Messenger and Visitor

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For Life or for a Term of Years.

Among the matters which the Presbyterian General Assembly now sitting in Ottawa has had under consideration is a question as to the term of service in the eldership. According to the present law and custom of the church, an elder is ordained for life, or at least for for so long as he maintains a character and reputation not flagrantly out of harmony with the important office which he holds. Whether or not any course of conduct, or manifestation of character, is practically recognized as disqualifying one for continuance in the eldership, which would not also disqualify him for membership in the church, we cannot say, but, generally speaking at least, the elders are elected and ordained for life, or during the period of their connection with the church. The proposal which came before the Assembly by way of overture, and which, after some discussion, was referred to the Presbyteries for consideration, is, as we understand it, to permit the election of elders for life or for a term of years at the discretion of the local congregations. We note this action of the General Assembly particularly and shall watch its outcome with interest, because what is practically the same question is one of some interest and importance in our own denomination. With us the question has reference to the election and the ordination of deacons. But with us, and for a reason which will readily suggest itself to those acquainted with our polity and our methods of procedure, there has not been much public discussion of the matter. We do not have any General Assembly or other general church court to concentrate the wisdom, the conservatism, piety, prejudice or other qualities of the denomination on such proposals. We have no machinery for overturing, referring, considering, reporting, etc., etc., until at length there is reached in the general court a final decision which shall have authority for the whole body. If some change from customary or traditional methods is proposed in a Baptist congregation, the congregation—that is the church—considers the matter and decides it according to the measure of its wisdom in the light of Scripture and expediency. The principal questions to be settled are,—is the proposed change desirable in itself, and is it in harmony with Scriptural precept or practice. If in the judgment of the church the answers to these questions are in the affirmative, then it feels competent to proceed in the matter, without seeking advice or direction from any other quarter. Accordingly, if a Baptist church reaches the conclusion, that to elect its deacons for a term of years rather than for life is not out of harmony with New Testament doctrine and practice, and that for other reasons the change is desirable, it proceeds to act in accordance with those conclusions without any fear of an ecclesiastical court to call it to account.

As a matter of fact, some of our churches have adopted the plan of electing their deacons for a term of years. We suppose this may be properly regarded as an innovation, although we are not prepared to say that no precedent for this plan is to be found in the history of Baptist churches. But certainly the prevailing, if not exclusive, practice of the denomination has been in the past to ordain deacons for life or for the period of their connection with the church ordaining them.

It is at least doubtful if the proposed innovation as to the term of the eldership will find, for the present at least, much favor in the Presbyterian body. And if our Baptist associations should vote upon the matter, we doubt if any would be found to favor the election of deacons for a term of years. The conservatism of these bodies—and within its proper sphere conservatism is a wholesome principle—would militate against the change, there would be in some minds at least a question as to whether the innovation is not a departure from Scriptural practice, and there would be a feeling that something of the dignity and sanctity attaching to the eldership or the diaconate is sacrificed when men are called to the office, not for life but for a few years only.

On the other hand, there are arguments in favor of the term-of-years method to which we at least are inclined to give some consideration. The great argument in favor of this method is that it keeps the eldership or the diaconate in more vital touch with the congregation and makes it more likely that the personnel of these bodies shall be really representative of the religious life of the churches. No doubt in most instances the deacons of our churches are called to their important office with great carefulness and prayerfulness. They are, we may hope, the best men for the office at the time, and growing in grace and knowledge, they continue to be the best men for the position. The plan of electing deacons for a term of years would not rule such men out, as they could, and doubtless would, be chosen again and again as long as they were willing to serve the church in that capacity. But there is another side to this. Churches do not always choose wisely, they sometimes make sad mistakes in calling men to be deacons, and many a church and community has suffered not a little from this cause. Men in the diaconate, as well as in other spheres of action, sometimes sadly disappoint expectations. A man in the deacon's office may develop qualities which render him a source of trouble and weakness to a church so long as he continues in connection with it, and yet, if he has been elected without any limit as to time, the cost to the church of removing him from the office would be so great that the affliction will probably be endured without remedy. If the plan, of electing deacons for a term of years obtained, there would be obviously an easy escape from such situations and from the long tale of troubles which they involve. In electing deacons for a term of years rather than for life there is also the advantage that the responsibilities of the diaconate are shared by a larger number of the members of the church, with a corresponding increase of their interest in the work of the church and of their ability for service. For those who use the office of a deacon well may be expected to acquire great boldness in the faith. So far as the bearing of the New Testament upon the question is concerned, there is nothing explicit in the way of direction or example. The most that could be claimed for the life membership would be that the Apostolic churches probably elected their elders and deacons for life or during their connection with the church, but the probability would seem to rest principally upon the negative fact of there being no intimation to the contrary, which in such a case cannot be said to afford any very strong ground for an affirmation.

Editorial Notes.

—Dr. Marcus Dods, the distinguished Scottish exegete and preacher, who is now visiting America is reported as speaking with some degree of hope in respect to the cause of temperance reform in Great Britain, though the ground of hope is not that any remedy for the evil of intemperance with which the country is afflicted has been found, but only that the country is waking up to the terrible proportions of the evil. In Scotland and England all classes are steeped in drink. Conditions are worse than they ever were before, and worse than anywhere else in the world. "We know they are," says Dr. Dods, "and the sense of the nation is saying that this sort of thing must cease. When the sense of the British people is awakened there is hope. Conditions are desperate."

—Infant baptism has received a good many sturdy blows first and last, but it seems now to have suffered the unkindest cut of all in the house of its friends and at the hands of the Rev. Richard Harcourt, minister of the Peoples' [Methodist], church at Reading, Pa. At a recent service in his church, so the papers report, Mr. Harcourt baptized fifteen children whose parents presented them as candidates for the ordinance, in response to an offer from the minister to give a gold dollar to each child so presented. Mr. Harcourt, it seems, cites as a Scriptural precedent for the bestowment of the gold coin the act of the Magi who presented gold and frankincense and myrrh to the infant Jesus. What Scriptural precedent Mr. Harcourt cites for the other part of the ceremony we are not told.

—The spirit of antagonism to the manifestations of the supernatural in historical religion which pervades many of the articles in the published volumes of the Ecyclopedia Biblica has been a painful surprise to many evangelical scholars, and the surprise has been greater in no single instance probably than in reference to the article "Jesus" by the late Dr. A. B. Bruce. Rev. David Smith in an article in the June 'Expositor' goes so far as to hint that the article should not be accepted without farther inquiry as a reflection of Dr. Bruce's views. Mr. Smith says: "It is a sense of amazement amounting to incredulity that is awakened in one who knew Dr. Bruce and enjoyed the privilege of his familiar intercourse. The tone and manner are our master's but the teaching is none of his. It is hard to conceive how those pages could have been written by one who believed in the Incarnation, the Resurrection or even the sinlessness of Jesus . . . One who remembers the author's devotion to the Kingdom of God may be pardoned the suspicion that there is some explanation. That this should be their master's final message to the world would be a surprise and grief to not a few who owe to him their establishment in the Christian faith."

—The departure of Professor A. H. Newman from McMaster University, to accept a call to a chair in Baylor University, Texas, causes among our brethren of Ontario and Quebec a deep and general regret, a regret in which also Maritime Baptists, we are sure, will most sincerely share. Dr. Newman is a man of whom the Baptists of Canada have had reason to be proud, and our sense of his remarkable ability and the value of the services which he has rendered to the denomination and to the religious world is naturally accentuated as he is about to leave us. In his special department of Church History Dr. Newman enjoys a reputation for extensive and accurate scholarship, and as an author, which places him in the very first rank of scholars in that department in America, and within his own denomination, there is probably none in the world who could be regarded as his superior. Nor has Dr. Newman's eminence in church history been won at the expense of meagreness in other departments of study. His scholarship along theological and biblical lines is marked by breadth and accuracy, and we have been told by one of the graduates of McMaster, of acknowledged competence to express an opinion in the matter, that there was scarcely a chair in the Seminary which Professor Newman could not, if required, fill with credit to himself and advantage to his students. It is manifest in Dr. Newman's writings that, while he stands firmly for what he holds to be truth, he is a man of irenic temper, who does not permit himself to forget the courtesies of debate. Those who know him intimately say that his erudition and his industry are only equalled by his modesty and kindliness of spirit. While therefore we are very sorry that Canada is losing Dr. Newman, our interest will follow him to Baylor, where we trust he is to enter a still larger and more fruitful sphere of influence.

—Efforts are being made to secure an agreement among the dry goods firms of St. John to close their establishments on Saturday afternoons during the summer season. This is a movement which ought to succeed. The long hours required of the men and women employed in these establishments leaves too little time for rest and recreation of a wholesome character during the week and adds to the temptation to spend Sunday in ways which are determined far more by the demands of the physical nature than by the needs of the moral and spiritual. There are certainly some difficulties in the way of carrying the proposal into effect, difficulties connected principally with the habits of the people, many of whom are accustomed to put off to the end of the week shopping which might as well be done at some other time, and who would feel disappointed if they were not able to make their purchases up to the last hour on Saturday evening. But if the merchants should all agree to close, these people would soon find that, without any real inconvenience to themselves, their shopping could be done at other times. The strongest argument perhaps against the proposal would be the interests of the people from the surrounding country, and other visitors to the city, who might be at times seriously inconvenienced by finding the shops all closed on Saturday afternoons. But when the Saturday half-holiday became an established and understood thing, this objection would be largely obviated as, most visitors would be able to arrange their coming to the city so as to avoid disappointment.

—The present meeting of the Presbyterian General Assembly in Ottawa, is said to be the largest in the history of that church in Canada. The General Assembly represents six Synods, fifty-five presbyteries, over twelve hundred ministers, 2,618 congregations, 7,166 elders, 11,911 managers, or deacons, 108,639 families, 206,716 communicants, 21,200 Sunday school teachers and 180,709 Sunday school scholars, and 3 049 Sunday schools. The present value of church property is $9 733,152, and the total debt is $1,644,271. Last year the church raised for all purposes $2,601,451, an increase of $216,654. Of this $511,603 was for missions and $1,686,738 for congregational purposes. The average payment per family was $23.95, an increase over the previous year of $2.41. Each communicant averaged $12.58, an increase of $1.39. Rev. Dr. Pollok of Halifax, is succeeded in the modera-