this practical work as highly important, since a great part of true religion consists in the due performance of the social offices, as we may learn from the extent to which scriptural precepts and exhortations on these topics are carried. It is true, that the frame-work of right action in the Christian life is to be sought in the genuine affections of the renewed heart. It is no less true that the basis of all gracious affections is the system of doctrinal truth revealed by inspiration. But nevertheless, it is necessary that all Christian teachers should be much employed in directing believers into particular paths of duty, and that they should even descend to the specialties of ordinary intercourse, and its resulting obligations. As the universal church was instituted for the furtherance of universal piety, to embody and manifest the holy plans of grace in the hearts and lives of saints, so we find it to be the appropriate func-

tion of each particular church to secure and foster and set forth the piety of its members. And as we hold the organization of the church, so far as it is carried out upon scriptural principles, to be a lovely example of simple order and well balanced energy, so we think it desirable that in every congregation of believers, there should be a like organization for the same purposes.

In these observations we have no reference to judicial or disciplinary measures; with regard to these our form of government affords all which could be desired. But there are in every community of Christians a multitude of arrangements which are left very much to the discretion of the church-officers and members, and which vary with every change of place or persons. It is right that cords should not be drawn too tightly, and that this discretionary power should be lodged where it is; nor would we argue for any iron code which should force the churches into a formal routine of service. At the same time, we believe it is found in the experience of every pastor and church session, that much good, which might be accomplished within the bosom of single congregations, is wholly omitted, simply because there is no general directory, or model scheme, for this class of fluctuating duties. There are churches among us, whose energies are pressed to the utmost point of tension, which are constantly and systematically working nobly in every good cause; and there are others, of equal power, which are lying utterly torpid. The one has a plan, and acts upon it: the other has no such plan. And the cases are numerous, and within the recollection of many pastors, in which the mere news of successful effort, carried from one of the former to one of the latter class, has had the effect of transfusing life into the dead. Better than mere intelligence from one would be the digested results of intelligence from many churches; or what is the same thing, a wise directory for the internal organization of all; so drafted as to avoid the extremes of unprofitable vagueness on the one hand, and pragmatical dictation on the other. Far be it from us to endeavour to sketch such a plan. To be what we have imagined, it must be the mature fruit of wise delay; the grand result of many experiments, counsels, prayers, and labours. The field is very wide. On one part of it the book before us throws a pleasing light; and in the desultory remarks which follow, we wish to be understood as simply presenting hints, which we hope may be seeds of thought and action in the minds of pious and practical men.

All the comparisons used in Scripture to shadow forth the church, convey the idea of a fair and regular arrangement. As Christ is the Head, so in him, the whole body, *fitly joined together*, and *compact*, *συναξολογούμενον καὶ συνβιβασόμενον*, by that

*which every joint supplieth*, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, making increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. The whole idea is beautifully developed, and we rejoice in our own scheme of polity as admirably consonant with this divine arrangement. Yet, as has been observed, when we descend to the actual operations of the church in its smaller divisions, as it regards Christian effort, we are struck with the total absence of method. Not that our form of government has left particular churches without organization. Besides the pastor, we recognize ruling elders and deacons, as necessary to the full and faithful operations of every church; the former as assessors in government, the latter as organs for charitable communications, and helpers in temporal things. As to ruling elders, it is observable, that even where the ecclesiastical theory of any churches would seem to exclude them, they are often virtually introduced under another name. The early English Puritans valued their services as "associated with the ministers in the spiritual government;" many Independents held the same opinion; and they were recognised among the Puritans of New England, not merely by individuals, but by public bodies. See Dr. Miller's *Essay on the Nature and Duties of the office of Ruling Elders*, chap. vii. The duties of ruling elders are found also to demand the services of vestry-men, churchwardens, and standing-committees, among the two sects which most strenuously repudiate the *name*. But we mention these officers at this time not so much in their character of rulers, as in that of spiritual assistants.

All the charities, and some of the temporalities of the church, were at an early day committed to *Deacons*. "The apostles (says Fuller) sometimes conceived that the very distribution of alms to the poor, had something of worldly drossiness therein, (called by them *servicing of tables*) as if only the preaching of the word were a spiritual employment."\* We lament to perceive that in so many churches there is a practical denial of our principles manifested in the neglect to appoint such officers; and that some ignorantly imagine that they differ from ruling elders only in name: there is no church in which there is not a call for that specific service which is enjoined upon these officers; no church in which there are not many objects of benevolence, or in which the care of temporalities might not be advantageously resigned to men possessing the scriptural qualifications of *Deacons*.

So much for the officers of particular churches. As far as the

\* Fuller's *Church Hist.* B. III. p. 81.

system was intended to reach, it answers every end. But the church may be reduced to greater regularity of action, in all that pertains to the things of God. In the great works of benevolence, for instance, is it not evident that the energies of the church are not fully brought out? Is it not evident, that the greater part of what is done, is done by a few churches? and that even in many of these, the effect is produced by a few individuals? And is there any one who does not perceive, that the change would be immense if, by any regular system, the whole of our churches were going forward with the alacrity and efficiency which characterize a few? More organization, however perfect, cannot, we allow, accomplish this; for the most exquisite mechanism of wheels and springs, requires a primary power to give it motion. But organization will accomplish all that it ever does accomplish in any department. The power already exists, though latent; all that we need is the mechanism which shall give it an outlet.

There is something beautiful in systematic arrangement; and it is as useful as it is beautiful. In moral enterprises, as in arts, it economizes power, and gives concentration to forces which, taken singly are inapplicable. Every church is a school, and should have its arrangement, in which each should find and retain his place. Or we may compare an assembly of Christians to an army, in which every individual should proceed in his due order and to his proper task. Who can calculate the waste of strength and the endless confusion which would result if the soldiers of a battalion should promiscuously rush to the onset without direction, mutual understanding, or method? Yet something like this takes place in the benevolent but blind and fruitless impulses of many churches. As there is a well-defined and common end, towards which all Christian endeavours converge, so there should be, and there may be, regular and united action among the members.

In addition to the common claims of social life, there are duties incumbent upon every individual member of the militant church, towards the whole body, and towards the family of man. These duties, wherever they may branch forth, are all contained in the golden rule of love. The demand on every church member is a most reasonable one—nothing beyond the strength, circumstances and office of each, and the divine favour is vouchsafed accordingly: for it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not. Yet every member is bound to act constantly and fully according to his place and capacity. Because one is a private Christian, it does not by any means follow that he has no duties to perform

in connexion with the general welfare, but the error is too extensively cherished, that there are some who may pursue their pilgrimage with scarcely a thought of personal exertion. Some plan should be attempted which might demand of all such persons the service which they owe, and stimulate them to the performance of what they are prone to overlook. At the present day the departments of benevolent action are so widely spread, and so happily divided, that every one may readily find his place of usefulness. There is no living stone which may not find a place where it shall contribute to the beauty or the strength of the spiritual temple.

The single business of Sunday-School teaching calls for many thousands; and there is no instructed Christian who may not discover some opportunity for the exercise of his gifts in this work.

The work of alms-giving, of temporal relief to the distressed, of consoling the bereaved, and of assisting the sick, should not be exclusively performed by a few. Neither should it be left to the mere promptings of individual piety; because the very poverty which occasions suffering often renders the sufferer unknown. Many languish and even die, in the very heart of large congregations, without having been once touched by the hand of gentle condolence. There ought to be a constant vigilance in this particular, and a regular plan which may secure prompt and effectual assistance to every one who is sick or disabled. And how many are there, whose piety languishes for need of such exertions, and who might be usefully and delightfully employed in such a work of love.

The schemes of public benevolence, which have originated during the last half-century, require the services of a great number as collectors, agents, distributors and the like. And even the work of writing for the press, which is entirely left to the spontaneous endeavours of a few, might be rendered tenfold more effectual if pains were taken to invite to this labour those in all our congregations who possess the requisite qualifications.

Now, although these suggestions propose no definite plan, they are sufficient to show that much labour is wasted and much power left unemployed, and that a more complete internal organization of Christian communities for these objects is needed. It is practicable; inasmuch as a great part of what we propose would at once be attained if in every congregation there were a mutual understanding upon these subjects. The truth is, that at present, there is in most places a lamentable want of concert. One half is ignorant of what the other half is doing. The same object is aimed at by different sets of persons, in two or three



different and conflicting methods; while a large proportion of the intelligence and strength is unemployed. To remedy this, we could desire to have all the Christian operations within a parish fully and deliberately spread before the whole of the people. Monthly, or even weekly meetings for this purpose might be introduced with good results.

We are happy to observe that something of this kind already exists among us, though not to the extent which we desire. Through the efforts of a few zealous men, a plan has been carried into effect for organizing every congregation into an association auxiliary to our Boards of Education and of Missions. The partial success of this scheme should not only render it universal with reference to these great objects, but should suggest the expediency of a more thorough organization, which might systematize and strengthen the whole array of benevolent efforts. And here we are again gratified to know, that in a few churches of distinguished liberality, something even of this complete organization has begun to take effect. The whole business of contribution for whatever object is thrown into one system. Every member is a contributor, and each is educated in the belief that this is no less required, than the performance of the ordinary and acknowledged social duties. The monthly concert of prayer for the spread of the Gospel is found to be a valuable auxiliary, for here the appropriations to the several objects of benevolence are voted, while the minds of those present are enlightened by Christian intelligence, and animated with the glow of devout affection. Every one gives something, and at a certain rate determined by himself, and the consequence is that each one gives far more than he would do, if the matter were left to be done at random. For if those who are forever complaining of the multitude of calls for their charity, and who make this their apology for denial upon every solicitation, would only sum up the total of their donations for a year, they would be astonished to find that it falls short of what even the niggardly would allow to be a reasonable annual subscription. The best of all plans for contribution, we think, is that of the apostle Paul; we mean a weekly appropriation, proportionate to the weekly success of each. This prevents the vexatious "gathering" by agents and collectors, secures a purely spontaneous liberality, and connects the believers' alms with the prayers and affections of the Lord's day. It was the direction of Paul to the churches of Galatia and Corinth, and perhaps to many others: "Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come."

After all that has been done towards the diffusion of religious intelligence by means of journals, and other works, there is in every congregation great need of some regular method of showing to the people the necessities and the progress of the great enterprise. For this reason, we deem it indispensable that all the animating facts of a missionary character should be communicated, at least in a summary, to the congregation. We have witnessed the signal efficacy of this in awakening the missionary spirit, creating an avidity for Christian news, and preserving the monthly prayer-meetings from the dulness and ill-attendance which are sure to prevail, where they are enlivened only by the common routine of pulpit exhortation. Instead of superseding the use of public journals, they create a taste and demand for the latter. Let every church have a clear mutual understanding, and a simply efficient arrangement, with reference to public charities, and contributions will be more than tripled, pastors and agents will be relieved, vexatious solicitation will cease, prayer will be intelligent and fervent, and a multitude of new ministers and missionaries will be called out from the bosom of our congregations.

The last chapter of Dr. Sprague's volume is upon "the Christian's intercourse with the unrenewed sinner in respect to his salvation." It abounds with wise and seasonable counsels upon this neglected subject. The author, however, in conformity with the plan of his work, treats of it with reference to the feelings and conduct of the individual Christian. The inquiry would be interesting, how far the endeavours of church-members in this branch of duty admit of being reduced to system. The conversion of souls is, undoubtedly, committed primarily to the charge of the session; but no one will deny, that all, without exception, should be engaged in it, according to the ability and relations of each. Some do nothing at all; and others, in what they attempt merely thwart the wiser efforts of their brethren, crossing their path, and neutralizing their influence. The urgent admonitions of Dr. Sprague, with regard to an obligation which all are ready to set aside, may be profitably read by every one who has a heart to love his fellow-men.

In the work of systematic instruction, we are not cheered with those tokens of advancement which appear in most parts of religious duty. The efforts which are made seem too often to be made at random. It is a delightful truth to the pastor, that his church, taken collectively, is his pupil, and as such may be *educated*, no less than his child. To do this there must be a plan; there must be a regular gradation of scriptural instruction; the whole scheme of truth must be gradually unfolded. Not only

must the babes have milk, but the mature must have strong meat. Hence the deplorable consequences of a merely hortatory style of preaching; exciting feeling without the basis of sound knowledge. Hence also the injurious effects produced by a frequent translation of ministers; as no man can *pursue* his wise plan of gospel instruction with a new flock; or *continue* it with equal advantage where his predecessor has left off: while time is lost, both to pastor and people, if he *begins* it anew at each successive removal. All should be under instruction. Besides the preaching of the Gospel, and the stated exposition of the word, resort must be had to the catechetical circle, the Sunday school, the Bible class, and the religious lecture. But why may not *all the members of the church* be engaged in this kind of labour? The principle of *mutual instruction* admits of a most happy adaptation to the wants of the church in this respect. Under the direction of the pastor and elders much might be done, and much remains to be done, which is demanded. In addition to the communication of doctrinal knowledge, there should be a discipline to which every young professor should be subjected, the object of which should be the cultivation of the heart. If it were practicable to have every individual taken under some stated supervision and spiritual care from the first moment of his dedicating himself to the Lord, much of the defection which we now lament might be prevented. We have strong objections to the system of class-meetings, as they are conducted and abused, but to the principle of such a thorough organization we yield a most cordial assent. The course pursued with the ancient catechumens has gone too much into disuse; we might here advantageously take lessons of our forefathers. Such a course would go far to remedy that ignorance which cannot escape our observation in the majority of young converts; to humble pride and correct forwardness, to encourage mutual love, reveal errors and abuses, direct pastors in the choice of subjects, and prepare a community of well-furnished Christians. We should rejoice in the proposition of some well digested plan, to secure these ends. As it is, we believe the church has suffered just in proportion as she has receded from the methods pursued in the reformed churches of Holland and Scotland.

Without some provision of this kind, it is absolutely impossible for a minister, in these days of multiform distraction, to know his flock individually, and without such personal acquaintance, it is out of his power to give each a portion in due season. Instruction on experimental and casuistical subjects requires an arrangement of this nature. The very idea of superintendence, the appropriate work of the *bishop*, implies it.

And only where it happily exists can the school of Christ be considered as duly organized.

Many of these observations have a forcible application to the various social meetings which have been instituted for the culture of piety. Over some of these it is necessary that the pastor should preside in person; but there is no reason why a large number of praying circles may not be simultaneously engaged. And where this is the case weekly, there would be a manifest propriety in having a convocation of the whole at longer intervals. At such meetings the minister will always be more able to feel the pulse of his flock than in the more solemn services of the Lord's day.

Yet no meetings of any kind, however wisely or faithfully conducted, can take the place of family and personal visits or interviews. The value of pastoral visitation seems to be more generally acknowledged than it was a few years ago; and no pulpit services are reckoned an indemnification for the want of this. Visits of religious instruction and inquiry, should be frequent and regular. Unless they are pursued statedly, and with reference to some system, they are apt to be neglected, are unequally distributed, and degenerated into mere "calls" of friendship. For let it be observed, that the life of a minister is too precious and too short to be frittered away in the exchange of ceremonious courtesies. These visits must be strictly *religious* visits; otherwise they are not purely *pastoral*. But our object in broaching this apparently foreign subject, is to suggest that these duties are not so intimately connected with the ministerial office, that they may not be performed by laymen. Not only the elder or the deacon, but the pious private Christian may, and ought to exercise his gifts in this way. There are few congregations in which such gifts do not exist in some humble believers; often more remarkably than in the pastor himself; and where there are such talents in the church, they should be drawn out and improved. Is there no plan by which in every congregation a number of helpers in this indispensable work may be associated for regular action, in aid of the session? While it is true, that some ministers culpably neglect this duty, it also true that the demands of the people are sometimes exorbitant. More is required than it is possible for frail humanity to render. The requisitions of the age upon a minister are greater than they ever were before. Besides his pastoral work, there may be said to fall upon him "daily, the care of all the churches;" inasmuch as he is *ex officio*, the link of union between his people and the grand benevolent associations for the propagation of the Gospel.

Upon this subject there are some forcible remarks of the late Dr. Mason, in a discourse on the resignation of his pastoral charge. Without feeling at liberty to adopt his sentiments in all their extent, we quote them as well meriting the candid attention of our churches. "There are two things (says he) in which the state of the churches now, differs materially from their state in primitive times. In the first place, they had inspired teachers; who could, therefore, spend the whole week in exhorting, confirming, and consoling their converts, without infringing on their preparations for the Lord's day. Our situation is quite different: close and habitual study is necessary for us. And if we cannot get time to attend to it, our ministrations grow uninteresting, and our congregations lean. In the next place the primitive churches never permitted themselves to suffer for want of labourers. *Our* economical plan is, to make one pastor do the work which was anciently done by three or four, and the very natural consequence follows; the work is badly done, or the workman is sacrificed. If we were to visit as much as our people are good enough to wish, and unreasonable enough to expect, we should not have an hour left for our proper business; we could make no progress in the knowledge of the Scriptures; and not one would be able to preach a sermon worthy of a sensible man's hearing."

These opinions may be abused—they are however just and reasonable. And the inference we would deduce is, that the pastor of every church should have an organized assistance in this part of his labours.

In short—for we must hasten to cut short these desultory and protracted observations—the principle of organization, so far as the circumstances allow, should be carried out into the details of church-operations. The great object should be, the advancement of the collective church. For every supposable emergency there should be a plan devised. Every individual and every work should be under supervision and control; every thing should be governed by mutual counsel and animated by mutual knowledge. New and important measures should not be left to the heat of sudden emergencies, but should be dictated by the choice results of safe experience. These results should be thrown into the common stock, by being communicated to the public. Thus, (as in science and arts the happy inventions of a few infallibly become the methods of the whole philosophical world,) we should see a unity of efficient action prevailing in all the congregations of true believers.

With these reflections, suggested by the excellent work before us, we commit the whole subject to the meditation and prayers of the reader.