

Christian Messenger.

A REPOSITORY OF RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL, AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE.

"Not slothful in business: fervent in spirit."

NEW SERIES.
Vol. V....No. 49.

HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 5, 1860.

WHOLE SERIES.
Vol. XXIV....No. 49.

Poetry.

Sunset.

The night, with a noiseless footstep,
Comes up from the beautiful vale,
To the brow of the hill, where the sunlight
Still lingers so loving and pale.

I watch the shadows that deepen,
The shadows of many a tree
In the woodland that borders the meadow,
Dark cliff by an emerald sea.

No longer the sound of the sickle
Comes up from the field as at morn;
The harvest lies low on the greensward,
And homeward the reaper has gone.

The wild bird has folded its pinion,
The lily her petals of snow,
And peace from a region celestial
Is tranquilly falling below.

I turn me to gaze on the sunset,
My spirit is thrilled to behold;
There are oceans of crimson and purple,
And rivers of silver and gold.

And anon, through the radiant vistas
My spirit looks wishfully through;
I see, far away in the distance,
The beautiful, beautiful blue.

I think of the city celestial,
The city with pearls for its walls,
Where sunlight, nor moonlight, are needed,
And the shadow of night never falls.

The friends that have hither ascended,
The friends that I loved long ago,
The children that went in the winter,
When the landscape was covered with snow.

Oh! times to my spirit's wild longing,
Their vision a moment is given,
And they always seem nearest at sunset,
For sunset, seems nearest to heaven.

I feel the sweet peace of their presence,
And my heart's swift beating it calms;
I see the white robes of the angels
That bear my beloved in their arms.

O sun! in thy splendor departing,
Fade out in thy shadowy bound;
In a land where the light is immortal
I know that my lost will be found.

W. & R.

Correspondence.

For the Christian Messenger.

The Use and Abuse of the Voluntary Principle in support of the Gospel Ministry.

Revealed religion is the most important and valuable thing in the world. It is from God in the highest and most peculiar sense. It is for man's highest good—his moral restoration—his eternal salvation from sin and misery. It discloses, in the plan and work of redemption, God in the fulness and glory of his perfection—infinite wisdom, power, holiness, justice and benevolence. The Gospel brings out and sets before men the rich and inexhaustible resources of Divine Grace by which they can be rescued from sin and its terrible and interminable consequences. It is evident that the support of such a religion is of the highest importance to man in whatever condition he is placed and in every relation he sustains to God, to his fellow men, to time, and to eternity. God might have rendered religion self-supporting in everything; or he might have provided immediately and directly for its support by miracle. Some have perhaps in the exuberance of their selfishness felt regret that he had not in this way made provision to maintain religion, and so relieved them from the burden that now presses so ponderously on them. Thus, grace would in their view be more manifest and magnified; and religion having been rendered wholly independent of human feelings and sacrifices as respects its support, would appear more heavenly, inviting and attractive. But the wisdom of God does not comport with the selfishness of man; it chooses rather to order things so as to eradicate the unholy and diabolical leaven from the heart.

The support of the Gospel ministry is intimately connected with the maintenance and propagation of religion in the world;—where no such ministry exists, or its labours have not reached, true religion is seldom found, or hardly maintains an organized existence;—at all events it cannot do this for any considerable length of time.

God, in revealing religion with its rich and various blessings, in its divine excellence and glory, in its wonderful adaptation to man's

moral condition and wants, did not neglect to make arrangements for its propagation and maintenance in the world. He has appointed the Christian Ministry whose special duty it is to communicate and exhibit to men the gospel in its doctrines, duties, promises, and privileges—to edify the church and to persuade sinners to come to Christ and be reconciled to God. By divine appointment the support of this ministry is devolved on the Church, and those who with them are favoured with the ministry of the Gospel.

God might have made it compulsory on men by legal enactment to render pecuniary or material support to the Ministry, and in his sovereignty made use of human governments to enforce it. This perhaps would have gratified the cupidity of some ministers; but it was rejected by infinite wisdom, and benevolence.

The Almighty chose that religion and the Gospel Ministry should be sustained on the voluntary principle—by the free and spontaneous contributions of men prompted by the teachings of his Word and Spirit. And this principle is effectual where human beings are truly and deeply influenced by the Gospel—the love of God, or are disposed to embrace it with the heart, or are in a state of mind favourable to the reception of the divine message. The operation of this principle as seen in the early history of the churches in Apostolic times affords abundant proof and illustration of its efficiency and adaptability to all the requirements of the case. But notwithstanding what may be said in favour of the principle itself and its sufficiency under the proper conditions to effect the particular object to which it is applied, it may still be asked—Does the employment of the Voluntary principle subserve any other purpose in the Divine economy which support of religion by Coercion cannot effect? We answer it does.

1st. It helps to manifest character, and affords a means of moral discrimination. The religion of Christ being sustained neither by miracle, nor by legal enactment, an opportunity is thus given to those who love it for its own sake, or desire its blessings, or even those who discover somewhat of its true character and are struck with admiration at its Divine benevolence and attracted by its heavenly beauty, to contribute to its support and extension among men. Those who want religion will not in the main neglect or decline to maintain it;—nay, will cheerfully make sacrifices, if necessary, in order to uphold and extend it in society. Those who do not love religion, or take no interest in it are left free and unrestrained by fear of the civil power, to manifest their dislike by withholding the means of support.—Those who love the Gospel will not be unwilling to contribute for the support of the men who bear its life-giving message; while those who love it not will be indisposed to do so. These facts then present us with a means of discriminating character to some considerable extent.

2nd. The Voluntary principle gives scope and liberty for the full development of gratitude and benevolence. Love is allowed to devise and act with the utmost freedom and liberality with that oblivion of self which corresponds with its heaven-born nature, and which is necessary to its full manifestation in man.

Had those to whom the gospel comes and who profess to have received its grace and regard its teachings been tied down to a fixed sum, or if it were drawn from them by the operation of legal force, or even under the sanction of human enactment, benevolent emotions would have been repressed, or attained but a feeble and stunted growth. But the voluntary principle not only admits of the operation of the largest and most expansive benevolence, but encourages it by presenting the hope of a future reward corresponding to our labours and sacrifices in maintaining religion according to the Divine appointment, as well as the present happiness a benevolent person enjoys in giving to support the cause of God—the ministration of the word, or the relief of suffering humanity.

3rd. It affords a convincing proof to the world of the vitality and power of the Gospel and also of the spirituality of the true church of Christ. Let an unwilling support be compelled by law to sustain some cause that has nothing but law to rest on—that from its own intrinsic worth, or the benefits it confers,

has no claims to the respect, veneration and love of mankind.—This may do for the despotic, tyrannical and corrupt kingdoms of this world. A different principle obtains in the kingdom of Christ. He is willing to entrust the support of the gospel ministry to those who have felt its vitalizing and transforming power. Such will not knowingly and wilfully defraud their Master, nor withhold from his ambassadors the proper love and support. When the world beholds the disciples of Christ, in opposition to the selfishness of the human heart and the habits which have grown out of that selfishness, voluntarily cheerfully and literally, and perhaps at the sacrifice of some of their temporal comforts, contributing of their substance or labour to sustain the ministry of his word; so strong is the proof of vitality and spirituality that men will be constrained to admit there is something unworldly, real, spiritual—divine in such a religion, and must acknowledge that it is worthy of the attention and acceptance of mankind. It is a demonstration of the truth of the Gospel—that notwithstanding its teaching and spirit are uncongenial to the maxims and spirit of the world it can live without aid from human enactments and government; nay, that it has lived, and can live in spite of hostile and proscriptive laws and persecuting princes. The Gospel erects for itself, without any help from coercion, a home in the heart;—it trenches itself strongly in the affections and presents the most powerful motives to induce a willing and cheerful obedience to the Divine Master—it employs no force, but that of truth, of light—of love—divine love. Such a religion must be divine; and where it is allowed fairly to operate, it shows the triumph of the Voluntary principle, in a manner to claim respect.

4th. The principle we contend for serves we think another important purpose—it tends to deter worldly, unconverted men from entering the ministry, or having entered it, to discourage their continuance in a work so little adapted to satisfy the expectations of a worldly money-loving mind. Where the Ministry is supported by an income obtained by means of legislative enactment, the clerical profession is crowded by unconverted men, drawn to the office, no doubt, in many cases, by the temptation which a settled legalized support offers independently of the wish, approval or sympathy of the people. On the Voluntary principle much in the way of support of a minister depends on his piety—his adaptation to the people and his attention and faithfulness, as well as on the good will and sympathy of his hearers. Hence the voluntary principle under the proper conditions, tends to bind minister and people more firmly together as being in a sense mutually dependent the one on the other. Support of religion by the State or legal enactment renders the minister wholly independent of the people, and so tends to produce in the minister, pride, worldly conformity, indolence, arrogance, and neglect of spiritual duties.

But every principle is liable to abuse; and some have taken the abuse as proof of the unsoundness and inefficiency of the principle. But it is evident on the slightest reflection that this is no argument against it,—since the soundest and best established principles may be abused, and many, if not all have been, each in its turn, abused in some way, or at some time. The Gospel itself—the perfection of Divine wisdom, power, truth and love has been abused most lamentably and extensively. Everything good may be abused—this arises from man's depravity—his indisposition to receive what is good and act in harmony with it.

By abuse of the voluntary principle we mean—when it is so viewed and employed as to counteract the ends contemplated in its introduction by its Divine Author; or when it stops short of its legitimate purpose; or is so miserably worked as to encourage, or continue, that selfishness and worldliness it was designed and calculated to lessen and remove; in other words when it is so worked as to dishonour God, and fails of supplying enough for the churches needs, and for the discharge of her duties to the world, and it thus appears before men as a caricature—something to excite contempt and ridicule. In our remarks on the abuse of the voluntary principle, no reference is had to ecclesiastical establishments where religion is maintained

by law;—for in such circumstances the voluntary principle, is more than abused—it is abandoned, and coercion is put in its place.

Let us now look at the abuses to which the voluntary principle has been subjected.

1st. When professors of religion endeavor under cover of this principle, to relieve themselves from the obligation to support the ministry, and so give nothing or next to nothing for that purpose. It is to be feared there are some who regard the voluntary principle as equivalent to mere *optionalism*,—something apart from all obligation and responsibility. It is very well to give, if one is so disposed, but they do not regard it as an offence against God if they do not give. This view is certainly not a legitimate result of the voluntary principle, nay, it is directly and palpably opposed to it. There is nothing voluntary in such cases, but selfishness and indisposition to give. Persons of this type may be found sometimes opposing any stated salary to a minister, refusing to subscribe or pledge themselves to any amount for that purpose, alleging that God will take care of his servants—let them trust in Him; or if surprized into so indiscreet an act, they would take care that the sum subscribed would never find its way to the minister's hand or home!

2nd. The voluntary principle is abused when the duty of giving in proportion to our means is not recognised and practised, or at least conscientiously aimed at. Some give to religion in the most limited and parsimonious measure, as though they thought it a *virtue* to reduce their contributions to the lowest possible minimum selfishness could dictate. The person who withholds from the Gospel the fair and just proportion of his means which God's word requires, is allowing himself to abuse the voluntary principle, and thus inflicts an injury on the cause of God, and on his own soul. This, it is feared, is a common abuse. Many content themselves with giving a mite or two to the cause of God, and seem to think that as the widow's two mites were accepted, and her benevolence commended, so will theirs be also; though the proportion between her offering and theirs, compared to the means they possess, is almost as *infinity* to nothing. Some again do not give, because should they give in proportion to their means, the gift is so small, their pride revolts at the confession of their poverty; forgetting, it would seem, that God has declared—"if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to what he hath not."

3rd. The voluntary principle is abused when persons contributing to support or extend religion, do it unwillingly, or merely because others give. Some contribute, because being church-members, it is expected they should give, though they would much prefer not to give; while others in and out of the church contribute, because it would be considered *mean* if they did not!

4th. It is an abuse of the voluntary principle when improper or false motives are presented to induce persons to contribute to the support of religion, and also when they are acted on. The piety that is not voluntary, is not pleasing to God. But true piety must be built on the Truth and nourished by it. So also the duties of benevolence being a part of religion, our contributions to support or extend the Gospel must be voluntary, or they are not acceptable to God, and will bring no blessing to the donor. The motive from which we give, must, in its general bearing correspond and harmonize with the truth as it is in Jesus. The honour of men, the desire to be esteemed benevolent, or love of mere animal gratification, are unworthy, and unholy motives; and should never be used or acted on in soliciting or making contributions.

5th. It is an abuse of the voluntary principle when, from a dislike to men who may be prominent in the services of religion, persons refuse or neglect to support the cause itself. This is losing sight of our obligation to God, and allowing a corrupt principle to interfere with the performance of our duty. The gospel is of such transcendent worth and glory in itself, and the obligation to love, obey, support, and extend it, is so strong, pervasive and commanding, that, independently of all personal and extraneous considerations, it ought to be cheerfully and liberally supported by every one who would enjoy its blessings.