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Church polity,
the first two
books of A
manual of ...**

**Robert William
Dale**



CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH POLITY.

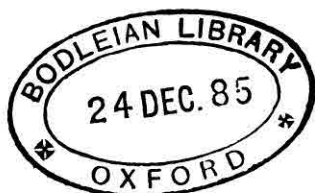
*BEING THE FIRST TWO BOOKS OF A MANUAL OF
CONGREGATIONAL PRINCIPLES.*

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R. W. DALE,

MALVERN,

August 16, 1884.

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INTRODUCTORY.

I.

At a time when Christendom is agitated by controversies reaching to the very roots of the Christian Faith, and when all Churches are struggling with practical duties which are beyond their strength, questions of ecclesiastical polity may appear to have no claim to consideration.

We have to assert the authority and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ against the assaults of speculative unbelief. We have to preach the Gospel to those who have never heard it. We have to lessen the miseries as well as the sins of mankind. There are hundreds of millions of heathen men to whom the redemption of the world by Jesus Christ is altogether unknown; there are vast numbers of our own countrymen who have drifted beyond the reach of all the ordinary institutions of Christian instruction and worship; there are the hungry to be fed and the naked to be clothed; there are miserable homes to be made decent and healthy; there are low conceptions of morality in domestic, commercial, and public life which the Church ought to elevate; there is selfishness in the Church itself which ought to be inspired with the charity of Christ, indolence which ought to be set on fire by the zeal of Christ for the honour of God and the righteousness and happiness of mankind. It may be thought that when these great tasks are done it will be time enough to consider

whether Episcopacy, Presbyterianism, or Congregationalism is the best form of church polity.

But, meantime, churches actually exist, and they cannot exist without some form of organisation. We are surrounded by Churches differing very widely from each other in the principles of their polity; and we have to elect the Church with which we will become associated. New Churches are being founded, and it is necessary to determine how they shall be governed. The question—What form of Church polity is most favourable to the maintenance of a firm and intelligent faith in Christ among the members of the Church, to the increase of their knowledge of Christian truth and duty; to the energy and joy of their spiritual life; to their mutual affection as brothers and sisters in the household of God; to the development of their Christian morality; to the discipline and effective use of whatever powers they possess for the service of God and of mankind?—this is a question which cannot be evaded or postponed.

The subject of ecclesiastical polity is of grave importance in relation both to the controversy with unbelief and to the practical work of the Church. For the ultimate triumph of the Christian Faith depends far less upon the genius and the learning with which it is defended by Christian apologists than upon the nobleness with which it is illustrated in the lives of Christian people. It is also true that the energy of the work of the Church will be determined by the extent to which Christian people are penetrated with the thought and animated with the spirit of Christ.

But it may be said that no particular form of church government is more favourable than another to the perfect development of the Christian life; that a beautiful sanctity, a spiritual

worship, a noble morality, a large and profound knowledge of Christian truth, efficiency and zeal in all works of Faith and Charity, may exist in connection with the most dissimilar types of ecclesiastical organisation. It may be maintained, however, with equal force, that nations have been strong and prosperous with the most dissimilar political institutions. Waste lands have been reclaimed and brought under cultivation, forests cleared, roads made, bridges built, under the most despotic governments as well as by nations enjoying political freedom. Absolute monarchies as well as republics have had splendid capitals, powerful fleets, victorious armies; they have had wealthy merchants, judges of stainless integrity, statesmen of great genius; they have had scholars, artists, and poets. Under every kind of political organisation a race with noble qualities in its blood may exhibit courage, industry, patriotism, and may achieve national greatness. And yet we believe that, other things being equal, a nation will reach the highest form of national life under free institutions; and that the responsibilities which rest upon the citizens of a free municipality and upon the people of a free State, discipline some of the most robust and generous virtues. When political rights have been enjoyed so long, and have become so secure, that only the duties associated with them are remembered, they encourage in the whole community an interest in public affairs, a zeal for the public good, a readiness to undertake the most laborious tasks in the public service, which are strong guarantees of the security of the State, and noble elements in the life of the people. Political institutions are at once an expression and a discipline of the character of nations; ecclesiastical institutions are at once an expression and a discipline of the character of churches.

The connection between organisation and life is never accidental or arbitrary.

It is the chief purpose of this Manual to state the principles of the Congregational polity, and to show that they determined the organisation of the apostolic churches, and are intimately related to some of the greatest truths and facts of the Christian Faith.

II.

The New Testament does not contain any law declaring that a particular scheme of church government is of universal and permanent obligation. In the directions which Christ gave for the treatment of an offending brother,* He assumed the existence of a Christian Assembly, or Church; but nothing is said about the manner in which this Assembly or Church is to be organised.

In the Acts of the Apostles, and in the apostolic epistles, it is possible to discover the general outlines of the organisation of the first churches; but there is no precept by which this organisation is enforced on the churches of all countries and of all times.

A certain presumption is created in favour of Congregational principles when it is shown that the polity of the apostolic churches was Congregational; but the presumption falls far short of a proof that the Congregational polity is of permanent Divine authority. That the apostolic churches were Congregational does not even amount to a proof that Congregationalism is permanently expedient. Between a form of church government and those great truths concern-

* Matt. xviii. 15—17.

ing Christ and the Christian redemption which form the chief part of the substance of the New Testament there is an obvious difference. What is true once is true for ever. That the Lord Jesus Christ was the Son of God, that He died for the remission of sins, that He rose from the dead, and received "all authority . . . in heaven and on earth," must have been just as true in the second century as in the first, and in the third century as in the second. But a form of church government which was the best possible organisation for the Church of the first century may, perhaps, have been the worst possible organisation for the Church of the third.

A political constitution which is admirably fitted to secure the ends of civil society when a nation has a small population inhabiting a small territory may be altogether unsuitable to a great empire with many millions of subjects and extending over half a continent. As Burke says, when the conditions of national life have greatly changed, "the beaten path is the very reverse of the safe road." Since the times of the apostles immense changes have taken place in the Church itself, and in its relations to society. Its numbers have increased. In Europe and America its members are not converts from Paganism or Judaism, but are the descendants of ancestors who have been nominally Christian for more than a thousand years. It has wealth and learning. Instead of suffering persecution, it is able to exert great political power. Statesmen profess the Christian faith, and ministers of the Church are the councillors of kings. It may be alleged that, with these great changes in the resources and position of the Church, great changes must have become necessary in its organisation; and that if

the same general laws that affect the polity of nations affect the polity of churches, to prove that the churches of Corinth and Ephesus were Congregational is only to create a presumption against adopting or maintaining the Congregational polity in London and New York.

The apostolic churches consisted of those, and of those only, who made a personal profession of their faith in Christ, and who, on the ground of this profession, were received into the Christian assembly; they are therefore addressed in the apostolic epistles as "faithful brethren," and as "saints in Christ Jesus." But it may be said that in those early days the Church necessarily consisted of such persons, and only of such persons. For a man to separate himself from the Jewish synagogue or to break with Paganism and to become a Christian, some force of personal conviction was necessary. In apostolic times the people outside the Church were not nominal Christians, but Jews and Pagans. It may therefore be argued that the precedent of the primitive churches gives no sanction to the endeavour of Congregationalists to limit church membership to those who, in response to their personal faith in Christ, have received the pardon of sin and the gift of eternal life.

The apostolic churches exercised discipline on their members, and excluded from membership those who were guilty of flagrant immorality. But it may be contended that the necessity for discipline arose from circumstances which do not exist in a country like our own. The Christian churches of the first age were surrounded by a hostile civil society; their power as witnesses to a higher religious faith and a purer morality would have been diminished if they had not marked with the severest disapproval church members

who were guilty of flagrant moral offences. And, further, the relations of church members to each other were so intimate that it was impossible to tolerate the presence of such persons in the Christian assemblies.

Every Christian church in apostolic times was independent of every other church, and governed itself without the interference of any external ecclesiastical authority. But it may be alleged that this was only because the number of Christians in each city was so small that it was possible for all of them to meet together for worship and for the transaction of church business, and because the physical difficulties which prevented free and frequent intercourse between Christian societies in cities remote from each other had not yet been overcome by the strong desire to realise in their church life their unity in Christ. Meanwhile, the influence of the apostles and of men like Timothy and Titus held the scattered churches together, and answered the purposes which were secured in a later generation by synods and diocesan bishops.

It may be even contended that, though it was according to the will of Christ that the apostles gathered their early converts into churches, we have no right to suppose that societies of this kind were intended to be permanent. Churches may have been necessary when the Christian Faith was maintaining a hard struggle for existence, when those who held it required all the support which they could derive from the sense of comradeship and from close and constant intercourse with each other; but in a country like this, in which the Christian Faith has been triumphant for centuries, no such combative organisations are necessary. When there was no Christian literature in existence, it was imperative that those who

believed the Christian Gospel should receive constant oral instruction in the facts, the truths, and the ethics of the new Faith; this involved frequent meetings; and frequent meetings were not possible without organisation. But the rise of a Christian literature has made oral teaching unnecessary.

To those who contend that the Episcopacy of the Romish Church and the Anglican Church has apostolic authority it is a sufficient answer to show that the apostolic churches were not Episcopal. To those who claim apostolic authority for Presbyterianism it is a sufficient answer to show that the apostolic churches were not Presbyterian. But the argument on behalf of Congregationalism drawn from the polity of the apostolic churches may be met by the reply that there is nothing in the New Testament to make this polity of permanent obligation; and that the organisation of churches, like the political constitutions of nations, must change with the changes in their life and circumstances.

It is not enough to prove that the apostolic churches were Congregational; it is necessary to prove that Congregational principles are permanently rooted in the central truths of the Christian revelation, and that the Congregational polity is at once the highest and the most natural organisation of the life of the Christian Church.

BOOK I.

The Principles of the Congregational Polity.

CHAPTER I.

PRINCIPLE I.—IT IS THE WILL OF CHRIST THAT ALL THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN HIM SHOULD BE ORGANISED INTO CHURCHES.

THE Christian churches of apostolic times were societies of persons professing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Saviour of men. These societies met at appointed times to offer prayer, to sing hymns, and to celebrate the Lord's Supper. The members of each church received instruction in Christian truth and Christian duty from those who were "apt to teach;" they were reminded in times of trouble of the great consolations and hopes of those who are "in Christ;" and they were exhorted to be loyal to Christ and to keep all His Commandments. A church was the natural centre and support of efforts for making the Christian Gospel known in its immediate neighbourhood. In some cases churches assisted evangelistic work in distant countries.

It is the common belief of Congregationalists—

I. That these societies were founded by the apostles in Christ's name and by His authority, and that all converts to the Christian faith were required to belong to them; and

II. That these societies were intended by Christ to be permanent, and that now, as in apostolic times, Christian men are required to be members of Christian churches.

If these two propositions can be maintained, the first principle of the Congregational polity, that *it is the will of Christ that all those who believe in Him should be organised into churches*, will be demonstrated.

I.

That the apostolic churches were organised in obedience to the will of Christ is proved by the following considerations:—

(I.) *Our Lord declared that He Himself is present in church assemblies, and that He confirms their decisions.* This declaration implies that churches were formed by His authority.

He knew that there would be causes of quarrel among those who received His Gospel. One Christian man would be guilty of offences against another. He directs that the man who has received an offence shall first go alone to the offender and endeavour to secure redress and reconciliation: "If thy brother sin against thee, go, shew him his fault between thee and him alone: if he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother" (Matt. xviii. 15). But this private appeal may fail: "If he hear thee not, take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established" (Matt. xviii. 16). Even this may fail. What is to be done next? "If he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church (*or* congregation): and if he refuse to hear the church (*or* congregation) also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile or the publican" (Matt. xviii. 17). These directions imply the existence of a Christian society which can meet for the purpose of adjusting differences between its members. No such function can be discharged without organisation. It must be known who are members of the society, and who, therefore, are under an obligation to take

part in its decisions. Some authority is necessary to convene a meeting and to control its proceedings. Persons who do not submit to the will of the society are to be separated from it; and it is implied that separation carries with it loss and penalty.

And the decisions of an organised church are sustained and confirmed by Christ's own presence in its meetings: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. xviii. 20). These words, though legitimately extended to the most informal and accidental assembly of Christian people gathered together in the name of Christ, were intended to illustrate and explain the authority with which Christ invested the action of an organised Christian church.

The offending brother who refuses to submit to the decision of the church is to be excluded from its communion: "let him be unto thee as the Gentile or the publican." The exclusion involves something more than separation from a visible human society. "Verily I say unto you, What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. xviii. 18—20). To bind and to loose is to exercise the authority which belongs to regularly constituted governments; and our Lord declares that the acts of the church on earth in binding and loosing are confirmed in heaven. The ground on which He rests the supernatural force which sustains the decisions of Christian brethren when united in a church is this:—"For where two or three are gathered together in My name there am I in the midst of them." Whenever a church meets in Christ's name Christ Himself is present in the assembly; its decisions are His as well as theirs; its decisions are confirmed by His authority.

(11.) *The special promise of Christ to united prayer, which rests on the same ground as the declaration of the authority which*

belongs to the decisions of the church in relation to questions of discipline, gives His sanction to the organisation of Christian churches for purposes of worship. "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. xviii. 19, 20). Christ is speaking of a Christian assembly: it may be a very small one; only "two or three" may be "gathered together" in His name. But as the decisions of such an assembly are confirmed in heaven, its prayers are also certain to be heard. It is a Divine society, for He Himself is present when it meets either for discipline or for prayer. Its prayers are His, as its decisions on questions of discipline are His. Christ has thus given the most impressive sanction to the organisation of Christian societies for the purposes of prayer and worship.*

(III.) *The institution of the Lord's Supper is a proof that our Lord intended that those who believe in Him should be formed into Christian societies.* He meant His friends to hold together after He had left them. They were not to live an isolated life, but were to meet to eat bread and to drink wine in remembrance of Him. We learn from Paul's first epistle to the church at Corinth (chap. xi. 23—26) that this service was

* It is not denied that the promise, "if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask," justifies exceptional confidence in the certainty of obtaining answers to all prayers in which Christian men unite, whether they are the prayers of a regularly constituted church or not. But it is of great significance (1) that the promise was given in immediate connection with our Lord's declaration of the supernatural force attaching to church decisions; (2) that the ground of the promise is Christ's presence in an assembly of Christians—"Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them. The promise is a strong discouragement and condemnation of that un-Christian temper which leads men to live an isolated Christian life, for it attaches supreme efficacy to prayer when it is offered in fellowship with other Christian people.

not to be celebrated by the apostles only, or only by those who had been the personal friends of Christ during His earthly ministry, but by all converts to the Christian Faith.

But those who meet regularly as Christian men to celebrate the Lord's Supper confess their common faith in Christ; they implicitly recognise their union with Him and with each other; they constitute a Christian church.

The organisation of such an assembly may be very imperfect; it may have no exact regulations as to who shall be present and take part in the service; it may keep no register of members; it may appoint no officers; many of the ends for which churches exist may not be attained; but, if the service is to be held regularly, some rudimentary organisation is necessary.

Churches must be founded if those who believe in Christ are to meet regularly to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

(IV.) *The apostles founded churches, and it may be regarded as certain that for the great acts of their ministry they had the authority of Christ.* They did not believe that the Christian life of their converts would reach the perfection of its power and blessedness in religious solitude, or that it was sufficient for a man to trust in Christ for eternal redemption and to regulate his personal conduct by the will of Christ. They required the outward acknowledgment of the authority of Christ as well as inward loyalty to Him (Rom. x. 10). They insisted on baptism as well as on faith (Acts ii. 38). They gathered their converts into organised societies. For the defence of those who had received the Christian Faith against great moral and spiritual perils they relied largely on the vigilance of the ministers of the churches (Acts xx. 28—35). Those who had believed in Christ were taught of God, but this did not render unnecessary the instruction of the recognised "teachers" of the churches (1 Tim. v. 17; Eph. v. 11). The members of the churches were required to care for each other; the strong were to support the weak; the courageous

were to encourage the faint-hearted; and those who were living a disorderly, idle, fanatical life were to be admonished by their wiser and more sober brethren (1 Thess. v. 14).*

The apostles were charged by Christ Himself with the great work of making known to mankind the blessings and the laws of His Kingdom, and they believed that the Divine method for the protection and development of the Christian life required that those who professed faith in Christ should be gathered into Christian societies. On a point of such capital importance as this it is inconceivable that they could have mistaken the mind of Christ.

(V.) *In organising churches with regularly constituted officers the apostles received the sanction of the risen and glorified Christ.* "He gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, *pastors and teachers*; for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ" (Eph. iv. 11, 12). Apostles had an immediate call from Christ, and were commissioned to make known the Gospel to all nations; they were the founders, not the officers, of churches. Prophets were men who, under the special illumination of the Holy Spirit, had a keen insight into the things of God; they exercised their ministry in Christian assemblies; but—as prophets—they were not church officers. Evangelists were, in our modern phrase, missionaries. But pastors and teachers were then, as now, the ministers of particular churches. There were teachers who were not pastors, but when Paul wrote his later epistles "all pastors were required" to be 'apt to teach.' As pastors, they had a real but undefined authority over the church; they had control over the conduct of worship; they were exceptionally responsible both for the purity of the faith of the church and the purity of its morals.

* I agree with Meyer that in 1 Thess. v. 14 Paul is not addressing the officers of the church specially, but the members generally.

They discharged their principal pastoral duties by the instruction they gave to the church in its ordinary assemblies; and, as this function of teaching was so important a part of their ministry, Paul describes them as 'pastors and teachers,' giving a double title to the same office.**

(VI.) *Through the ministers of organised churches, Christ conferred the highest spiritual blessings.* "Pastors and teachers," as well as apostles, prophets, and evangelists, were given "for the perfecting of the saints," "unto the building up of the body of Christ." Their work was to be consummated when those to whom they ministered reached the same "faith" in "the Son of God," and the same full and sure "knowledge" of Him; when they touched the ideal maturity of the Christian life, and every one of them became a "full-grown man," and in the complete development of Christian righteousness attained "unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. iv. 12—14). If a Christian man remained outside the Church, he incurred great loss and great guilt; for through the ministers of the Church Christ disciplined, developed, and perfected Christian life and character.

(VII.) *The organisation into churches of those who believed in Christ received the special sanction of the Spirit of Christ.* Speaking to the ministers of the church at Ephesus, Paul said: "Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in the which the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops, to feed the Church of God, which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts xx. 28). Since men were made "bishops" of churches by the Holy Ghost, it must have been the will of Christ that churches should be organised.

From the preceding considerations it follows that it was

* "Lectures on the Epistle to the Ephesians," by R. W. Dale, pp. 278, 279.

the will of Christ, in apostolic times, that all who acknowledged His authority should be associated with Christian churches. The Christian church was an institution founded by the authority of Christ for the discipline and development of the Christian life. Its institutions were means of grace.

II.

It may be conceded that the churches of apostolic times were founded under the authority of Christ, and that it was the duty of all converts to the Christian Faith to belong to them; but it may be alleged that these societies were not intended to be permanent, and that the reasons for founding and maintaining them have long disappeared.

It rests upon those who take this position to show that *all* the reasons for organising Christian churches in apostolic times were accidental and temporary. It is not enough, for instance, to say that, when those who professed the Christian Faith were surrounded by a hostile and Pagan society, it was expedient to place them under the shelter of Christian churches, and that churches are now useless, since the necessity for this shelter has ceased. For Christian churches may have had other ends than the protection of their members against apostasy and against the gross moral corruptions of Paganism. Churches were founded by the authority of Christ; they must not be suffered to fall into decay unless it can be shown that all the reasons for which He founded them have passed away. The burden of proof lies upon those who contend that the institution was a temporary expedient to answer temporary purposes.

But decisive reasons can be alleged for believing that it is still the will of Christ that His people should be organised into churches.

(I.) *There is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that Christian churches were regarded as temporary institutions in-*

tended to meet the temporary exigencies of the first Christian age. Since there is clear evidence that it was Christ's will that those who believed in Him in apostolic times should be formed into churches for purposes of Christian instruction, worship, and fellowship, there is the strongest presumption, in the absence of any intimation to the contrary effect, that these institutions were intended by Him to be permanent.

(II.) *There is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that the Lord's Supper was intended to be a temporary institution.* There is nothing in the nature of the service to suggest it. There is nothing in the objects of the service to suggest it. The Apostle Paul declares that when the friends and disciples of Christ eat the bread and drink the cup they "proclaim the Lord's death till He come." The memorial service is to last until the appearance of our Lord in glory. But it has been already shown (p. 12) that wherever Christian people meet regularly to celebrate the Lord's Supper there is at least an informal Christian society; and such meetings cannot be maintained long without giving to the society a more or less definite organisation. But a society of Christian men organised for the celebration of the Lord's Supper is an organised Christian church.

(III.) *There is no reason for supposing that the great words of our Lord, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them," are less true in our days than they were in the days of the apostles.* There is no limitation to suggest that they were intended as a promise of exceptional honour and blessedness to the Christians of the first century. Indeed, they are not a promise at all, but the revelation of a fact. Christian men are so related to each other as well as to Christ that when they are "gathered together in His name" He is "in the midst of them." They find Him when they find each other.

This exceptional presence of Christ in an assembly of Christian men is the ground of all the power and dignity of the

Christian Church. Churches are founded that this presence may be realised. Christian men should associate themselves with churches in order that they may share the strength and blessedness which this presence confers, and discharge the duties which it renders possible. It is still the will of Christ that His people should be gathered into churches, for where two or three are gathered together in His name there is He in the midst of them.

(IV.) *There is no reason to believe that the promise to united prayer has been recalled.* "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven" (Matt. xvii. 19). The promise stands in immediate connection with what our Lord said about the authority of the Church to bind and loose, and with the great declaration, "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." In an assembly of Christians, however small, gathered together in Christ's name, whether to reconcile brethren who are estranged from each other, or to offer common prayer to God, Christ Himself is present. As His presence gives authority to the acts of the assembly, it also gives power to its prayers. God listens to us and blesses us when we pray alone; but when we pray with our Christian brethren our union with them draws us into closer union with Christ; our prayers become more truly the prayers of Christ Himself, and are more sure to obtain an answer.

The general experience of Christian people, that united prayer and united worship contribute to the activity and elevation of spiritual thought, and to the energy of the spiritual affections, is explained by the presence of Christ among us when we are gathered together in His name. Solitary worship has its own peace and blessedness, and is sometimes environed with a wonderful glory; but most Christian men are surer of a vivid sense of the presence and greatness and power and love of God when they worship.

with others than when they worship alone. The reason is that when we are in the closest fellowship with our Christian brethren we are in the closest fellowship with Christ, who is the "Way" to the Father.

The great promise to united prayer is a law which requires the organisation of Christian churches, for, apart from organised churches, assemblies for prayer will be uncertain, irregular, and precarious.

(V.) *No essential change has passed upon the spiritual life, which is the gift of Christ; and organised Christian societies are still necessary for the satisfaction of some of its strongest cravings.*

The spiritual life which Christ gives is a present revelation of Christ, and where the spiritual life is vigorous and healthy there is a strong desire for fellowship with Christian brethren as well as for fellowship with God. It must be the will of Christ that this desire should be satisfied, and it cannot be satisfied except by the creation of organised churches.

It was under the strong constraint of the cravings and affections of their new life that the earliest converts to the Christian Faith drew together. They could not live apart. They were not content with occasional meetings for Christian worship and instruction in Christian truth. "All that believed were together, and had all things common. . . . And day by day continuing stedfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they did take their food with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people." New converts joined the Christian society as a matter of course; "the Lord added to them day by day those that were being saved" (Acts ii. 44—47). It is not to be supposed that they knew as yet what our Lord had said to His apostles about the Church, but "the law written in their hearts" enabled them to anticipate positive precepts.

When the fervour of that early enthusiasm sank, the Jewish Christians still held together, and it was not till they were

in danger of drifting away from the Gospel and neglecting the "great salvation" (Heb. ii. 1—3) that it was necessary to insist on the duty of maintaining their fellowship with the church and attending its meetings: "Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works; not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more as ye see the day drawing nigh." And the charge is immediately followed by the awful menace: "For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment and a fierceness of fire which shall devour the adversaries" (Heb. x. 24—27). To withdraw from the church was a step towards apostasy from Christ. When Christian faith was firm and the Christian life fresh and vigorous, fellowship with the saints was a delight; now it had to be enforced as a duty.

Love for those who, in virtue of the Divine life which they and we received in the new birth, are our brethren in the household of God is an instinct of the Christian heart. It was necessary that Paul should warn his converts in Thessalonica against committing the vices of heathenism, but he says, "Concerning the love of the brethren, ye have no need that one write unto you; for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another" (1 Thess. iv. 9). John says, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren" (1 John iii. 14). But where there is love for the brethren isolation from them will be intolerable. If we love them we shall feel that we are in "partnership" or "fellowship" with them in all the higher interests of life. We shall be anxious for the forgiveness of *their* sins as well as of our own, for their righteousness as well as our own, for their joy in God as well as our own. We shall long for their sympathy with us in our sorrows and struggles, in our triumphs and defeats. We shall, therefore, desire to confess sin

together, to invoke God's pardon together, to ask for the light and strength which come from the inspiration of the Holy Ghost together, and to dwell together on the infinite blessedness of the love of God which is theirs as well as ours, ours as well as theirs. The consciousness of a common life, of a common faith, of common memories, of common hopes, of common troubles, of common joys, and of a common relationship to God will demand expression in united worship and united prayer. But apart from a regularly organised church there can be no adequate provision for the complete satisfaction of those cravings for "the communion of saints" of which united worship and prayer are a noble but incomplete expression.*

(VI.) *Christ's "new commandment," requiring Christian people to "love one another" (John xiii. 34) with a special love, is still in force, and organised Christian churches contribute to the development of brotherly affection.*

In the discipline of the Christian life the organised church fulfils a purpose very analogous to that which is fulfilled by

* John Owen has described the craving for spiritual fellowship in admirable words. He says that it is "the instinct of the new creature and those in whom it is to associate themselves in holy communion for the joint and mutual exercise of those graces of the Spirit which are the same, as unto the essence of them, in them all. The laws of Christ in and unto His Church, as unto all outward obedience, are suited unto those inward principles and inclinations which, by His Spirit and grace, He hath implanted in the hearts of them that believe. Hence His yoke is easy, and His commandments are not grievous. And, therefore, none of His true disciples, since He had a church upon earth, did or could satisfy themselves in their own faith singularly and personally, but would venture their lives and all that was dear unto them for communion with others, and the associating themselves with them of the same spirit and way, for the observances of the commands of Christ. The martyrs of the primitive churches of old lost more of their blood and lives for their meetings and assemblies than for personal profession of the faith; and so also have others done under the Roman apostasy."—*Works* (1851), xv. p. 256.

the Family and the State in the discipline of the natural virtues. It is our duty to love our neighbour as ourselves; to love all men; to care for strangers as well as for those of our own name and our own blood. But it is by the dear affections of home that we are trained to a wider charity; and experience shows that those who are loosely held by the ties of the Family are not conspicuous for their generous affection for all mankind. Nor, as a rule, are those who have released themselves from the special obligations of patriotism conspicuous for the energy of their devotion to the general interests of the human race. A universal philanthropy is the natural outgrowth of a genuine compassion for those of our own nation who are suffering from misfortune or injustice, and of that noble temper which makes a man care for the fortunes of his country as for his own.

The concentration of affection strengthens it and prepares it for a wider development. If in our common life we were under no special obligations to love and serve some particular persons, we should not love and serve the whole world better; we should neither love nor serve it at all. And so an organised church, by concentrating brotherly love, and defining a special area for our Christian service, disciplines us to that larger love which we are required to cherish for all that are in Christ, and to that larger service which we are under obligations to render them.*

III.

In the preceding sections of this chapter it has been contended that, since the apostles were commissioned by our Lord to "make disciples of all the nations," and to teach them "to observe all things" that He had commanded them, it may be assumed that the founding and organising of Christian societies, which was a very large part of their work, was done

* See NOTE I. at close of this chapter.

with His authority. The proof that it was the will of Christ that those who believed in Him, in apostolic times, should be organised into churches has been strengthened by an appeal to particular commands and promises of our Lord recorded in the four Gospels, and by passages in the discourses of the apostles and in their epistles, in which they attribute to the risen and glorified Christ an active part in the administration of organised Christian societies. It has been further contended that there is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that churches were temporary institutions, and that they are still necessary for the satisfaction of the cravings of the spiritual life and for the development of brotherly affection.

But, on a subject of such grave importance as this to the spiritual life of the race in all countries and all ages, an argument, however strong and firm, built on the foundation of particular texts seems incomplete. Christ treats us, not as slaves, but as friends. He does not merely give us authoritative commands, to be obeyed blindly; He enables us to discover the reasons and grounds of His commands, that we may obey them intelligently, with the full concurrence of our reason and conscience. We ought to be able to see that the particular precepts and promises which oblige us to form organised churches have their root in the substance of the Christian revelation. It should be possible to discover that Christian churches are the natural and necessary creation of the Christian Faith.

The wonderful sentences in the prayer which our Lord offered immediately before His Passion express the great thought of Christ concerning the redemption of the human race: "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in us. . . . And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given unto them, that they may be one,

even as we are one; I in them and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected into one" (John xvii. 20—23).

Preserving their separate and independent personality, those who believe in Christ are to reach the perfection of their power and blessedness in their union with each other as well as with Him. Christ came to found a "kingdom," not merely to be the Teacher, the Saviour, the Ruler, of individual men. When we repent of sin and receive the Christian redemption, we are restored not only to our heavenly Father, but to the "household of God." "Saints" are not called to an isolated righteousness and blessedness, but to be "fellow-citizens" in an eternal and Divine city. They are "one body in Christ, and severally members one of another."

But their union with each other, which is created by their possession of a common life in Christ, cannot be actually realised unless they are united by a strong and tender mutual affection; and their perfect union with each other is necessary to their perfect union with Christ. This explains the urgency with which our Lord insists on the new commandment, that His disciples should "love one another."

To draw together those who believe in Christ, and to prevent them from living an isolated life, is necessary to the achievement of the Christian redemption. This was one of the purposes for which the Lord's Supper was instituted. It was meant to recall to Christian people their unity in Christ: for they were to eat of the same bread, the symbol of Christ as the Bread of Life, and to drink of the same cup, the symbol of His blood which was shed for the remission of their sins. It was to renew, to strengthen, and to make intensely vivid, their consciousness of a common redemption from common perils. It was to deepen their love for each other by the power of Christ's love for them all.

There is a direct relationship between Christ and every man that has received the Christian salvation; but, according to the Divine order, we are largely necessary to each other, and

the gifts of Christ's grace often reach us through the ministry of brotherly affection. We do not learn the meaning of some of Christ's promises till we see them fulfilled in the lives of others; our faith in them is strengthened by the faith of our brethren. We do not learn the meaning of some of His commandments until we see them illustrated in the character and conduct of others; we find courage to obey them when we learn from the obedience of our brethren that obedience is possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. Great revivals which have changed the religious condition of millions of men have begun in the fire kindled from heaven in a solitary heart; and these are but large illustrations of a law which is being constantly illustrated on a smaller scale in the lives of all of us. We are led into a fuller knowledge of Christian truth by those to whom God has made clear some things which He has not made clear to ourselves. We are made more devout and more earnest by the devoutness and earnestness of our brethren. The law under which Christian people are largely dependent upon each other for the greatest spiritual blessings is directly related to the great end of the Christian redemption. We are to be restored to each other as well as to God. The law of mutual dependence prevents us from standing apart. We are bound together by mutual obligations and mutual services.

Our Lord's declaration that where two or three are gathered together in His name He is in the midst of them is an expression of one of the central laws of His redemptive work. While we stand apart from each other our union with Him is incomplete; we realise our union with Christ in just the same measure in which we realise our union with each other. This law is also the root of the promise to united prayer. Apart from Christ we can do nothing: righteousness is impossible to us; access to the Father is closed; prayer is ineffective. When we are in real spiritual fellowship with our brethren we are also in fellowship with Him; our

prayers become His as well as ours, and are sure to be heard and answered.

That Christian people who live near each other should worship together and pray together; that they should recognise the law of mutual dependence and the obligations of mutual service by placing themselves in each other's care, by asking one or more of their brethren to whom God has given a large knowledge of His truth to teach them, and by asking others to whom He has given practical wisdom and maturity of Christian life to watch over them—this is but the carrying out of Christ's great purpose of drawing into union with each other those who are in union with Himself, and of drawing them into closer union with Himself by their closer union with each other.

An organised Christian church is the natural creation and expression of the great law that those who are in Christ are to reach the perfection of their righteousness and blessedness in their union with each other as well as in their union with Him.

When Christian churches are described by Congregationalists as "voluntary societies," it is not meant that Christian people are at liberty to please themselves whether they will form churches or not, but that churches are to be formed in free obedience to the authority of Christ—not by the power of the State. Nor is it meant that where churches exist Christian people are at liberty to please themselves whether they will be members of these churches or not, but that membership is to depend on the free consent of those who enter membership; that no man ought to be a member of a Christian church by birth, and that no civil law should enforce membership. The only ground on which a Christian man can properly refuse to remain outside a Christian church is that the churches within his reach impose conditions of membership to which he cannot submit without,

