

CIRCULAR LETTER.

BY REV. A. CHIPMAN.

To the Churches Comprising the Eastern New Brunswick Baptist Association:

DEAR BRETHREN,—As in the case of the Associational Sermon for this year, so of the Circular Letter, our theme has been selected for us. A more important or timely subject could scarcely have been assigned for our consideration:

"BAPTIST POLITY AND CHURCH DISCIPLINE."

What is Baptist Polity, or what is the form of Baptist Church Government? and is it the Scriptural Form?

It may not be amiss to remind you that there are prevailing throughout Christendom, three different forms of Church Government. First, that form or system known as the *Prelatical*; according to which the governing power resides in prelates or bishops. The Romish Church, the Greek, the English, and some others are governed in this way. Second, the *Presbyterian* mode; according to which the governing power centres in Presbyteries and Synod, e. g. the Scotch Kirk, Lutheran, and the various Presbyterian Churches. Third, the principal form of Church Government, is the *Independent*; according to which the governing power rests in the members of each individual church. This, as you are supposed to be aware, is the *Baptist* Polity, also that of the Congregationalist body, and perhaps a few other smaller Denominations.

Now which of these methods is in harmony with the teachings of the New Testament, or the practice of the Apostolic churches? In other words, ought Christian churches, independently of any other guidance than that of the Holy Spirit; to interpret and execute the laws of Christ? Or should the control and management rest partially in the State, or almost exclusively in the clergy, and the churches thus be shorn of the power and liberty of self-government?

Suffice it to say on the present occasion that the custom adopted in Baptist Churches, of administering their own affairs, no one, not even the Minister or Pastor, having a pre-eminence of authority, but each church and each individual member enjoying an equality of rights and privileges, is, we hesitate not to assert, alone in harmony with Gospel teaching, and the practice of the primitive churches, not only of New Testament times, but also of the early Christian Churches down to the time when, through unsanctified human ambition, and through various consequent errors of doctrine and practice, the churches became corrupted.

An unbiassed and careful reading of the New Testament, transparently shows that Christ's Kingdom was not to be of this world, but was to be established by the spiritual enthronement and continuous reign of Jesus in the hearts and lives of his disciples, whether in their individual or associate capacity.

Moreover, the Apostles directed their epistles to the churches as such, reported their own doings or labors to the churches, and both Christ and the Apostles enjoined upon them the duty of discipline. The New Testament also recognizes the right and duty of the churches to elect their own officers, these consisting simply of Pastors and Deacons.

The testimony of eminent church Historians confirm this view. Says Neander: "The churches were taught to govern themselves. The brethren chose their own officers from among themselves."

Mosheim describes the primitive churches thus: "The power of enacting laws, of appointing teachers and ministers, and of determining controversies, was lodged in the people at large. Each independent church, which had a bishop or presbyter of its own, assumed to itself the forms and rights of a little republic, or commonwealth.

In respect, then, to the principles and forms of Church Government, Baptist Churches are—theoretically at least—governed after the Apostolic pattern.

But, in consequence of the frequently imperfect administration of their affairs, the twofold inquiry has been raised: Is not the independent system of Church Polity radically defective? And ought not Baptists to adopt the Presbyterian plan, or some other method by which our business as a Denomination might be more systematically and effectively conducted, and the discipline of our church more efficiently carried out? This inquiry which at one time or another has doubtless entered the minds of many of the brethren, may be generally met by the familiar saying of the immortal Chillingworth: "The Bible, and the Bible only, is the Religion of Protestants"; and, taking the Word of God for our Directory in this matter, it follows, as already shown, that churches controlled in part by the State or civil power, and churches governed by popes, prelates, synods, presbyteries, conferences; or managed in any other way than by their own members, are not constituted and administered on the model of the primitive churches, nor according to Gospel rule. We may therefore not expect to improve on the Divine plan, nor are we really at liberty to adopt any other.

The true remedy of our ecclesiastical defects and inefficiencies is rather to be sought, in the first place, in a more generally intelligent understanding of what independent Church Government involves and implies; in the next place, in the cultivation of a more prevailing heart-piety throughout our membership and in a more loyal adherence to New Testament precepts.

Now it is sometimes forgotten, or otherwise not understood, by our members that, while we are New Testament organizations, or Christ's churches, therefore under supreme law to Him, we are also Societies or voluntary Associations, that this is true of us as Churches, as Associational Assemblies, or a Conventional body; and that an essential principle of a voluntary organization, secular or Christian, is that all submit to the fairly expressed decisions of the majority. So long, therefore, as we continue our membership in a Baptist Convention, Association, or Church, it should be accepted by us as a rule, to which there can properly be but rare exceptions, that the minority abide by the decisions of the majority.

This rule universally and heartily followed, would of itself go far towards saving our churches from confusion and friction, our Denominational assemblies from dissension, and their measures from failure. This rule, on the other hand, disregarded, our church polity suffers shameful abuse, our boasted freedom

or liberty becomes perverted into spiritual licentiousness, and our rightful independence prostituted to a selfish and disorderly individualism.

Brethren, it is to be feared there is among us far too much of the disposition expressed in that low carnal maxim: "Every man for himself, and God for us all."

Let us more carefully heed, in the first place, that elementary and fundamental principle already alluded to, namely, that the decisions of the majority should in all ordinary cases secure general harmony, and even unanimity of action.

Let us also rise to still higher conceptions of the Christian Church, namely, as being the "body of Christ," of which He is therefore the rightful supreme Head, to whom all the members should always yield willing obedience.

Let us bear about with us the truth that the church is, or should be, collectively a "spiritual temple," composed of divinely regenerated and holy members, and thus distinguished from, and exalted above, all mere worldly organizations; let us admit that individual Christians and Christian Churches are free indeed, if Christ has made them free, yet vitally related and indissolubly bound to Christ, also thus to each other, and that oneness of relation and interest should secure a hearty concurrence of action.

Let us not forget that churches are instituted by Jesus Christ and placed in this world, not for any selfish gratification or personal exaltation, but for the Glory of Him whose they are and whom they profess to serve; that "according to the eternal purpose which God made in Christ Jesus our Lord," even now, should be made known through the church "to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, the manifold wisdom of God;" and that Christians individually and unitedly, should seek to walk worthily of this "high calling," by being "the light of the world and the salt of the earth," and by making known continually the Gospel of Salvation for the edification of the saints and the conversion of the world.

These conceptions and convictions thoughtfully cherished, together with a more prayerful cultivation of heart-piety, and a more consistent and affectionate loyalty to Christ, would save us from dissatisfaction with our independent polity, and from making so unhappy a spectacle of ourselves to the world and to other religious Denominations, as sometimes occurs.

To the remaining part of the subject assigned for this Circular, we can give but brief consideration. Nor is a lengthy discussion necessary, inasmuch as the general principles for conducting Church Discipline, have been already stated; those principles being: The Bible, our sole, and sufficient guide, Christ our Supreme Law-giver, the churches simply the executors of His Laws and Regulations in a "spirit of meekness" and harmony.

But, dear brethren, it is painfully evident that there is among us at the present day great laxity of church discipline, in respect both to private and public offences, and, on account of this looseness, there is a lamentable degree of ecclesiastical demoralization. This purity, harmony, fellowship, and power of our churches for good are thus greatly weakened.

The first great law for every disciple—the law of love—is culpably and notoriously disregarded. "A new commandment I give to you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another." As Dr. Hiscox in his Baptist Directory says, "This, if strictly obeyed, would prevent all cause of grief, either personally to brethren, or publicly to the church. It would prevent cold indifference to each other's welfare, unfounded suspicions, causeless accusations, jealousies, animosities, bitterness, hatred, and revenge, and would cause each to love the other 'with a pure heart fervently.'"

Brethren, is it sufficient for us to be loyal to the letter of Christ's ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper? By no means! Important as is obedience to the letter, their spirit or intent is vastly more important, and genuine loyalty to the spirit of those two ordinances, includes nothing less than "death" to all sin, and "life" to every Christian duty and virtue.

Yet Christ's clear and emphatic regulations in Matt. xviii: 15-19, and v: 23; prescribed for both the offending and offended party, are not by us carried out as they ought to be.

Again, the more common causes of public offence, such as false doctrine; disregard of authority; contention and strife; immoral conduct; disorderly walk; covetous spirit; arrogant conduct; going to law, appear to be often ignored or winked at.

What is accomplished or attempted in the way of corrective discipline, is not infrequently left to the Pastor. He must first privately investigate these difficulties, and then introduce them into the church and personally urge forward their settlement. Thus, from the lack of a leading co-operation and responsibility on the part of our church members, the Pastor's efforts prove a failure, or if successful, he receives the brunt of the blame. These things ought not so to be. Churches should co-operate with the Pastors just as actively and faithfully in the administration of Discipline, as they do in time of a gracious revival. The latter work is more agreeable to all parties, but the pruning knife is just as necessary, and its results, when properly used, not less healthful to the churches, scarcely less conducive to the conversion of sinners, and certainly glorifying to God.

Brethren, there should be more moral backbone in our churches, more ready and scrupulous regard to all of Christ's preceptive requirements, and an active determination to carry forward and carry out, from time to time, such a wholesome discipline as would defeat the Devil, and honor Christ.

In concluding this letter, let us briefly specify two offences; a lack of brotherly love, and the sin of covetousness.

We would here kindly emphasize the necessity of more carefully reading and heeding Peter's direction in his first Epistle 1st Chap. 22nd verse: "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently." And where cold estrangements exist, where unkind suspicions, or vindictive back-bitings are indulged, let there be prompt visitation, and, if that means proves abortive, let there be earnest, united, judicious discipline undertaken and persevered in until the evil is cured—cured, if possible, by harmonious retention of the parties, otherwise by their equally harmonious exclusion, allowing no circumstances of wealth or social position to swerve the church from fidelity to Christ.

In the case of a covetous or avaricious disposition in a

Church member should there be the administration of Discipline? Undoubtedly. The Scriptures are unmistakable and emphatic on this case. Paul, in his inspired Letter to the Church at Ephesus, pronounces a "covetous man" an "idolator," associates him with the "fornicator and the unclean person," and assumes that those Ephesian Christians know that such have not "an inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ and God," and in one of his Epistles to the Corinthian Church, he authoritatively exhorts to "put away" those wicked persons "from among themselves."

If, then, a member persistently refuses to contribute his proportion, towards the relief of the church's poor, or the support of the Gospel at Home and Abroad, he should be waited upon, kindly reasoned with, and, if possible, persuaded to do his duty in the direction of Christian benevolence. If in any instance such efforts fail, exclusion should certainly follow.

As one preventive, however, of the necessity of such a step, let there be adopted in our churches more systematic plans and efficient agencies for eliciting benevolent contributions from all the members, in proportion as God prospers them. When such agencies shall have been more thoroughly carried into effect, unselfish dispositions will be successfully inculcated, benevolent habits will be cherished, more valuable members will be retained, more souls will be saved, more Glory to Christ will accrue, and the Christian ministry will be far more adequately and worthily supported; much less dissatisfaction with the Pastor will occur; and when the church thus does her temporal duty towards him, the now growing, but unhealthy, demand for frequent pastoral changes will perceptibly and happily decline.

Brethren, we know of no better additional counsels to convey through this letter than that we betake ourselves to more careful study of the Word of God, and to more earnest prayer and faithful self-examination. We also suggest and urge the propriety on the part of the Pastors and Deacons of a frequent inspection of the church lists of names; we earnestly recommend the appointment of standing or occasional committees, both of brethren and sisters, for the purpose of a thorough visitation of the members and their families; and, finally, we advise the holding, in all our churches, of regular business meetings at least once every three months.

Said a German writer, referring particularly to his own country: "There is a future for the Baptists." Let that future be, in these Maritime Provinces, and throughout this wide Dominion of our Canada, the noblest possible. Such a standard may be reached by the Grace of God, and our Christian fidelity.

Denominational Literature.

Submitted at the Western N. B. Association.

Your Committee in view of the great importance of Education, and of the important part that Literature plays in forming the mind and character of the young and rising generation, deem it highly essential that those engaged in Sabbath School work in connection with our churches, should exercise great caution in selecting Sabbath School libraries and other literature to be placed in the hands of those under their care, believing as we do, that much of the literature now constituting our libraries is of an objectionable character and not in accordance with the principles of our denomination.

We also notice with pleasure the increased circulation of the YOUTH'S VISITOR and BIBLE LESSONS as published by the proprietor of the CHRISTIAN VISITOR, and heartily recommend their use to our Sabbath School workers.

Our denominational paper the CHRISTIAN VISITOR has been conducted in such a manner during the past year as to merit our confidence and claim the support of every Baptist family.

G. G. KING,
A. H. HAYWARD,
JAMES SLOAT, } Committee.

P. E. I. ASSOCIATION.

The Committee on Systematic Benevolence report that while we rejoice that much has been accomplished through the efforts of our churches in supporting our benevolent enterprises, yet our ever-widening fields of work call for still greater efforts on the part of those whose duty it is to extend the cause of Christ in the world. It is unnecessary to enumerate the various objects that have claims on our benevolence, nor are we willing to prescribe to any person, the particular channel in which his benevolence should flow; this will have to be regulated by each individual's own judgment. Yet that order may be maintained, and that each worthy object may receive its proportion, we would commend to the intelligent consideration of our churches, the scheme adopted at the last Meeting of our Convention, known as the Convention Scheme. The general rule for the carrying out of benevolent purposes, may be gathered from the command given to one of the early churches, to give as God has prospered them. Could we rely on this principle being carried out, nothing further would be needed. But such is the condition of humanity that in order to carry out any noble enterprise, by voluntary effort, system is indispensable, hence we recommend that our churches make still greater efforts to secure such a system of giving as will make success certain.

Our past success should be sufficient to incite us to "Thank God and take courage," as we look forward to, and assist in the promotion of better things. If then, such marked success has attended the small efforts put forth, does it not become us as Stewards of God, to render still more efficient the means employed, in order that a still more abundant harvest may be gathered into his garner.

The Christian church makes no other such good investment, as that which she lays out for the promotion of the cause of her Master, and besides, her own vitality depends on such action. While we repudiate the idea of a religion that consists of works, we still hold to the necessity of such an inward life as will manifest itself in outward benevolent actions. We are wont to boast that Christianity has developed higher benevolent sentiments than were known previous to its inception, and such we believe to be true; yet the needy condition of all our benevolent institutions, must speak small praise of our benevolence in the eyes of the world. How little real sacrifice is yet made in this department of Christian work, and to what a small extent do the members of our churches forget the comforts or even the luxuries of life in order that the gospel may be sent abroad, or that weak, struggling interests at home may be sustained. Yet the command to bear one another's burden demands this and he who has never made any sacrifice in the carrying out of his benevolent duties has never yet experienced the true luxury of giving, nor has practical evidence of the truth that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Our earnest appeal to all our churches, and brethren and sisters who compose them, is that through a sense of gratitude for blessings received, they may be aroused to greater efforts to meet the needs of the cause of Christ, as they now press upon us.

Respectfully Submitted,
ARTHUR SIMPSON, Chairman.