

ART. VII.—*Demission of the Ministry.*

THE last General Assembly adopted the following overture, viz.

“Resolved, That it be referred to the Presbyteries whether the following sections shall be added to the 15th chapter of the Form of Government, namely,

“16. The office of a minister of the gospel is perpetual, and cannot be laid aside at pleasure. No person can be divested of it but by deposition. Yet, from various causes, a minister may become incapable of performing the duties of the office; or he may, though chargeable with neither heresy nor immorality, become unacceptable in his official character. In such case he may cease to be an acting minister.

“17. Whenever a minister, from any cause not inferring heresy, crime, or scandal, shall be incapable of serving the church to edification, the Presbytery shall take order on the subject, and state the fact, together with the reason of it, on their record. And when any person has thus ceased to be an acting minister, he shall not be a member of any Presbytery or Synod, but shall be subject to discipline as other ministers, provided always, that nothing of this kind shall be done without the consent of the individual in question, except by the advice of the Synod; and provided, also, that no case shall be finally decided except at a stated meeting of the Presbytery.

“18. Any minister having demitted the exercise of his office in the manner herein provided, may, if the Presbytery which acted on his demission think proper, be restored to the exercise thereof, and to all the rights incident thereto, provided, that the consent of the Synod be obtained, in case his demission was ordered by the Synod in the manner above recited.”

This overture makes a distinction between the exercise of the ministry and the ministry itself; the former may be demitted, the latter cannot be laid aside either at the pleasure of the party, or by the action of the Presbytery. Once a minister, always a minister, unless in cases of deposition. The

overture proposes that the want of ability to discharge the duties of the ministry, or want of acceptableness, shall, provided the party consent, be a sufficient reason for the demission of the exercise of the office. Should, in the judgment of the Presbytery, these reasons exist, the Presbytery may, with the advice of Synod, enforce this demission, without the assent of the party concerned. The effect of the demission contemplated is not to deprive the minister of his office, but only of certain of its prerogatives. He ceases to have the right to sit and act as a member of Presbytery; but he does not become a layman. He is subject, not to the session, but to the Presbytery; and may be restored to all the privileges of his office, by the simple vote of the Presbytery, without any renewed trials or ordination.

To have any intelligent opinion as to the propriety of the proposed measure, we must, in the first place, understand what the ministry is. Is it a work, or an office? If the latter, what are its peculiar characteristics? In what sense is it "perpetual?" Why may it not be resigned as other offices may be? There is a large body of distinguished men, ancient and modern, and some Christian sects, who deny that the ministry is an office. They assert that it is simply a work. The distinction between the clergy and laity is said to be not merely human as to its origin, but altogether arbitrary. No such distinction, it is said, is recognized in Scripture, or consistent with the common prerogatives of Christians. It is maintained that, in virtue of the universal priesthood of believers, all Christians have equal right to preach, baptize, and to administer the Lord's Supper. Such was the opinion of some of the Fathers, and such is the opinion of some of the most eminent modern scholars. It is not, however, the common doctrine of the church; and it is not the doctrine of our church. The ministry is properly an office, because it is something which cannot be assumed at pleasure by any and every one. A man must be appointed thereto by some competent authority. It involves not only the right, but the obligation to exercise certain functions, or to discharge certain duties; and it confers certain powers or prerogatives, which other men are bound to recognize and respect. Lawyers, physicians, merchants, and

mechanics, are not officers. Any man may be a physician or merchant. No man is bound to discharge the duties of either. But judges and magistrates are officers. They are appointed to the posts which they occupy; they are bound to discharge its duties; and they are invested with certain prerogatives in virtue of their appointment. That the ministry is in this sense an office is plain from the numerous titles given in the New Testament to ministers, which imply official station. They are not only teachers, but overseers, rulers, governors. The qualifications for the office are carefully laid down, and the question, whether these qualifications are in any case possessed, is not left to the decision of those who aspire to the office, but to the church, through her appointed organs. Men are, therefore, said to be called, appointed, or ordained, to the work of the ministry, by those who have authority thereto. And accordingly, the people are required to obey those who have the rule over them, and whom the Holy Ghost has made their overseers.

But what is the nature of this office? Is it a temporary, or a permanent one? According to one view, the office of the ministry has relation to one particular church and is dependent on that relation. A man is a husband in relation to his own wife, and to no other woman. If legally separated from her, by her death or otherwise, he ceases to be a husband. A man is a governor of a particular state; he is no governor in relation to any other commonwealth; and when his term of office expires, or he resigns his post, he ceases to be a governor, and becomes a private citizen. According to this theory, minister and pastor are convertible terms. A man is a minister only in relation to the church which chooses him to be its pastor. Outside of that church he has no official power or authority; and when his connection with his particular congregation is dissolved, he becomes a layman. If elected by another church, he is reordained. This is the pure Independent theory. Many cases of such reordinations occur in the early history of the Puritans of New England. It is very evident that this is an unscriptural theory. All the ordinations specifically mentioned in the New Testament, i.e. all the persons therein mentioned as ordained to the work of the ministry, were thus ordained, not in

reference to any particular church, but to the church at large. According to this Independent theory, no man can be ordained to preach the gospel to the heathen; and some of its advocates are consistent enough to teach that no provision is made in the Now Testament for the conversion of nations outside the church. It need not be said that this is not the common doctrine of Christians, or that it is not the doctrine of Presbyterians. We hold in common with the great mass of believers, that the ministry is an office in the church universal, designed for her enlargement and edification; that it is not dependent on the choice of any particular congregation, or on the relation which the minister may sustain as pastor, to any particular people. It is in this respect analogous to naval and military offices. A captain in the navy is as much a captain when on shore, as when he is in command of a ship; and he may be transferred from one ship to another. His office is permanent. The Romish theory on this subject is, that orders, or ordination, is a sacrament; and a sacrament is a rite instituted by Christ, which has the power of conferring grace; and grace is an internal spiritual gift. In every case therefore of canonical ordination there is this peculiar grace of orders communicated to the soul. In ordination to the priesthood this grace is, or includes supernatural power, giving ability to transubstantiate the bread and wine in the Eucharist into the body and blood of Christ, to remit sin, to render the sacraments efficacious, &c. &c. Here then is an internal something constituting a man a priest, of which he cannot divest himself, and which by no act of man can be taken from him. It may however be forfeited. As baptismal grace, including the remission of sin and the infusion of a new principle of spiritual life, may be lost by mortal sin, and can be restored only by the sacrament of penance; so the grace of orders may be lost by certain crimes, such as heresy or schism. Hence in the Romish church a priest, when convicted of such crime, is degraded before he is delivered over to the secular power to be executed. This service of degradation however is declarative, rather than effective. It declares in a solemn and official manner that the offender has forfeited the grace received at his ordination and has become a layman. It is evident that the ministry, according to this theory, must be in

a peculiar sense a permanent office. It can neither be voluntarily laid aside, nor can a man be deprived of it. If the Holy Ghost is received in a specific form, or mode of manifestation, in ordination, he remains, until the condition occurs on which he has revealed his purpose to withdraw. If the gift of prophecy, or of miracles, or of tongues, were conferred on any man, he could not divest himself of that gift, nor could he be deprived of it by any act of the church. It is so with the grace of orders. This however is not a Protestant doctrine. It is one of the essential and necessary elements of that cunningly devised system of Romanism, which is after the working of Satan with all deceivableness of unrighteousness.

Protestants however also teach that the office of the ministry is permanent, though in a very different sense from that just stated. It is permanent, first, because it is not assumed or conferred for any limited or definite time. And, secondly, because the candidate in assuming the office is understood to consecrate himself for life to the service of God in the work of the ministry. This is also the light in which the church regards the matter when she, through her appropriate organs, ordains him to the work. There is nothing however in the Protestant, and especially in the Presbyterian, doctrine of the nature of the ministry or of ordination, to forbid the idea that the office itself, and not merely the exercise of the office, may, for just reasons be laid aside, or demitted.

The Protestant doctrine, as we understand it, on this subject is this. First, that the call to the ministry is by the Holy Ghost. The Spirit of God is said to dwell in all the members of Christ's body, and to each member, as the apostle teaches us, is given a manifestation of the Spirit. 1 Cor. xii. 7. That is while the Spirit manifests his presence in his enlightening and sanctifying influence, in different measures, in all the followers of Christ, he gives special gifts and qualifications to different individuals of their number; dividing to every man severally as he wills. In the apostolic church, he gave to some the gifts of plenary knowledge and infallibility, and thus made them apostles; to others, the gift of occasional inspiration, and thus made them prophets; to others, the gift of teaching, and thus made them the teachers or preachers of the word;

to others again, the gift of healing, of miracles or of tongues. Some of these gifts we know, both from the New Testament and from actual observation, were designed to be confined to the first age of the church. They have accordingly ceased. We have no inspired and infallible men—no workers of miracles, no speakers with tongues. In other words, we have no apostles, nor prophets, nor men endowed with supernatural power.

There are other gifts, however, which we learn from Scripture observation were designed to be permanent. The Holy Spirit confers the gifts for the ministry; and by thus conferring them, and exciting the desire to exercise them for the glory of God and the service of Christ, thereby manifests his will that these thus favoured should consecrate themselves to the preaching of the gospel. This is the true, divine call, to the ministry.

Second: The evidence of this call to him that receives it, is the consciousness of the inward gift and drawing of the Spirit, confirmed by those external workings of providence which indicate the will of God as to his vocation. The evidence of the church is everything which tends to prove that the candidate has the qualifications for the office of the ministry, and that he is led to seek it from motives due to the operation of the Holy Ghost.

Third: Ordination is the solemn expression of the judgment of the church, by those appointed to deliver such judgment, that the candidate is truly called of God to take part in this ministry, thereby authenticating to the people the divine call. This authentication, or ordination, is, under all ordinary circumstances, the necessary condition for the exercise of the ministry in the church; just as the judgment of the session that the candidate for baptism or for admission to the Lord's table, has the qualifications for church membership, is the necessary condition of church-fellowship.

As, however, neither the candidate nor the church is infallible, there may, and doubtless often is, mistake in this matter. A man may honestly believe that he is called of God to the ministry, when he has never, in fact, been thus called. The Presbytery may concur in this erroneous judgment. If a mistake is made it ought be corrected. If both the man himself

and the Presbytery become convinced that he never was called to the ministry, why should they persist in asserting the contrary? So long as the man clings to his office, he thereby says, he believes he is called to it by God; but this he may be thoroughly convinced is not true. Why then should he be required to assert what he knows to be false. The Presbytery join in this false testimony; nay, they take upon themselves the whole responsibility of the falsehood, if they interpose their authority, and refuse to allow a man to demit an office to which both he and they are convinced he never was called. It is not merely, therefore, a man's right to demit the ministry, if he is satisfied God has not called him to the work; but it is his solemn duty to do it. And the Presbytery have not only the right to allow him to do it, but they have no right to prevent it. They cannot force a man to be a minister against his will, and against his conscience; much less can they righteously force him to lie to the church, and to the Holy Ghost, by making him say he is called, when he knows that he is not called.

There is nothing in the Protestant doctrine of the ministry, or of ordination, which stands in the way of the demission of the sacred office. We do not hold that the judgment of the church is infallible; so that it can in no case be recalled or reversed. We do not hold that an inward gift, the grace of orders, is conferred in ordination, so as to be beyond recall. Neither is there anything in the ordination vows, or the obligations assumed by the candidate, to prevent his laying the office aside. He does indeed promise to devote himself for life to the work of the ministry. But this promise is obviously conditional. It is conditioned on the possession of physical ability. If rendered paralytic or voiceless, the promise does not bind him. In like manner it is conditioned on the inward call of God. The man believes that it is the will of God that he should be a minister; and, on the ground of that belief, he promises to devote himself to the work. If he becomes satisfied that he never was called, in other words, that it is not the will of God that he should preach the gospel, then the ground on which the promise was made no longer exists.

The principle of demission is clearly recognized in our stand-

ards. That is, it is distinctly recognized that a minister may cease to be such, and become a layman. What is deposition but the declaration, on judicial grounds, on the part of a Presbytery, that a minister of the gospel is no longer to be regarded as such? And what is that but reversal of the judgment pronounced at his ordination? It is saying that the Presbytery erred in deciding that the person in question was called of God to the ministry; for if he had been thus called, it was for life, and no Presbytery could take away a permanent office conferred by God. The only difference between deposition and demission lies in the nature of the evidence on which the Presbytery reverses its former judgment. In the case of deposition, it is some grave offence, some heresy or crime, which clearly proves that the minister convicted of such offence is not called of God to preach the gospel. In the case of demission, it is anything, not involving a moral or religious offence, which satisfies the judgment and conscience of the man himself, and of the Presbytery, or even of the latter alone, that the minister demitting his office, or called upon to demit it, was never called of God to the sacred office. Of course mere physical infirmity, or the weakness or imbecility of age, can never be such a proof. A minister or missionary, nay, Paul himself, after a life devoted to the service of God, in the ministry of his Son, crowned with every manifestation of the divine favour, might be superannuated or paralytic, yet no one would dream that this was any evidence that he had entered the ministry without a call from God. The evidence in question must be the opposite of the evidence of a divine call, viz. the want of fitness for the office, the want of a desire to discharge its duties, the want of success, and the consequent inability to serve God or the church in the work of the ministry. All this may, and in many cases is apparent, where there is every evidence of Christian character, and therefore where any act of discipline would be uncalled for and unjust.

As therefore there is nothing in the nature of the ministerial office, nor in the nature of ordination, nor in the obligations assumed by the candidate when he is ordained, nor in the infallibility of the Presbytery, incompatible with the demission

of the sacred office, it follows that for proper reasons, it may be laid aside. In the second place, as before remarked, it ought in the case supposed to be laid aside. To continue to profess to be called of God, when we are satisfied that such is not the fact, and when the Presbytery and the Christian public are equally convinced on the subject, is to profess a conscious untruth. This at first was a mistake in all concerned; but when the mistake is discovered and made apparent, then to persist in it, gives it the character of falsehood. In the third place, it is highly desirable that those who have thus mistaken their vocation, should be allowed to correct the error. It is not only wrong to constrain a man against his judgment, will and conscience, to retain the ministerial office; but it cannot be done. The office is in fact, in multitudes of cases, laid aside. Men once ordained give up their ministry. They not only cease to exercise it, but they virtually renounce it. They lay aside the title, they do not attempt to discharge its duties; they do not claim any of its prerogatives. They devote themselves to some secular pursuit, and are merged in the general class of laymen. For this, in the cases supposed, they are not to blame, and therefore they cannot be justly censured. They are often useful members of society and of the church; but they are not ministers. Now if this is done, and must be done, it is surely proper that it should be done regularly; that provision should be made to meet cases of this kind. Besides, it is a great evil that our church courts should be encumbered with nominal members, who are incapable of discharging the duties of membership. And it is a still greater evil that men should be allowed to sit in those courts, and exercise the powers of an office, to which all concerned are satisfied they have no legitimate call, and the duties of which they cannot fulfil. Such ministers are not only an incumbrance to our church courts, disturbing the natural balance of our system, but it is a disgrace to the ministry and to the church, to have men notoriously incompetent, (however worthy they be,) and who are merely nominal ministers—men who are laymen in their whole spirit and pursuits, designated and recognized as invested with the sacred office. It is best that things should be called by their right names. If a man is not a minister of the gospel (i.e. one

who either does or has served God in the gospel of his Son) he should not be so designated or so regarded.

It is objected to all this, that if we make it thus easy to get rid of the ministry, less care will be exercised in entering it. We doubt the fact. The ministry in our country and in our church, is not often entered from worldly motives. It is not sufficiently attractive to the mercenary. It is commonly an honest mistake on the part both of the candidate and of the Presbytery, when men are ordained by the church who are not called of God. But even if the fact be admitted which the objection assumes, it would be unwise to make the ministry a *cul-de-sac*, which whoever wanders into in the dark, must stay in it. It would be far better to make the egress from the ministry so wide that all who want to leave, or who ought to leave it, may do so with the least possible difficulty or delay.

If our readers agree with the principles above stated, they must regard the overture submitted to the Presbyteries as an illogical, half-way measure. It assumes that the office of the ministry cannot be demitted; but that a man may lay aside its exercise and be divested of its prerogatives. It assumes that the office is in such a sense permanent that it cannot be got rid of, except by deposition. But this assumption is illogical. It necessarily follows from the Protestant and Presbyterian doctrine of the ministry, of ordination, and of the fallibility of all church courts, that the office is not permanent in any such sense. That doctrine supposes, that both the candidate and Presbytery may err; and it supposes that the error when discovered may be corrected. It is only on the assumption of the Romish doctrine of "the grace of orders," that the ministry can be regarded as in any such sense permanent as that it cannot be demitted. Besides, deposition implies that the office of the ministry is not in such a sense permanent as to be inconsistent with demission. Deposition merely does for one reason, what demission does for another. Both reduce a minister to the condition of a layman. The one, therefore, is just as consistent with the true permanency of the office as the other.

Another objection to the overture as it now stands, is that it undertakes to separate things which in their nature are inseparable. If the ministry is an office of divine appointment, if men

are called of God to be ministers, then the obligation to discharge its duties, and the right to exercise its prerogatives, are inseparable from the possession of the office. If God calls a man to be a minister, what right have we to say he shall not act as such? By allowing him to retain the office, we say he has a divine call to it; and if so, he has a divine right to exercise all its functions. The overture, therefore, in our view, involves a contradiction. It in effect says, that a man is, and is not a minister, at the same time; that he was mistaken in supposing he was called by the Spirit to be a minister, and nevertheless he is a minister. These are contradictory judgments.

We would greatly prefer a simple clause providing that whenever any minister, in good standing, is fully satisfied in his own judgment and conscience, that God has not called him to the ministry, he may, with the consent of Presbytery, resign the office; and in case the Presbytery is satisfied that a minister has no divine vocation to the ministry, although he himself may think otherwise, they shall have the right, (with the consent of the Synod, if that be thought desirable) to cancel his ordination without censure, as in deposition it is done with censure.

SHORT NOTICES.

A New History of the Conquest of Mexico; in which Las Casas' Denunciations of the popular Historians of that War are fully vindicated. By Robert Anderson Wilson, Counsellor at Law. Author of "Mexico and its Religion," &c. Philadelphia: James Challen & Son. 1859.

Whether the sources of popular Mexican history are authentic or legendary, is a question which was started years ago, and now begins to be discussed thoroughly and elaborately. Nearly twenty years since, General Cass, whose official life, largely devoted to Indian affairs, and whose scholarly habits invest his opinions, on such a subject, with high authority, called in question the accuracy of the documents on which the historians of Mexico have relied, in an able article in the *North American Review*. This volume by Judge Wilson is a copious