
A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE IX.

THE NEW PAROCHIAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE CHURCH.

BY THE REVEREND THOMAS CHALMERS.

In the history of Christianity, there have been two general forms of religious activity, and these forms, though always in some measure coexistent, have usually succeeded each other in great eras. One form is that of evangelization, and the other is that of parochialization; and the thesis which this article proposes is, that American Christianity is passing, and should pass, into an era of parochialization. I say this as one who has had full sympathy with the traditional type of evangelism. But evangelism is not to continue as it has the dominant form of militant Christianity. The popular conception of vital and aggressive religion which was to persist in this country for more than a century and a half was fixed by the Great Awakening at Northampton. And it has been a distinctly American conception.[1] Since that day American Protestantism has judged of earnest, virile Christianity almost wholly by the evangelistic standard. When revivals have been frequent and sweeping, the church has enjoyed the consciousness of prosperity. When they have ceased, the church has languished, or lived on in the patient hope of their return. They have been the one great object of the prayers of the faithful.

This era of evangelization has been one of the most beneficent epochs in the history of the church. The Great

[1] "The idea of revivals is the gift of American to foreign Calvinism." —A. V. G. Allen, in Jonathan Edwards, p. 136.

Awakening transformed the moral and religious life of New England.[1] The fervor it kindled in the church enabled Christianity to overtake the tides of migration westward, establishing, as the fruits of successive revivals, in cities, villages, and country districts, the permanent institutions of Christian life and worship. Without financial aid or recognition from the state, our Christianity has covered the continent with its churches. It is a feat of evangelization almost unparalleled in the history of Christianity. The denominations which were best calculated to give expression to the spirit of the Great Awakening have reaped the harvests of the century and a half. The Methodists and Baptists, never having enjoyed the prestige of state patronage, unfrightened by threatened respectability, have surrendered themselves fully to the evangelistic idea, and have been, therefore, the great religious forces of the country. The Presbyterians and Congregationalists have prospered in almost exact proportion as they too have interpreted the spirit of the era. The Episcopal Church has shared neither in its spirit nor its prosperity.

But there are already indications that the era is passing, and it is natural that it should. Some form of evangelism must have a perpetual place, but it will not determine, as it has done, the character of our Christianity. Among the indications of a transition, we mention the general apprehension that the days of the great revivals are gone. Mr. Moody's successor is not looked for. Denominations that have depended most exclusively on evangelism express alarm that they have ceased to progress or are losing ground. The denominations, on the other hand, like the Lutherans and Episcopalians, that depend more on parochial than on evangelistic efficiency, are in the ascendant. Greater attention is being given by all our churches to the care of the local parish.

[1] Jonathan Edwards, p. 185.

This is shown by the awakening interest in the catechumenate. Some two dozen catechisms of various types have been prepared by Congregational pastors alone, and pastors' classes for the moral and religious instruction of the young are becoming general. Efforts have been made on a considerable scale for a decade past by institutional churches to meet the social and spiritual needs of the parish. These churches have been so far—at least in the cities—the best exponents of the parish idea. They have ignored denominational lines, and have sought to serve the community. The ordinary denominational church contents itself with being surrounded by the homes of scattered parishioners. The institutional church, in the difficult attempt to restore the parochial idea, has sought to surround itself by a parish. It has not been an entire success, but it has borne witness to the principle that geographical location should, on the whole, mean more in church affiliation than denominational ancestry. At present our churches are points, each with a scattered constituency. There is little definite assumption of responsibility for territory as such. Between these points are the valleys of neglect, where the population lives in semi-heathenism. This churchless population is the menace of the civilization. The vast majority of the boys and girls who go wrong are from this churchless class. These valleys cannot be evangelized by the traditional evangelism. Revival meetings barely touch them. This churchless population is Protestant. There is no churchless Roman Catholic population in this country worth speaking of. The parochial efficiency of the Roman Church prevents it. The heathenism of this country is ours, and it is judging the Protestant Church. It must be conquered by us as efficiently as the churchless Romanism that preceded the priest to America has been, and is being, conquered by the Roman Church. It cannot be conquered by the agencies we

have been relying upon, but I believe it can be conquered by a calm, quiet, patient, and general return to parochial methods, and for this belief I have the rich confirmation of history.

IN THE FIRST ERA.

The first era of the Christian church, which was evangelistic, blended into an era of parochialization. Means were adopted by which the results of the apostolic preaching were conserved; the church became established, and pastors settled over pastorless congregations; limits to ecclesiastical jurisdiction were fixed; the character and function of the pastor as the spiritual counselor of his people were defined; he kept himself acquainted by system with the condition of the souls of his people; the catechumenate stood at the door of the church to bar the insincere, to lead the earnest into the path of eternal life, and to lay bare the sins that damned the age. In short, the task the church had before her was definitely perceived, and she went about it with a clearness of vision and a regularity of movement, without which victory could never have come, and which could not have characterized a purely evangelistic era.

IN THE GERMAN REFORMATION.

The first period of the German Reformation was one of evangelization. The gospel of justification by faith was proclaimed, wherever the German language was spoken, by an army of converted monks and priests. Every intelligent convert became an evangelist, and "every place," says D'Aubigné, "became a temple." The gospel of God's free grace was preached in market-places, cemeteries, groves, and lime-tree meadows by transient evangelists until the Lutheran doctrines were popularly prevalent throughout the German-speaking world. But this era of evangel-

ization was succeeded by a period of moral and religious decay. Churches in the rural districts and in the cities became deserted, and the population fell into immorality and irreligion. "Pastors and people had broken loose from all restraint, churches and schools were in ruins, the ministers without income, ignorant, indifferent, and demoralized."[1] "The peasants," wrote Luther, "learn nothing, know nothing, and abuse all their liberty. They have ceased to pray, to confess, to commune, and live as if they had no religion. As they despised Popery, so they now despise us."[2]

But for the period of parochialization which followed, the German Reformation would have gone down in history as a dismal failure, protest against Rome would have been discredited, and the triumph of evangelical Christianity would have been postponed for centuries. It was the Saxon Church Visitation scheme, imitated in other German states, a work of pure parochialization, which saved Protestantism in the land of its birth. And to those who fear that such a transition as I am pleading for in our own land, would lead us nearer to Rome, it is sufficient to say that all those provinces of Germany that passed through this transition into a stable, parochial Protestantism, are permanently Protestant, enjoying all the blessings of Protestant civilization, with no possibility of a return to Rome. On the other hand, those provinces in which the population had become Protestant during the era of evangelization, but in which Protestantism was never given a more permanent form, have fallen back into Romanism, and are Roman Catholic to-day.

IN THE GENEVAN REFORMATION.

John Calvin's work in Geneva was a work, not of evangelization, but of parochialization. The city had already

[1] Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Vol. vi. p. 549. [2] *Ibid.*

been converted by the Protestant preaching of Farel. Calvin's first task was to convince Geneva that Protestantism and license were not synonymous terms. He instituted an elaborate and effective parochial system. He had the city divided into parishes, and provided for the stated pastoral visitation of every family. He prepared a catechism, and provided for the religious instruction of every child in the city. His system brought every individual where the church could touch him at every turn in his life. He was violently opposed by the Libertine party, but he succeeded, and his historian can say, that, through his efforts, Geneva, "from being noted for profligacy, became renowned for virtue."[1] It was one of the most remarkable municipal transformations in history. It was a system that held back a multitude of souls from moral ruin to the praise and glory of God, and the joy and happiness of man. Without considering his influence on theology, which some may not prize, we still have great reason to thank God for the Genevan reformer.

IN THE SCOTCH REFORMATION.

Systematic parochialization has nowhere been carried on with greater vigor and effect than in Scotland. With a system of church government which is fundamentally congregational, the Church of Scotland policed the kingdom with a complete plan of parochial supervision. Parish boundaries were well-defined, and ministers were required to live within them; an excellent system of parochial schools was established; parish registers containing a record of the cardinal facts in the religious history of each individual within parish bounds were kept with an accuracy for which subsequent generations have been grateful. And

[1] Ogilvie, The Presbyterian Churches.

one of the regulations which proved of immense value to society was the requirement that persons moving from one parish to another should carry a letter from their former parish as a guarantee of good faith and Christian character. This rule was enforced equally upon the domestic servant that moved from place to place, and upon the nobility that came in certain seasons to dwell in the capital. It was a system that deprived no man of his liberty. In fact it gave scope to the freest and fullest confidence one in another, and promoted freedom of intercourse. To this, among other influences, was due the disappearance of the lock and key from the Scotchman's door. Barrie tells us that "once Thrums had been overrun with thieves. It is now thought," says he, "that there may have been only one. . . . [But] such was his repute that there were weavers who spoke of locking their doors when they went from home." The completeness of Scotch parochialization did not endanger Scotch Protestantism. In fact Protestantism in Scotland was never so secure as when its parochial efficiency was greatest.

THE PROBLEM IN AMERICA.

That our American Christianity in its parochial efficiency falls far behind that of Protestant Europe is no matter of surprise. We have been engaged hitherto, as has been shown, in another and in many respects greater task—the evangelization of a continent. We have been gathering congregations, awakening the memories of past religious teaching in men who have abandoned Christianity. We have been building churches in towns that had none, and planting Sunday-schools where there were no churches. The work that needed doing was a work that hurried us, and we have had little patience with quiet and more permanent methods. We have had to have immediate results, because we have feared, and with some justice, that if we

did not get immediate results we would get none. But there has been of late an increasing feeling that results are not altogether satisfactory. Now and then some great evangelist, depressed by popular indifference to religion, has called pastors and churches to renewed prayer and increased exertion. Bishops, distressed at the gloomy outlook for their churches, have appointed days for humiliation and fasting. These special appeals to flagging spiritual energies, these periodical cryings out for the Spirit of God to come in overwhelming power, are the characteristics of an age possessed of spiritual earnestness, but of an earnestness that does not know definitely what to do with itself. They are the characteristics of an evangelistic era that has reached the stage of exhaustion. They are also, however, the promise of a better day.

Inasmuch as the difficulties bequeathed to us by an age of denominationalism are so great that we cannot hope for a parochial efficiency equal to that of other days and other lands, what do we mean by parochialization as applied to the United States? We will summarize our conclusions in the following propositions:—

1. There should be such an assumption of responsibility for territory that every Protestant family will find itself, with or without its consent, under the kindly persistent watch-care of a parish minister. The placing of Protestant families—that is one of the first tasks, and one which it will be the crime of Christianity to neglect. Worthy efforts to discharge this task are being made in many cities and states. When these efforts become general, and pass from the spasmodic stage into quiet permanency, this feature of our new era will be realized.

2. One of the laws that should go forth through our jungle should be, that no denomination shall deliberately break into the well-cared-for parish dominions of another. The interests of the great American church are greater than

those of any sect of which it is composed. And this law must be vigorously upheld. The sect that centers its energies in its own denominational ambitions, and wantonly wounds the body of our Christianity, should suffer chastisement. We have reached a stage in our Christian economy when the greatest of ecclesiastical crimes is a breach of comity. Any doctrine, for instance, like that of apostolic succession, which serves as an excuse by which one denomination frees itself from the laws which govern others, and tramples without scruple upon their rights, is a grievous practical heresy, and the denomination that holds it is, to that extent, guilty of ecclesiastical sin.

3. Every church should guarantee the careful, religious instruction, at some time in his life, of every child in its parish, and it should not rely upon the Sunday-school or the Christian Endeavor Society for this instruction.

4. Some systematic means should be adopted by which the parish pastor may exercise what Professor Achelis calls the function of spiritual diagnosis,[1] that he may become in the fullest sense what his name implies—the shepherd of a flock.

If, to what I propose, the objection is raised, that what might be done in a homogeneous Protestantism like that of Saxony would be folly if attempted in a heterogeneous Protestantism like that of New England, I answer, that the reason why the original homogeneous Protestantism of New England has become so heterogeneous is, because it has never fully valued the conserving qualities of careful parochialization. The question for us now is: Shall we try thus late in the day to do what might better have been done earlier?

[1] "Die Notwendigkeit der Diagnose liegt auf der Hand, weil nur sie das Verständnis des Gegenstands der Seelsgorge seitens des Seelsgorgers ermöglicht."—Praktische Theologie, p. 138.