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| Rev. J. Anderson Lowe, B.D., Glengairn Manse, Ballater. | |
| Rev. John R. Legge, M.A., 2 St. John's Terrace, Buckhurst Hill, Essex. | |

The Denudation of the Church.

BY PROFESSOR THE REV. W. P. PATERSON, B.D., ABERDEEN.

THE modern Protestant Church, it is considered, is nothing if not practical, and even the world eulogises her as alive with all manner of bustling activities. It is therefore somewhat surprising to find that there is hardly one of the great humanitarian duties required by Christ which she fulfils in its most characteristic and useful form. The programme of the works of mercy, as formulated by Jesus in one of His most solemn discourses, includes these four points—relief of the destitute, entertainment of strangers, tendance of the sick, and visitation of prisoners. And while it is notorious that a great stream of charity flows from the Church into the channels of mercy, the still more noticeable circumstance is that she is least directly associated with those agencies which most directly and effectively grapple with the principal varieties of human distress. The great instrument of poor-relief is worked by the State and the parish; infirmaries, though owing much to the leaven and the collections of the Churches, are in the hands of the voluntary association; while as regards the visiting of prisoners there are no doubt prison-chaplains and

stated services, but there exists no proposal to entrust to the Church the really important matter of the discipline of those who inhabit the gaols and the penitentiaries.

Not only is this state of affairs striking in view of the emphasis laid by Christ on the Four Works, but it stands in startling contrast to the Church's earlier performance. Those institutions for the relief of destitution and sickness to which she is now content to bid God-speed, were originally her own creation—organised by her brain, and worked by her arm and her resources. The full-grown monastery, as may be read in Uhlhorn's *History of Christian Charity*, was a religious club with a poorhouse and a hospital attached; while even the entertainment of strangers, undertaken before and since by the inn, was for a time a subsidiary department of Home Mission work. And the monastery is only a sample, though a highly instructive one, of the earnestness and thoroughness with which pre-Reformation Christianity faced the different heads of its Master's programme of mercy. Nor did the Reformed Church at once divest herself of the great philanthropic functions.

The Scotch Church, to take a familiar example, had until lately the main responsibility for the relief of the destitute, and along with this for the national system of education. To-day she is practically reduced to the proportions of a preaching institution; and at the most remembers the former works by adding to the day-school three-quarters of an hour per week of the Sunday school, subsidising the infirmary by a Hospital Sunday, and eking out, or enabling the destitute to dispense with, the parochial relief, by fairly liberal but somewhat haphazard gifts of money, food, and clothing.

To the denudation of the Church, as the above process may be termed, renewed attention was recently called by an event reported as 'the opening of a new hospital in Edinburgh,' and by the comments made on the occasion by its founder. In the view of Dr. Charteris, the Protestant Church has been guilty of grave un wisdom and dereliction of duty in so completely detaching herself as an institution from the blessed enterprise of healing; and the two closely related schemes which he has realised in his communion—the revival of the order of deaconesses, and a church-hospital which is at once their training school and a contribution to philanthropy, mark a not unimportant step on the part of a branch of the Scottish Church towards the recovery of lost ground. The erection of a church-hospital, though it be but a little one among the infirmaries of Scotland, suggests how different might have been the relation of the Church to the standing institutions which work towards the humanitarian purposes of Christ, and how much she has lost in influence, and her message in weight, by their complete detachment from her organisation. It was the consequence and punishment of Protestant divisions that the Church lost the power to carry on these mighty works as part of her machinery, and was forced to devolve them on sections of the *status politicus*. Had she furnished, as a one and undivided Church might, the resources needed for the support of the poor and the maintenance of infirmaries, her message of faith would have been so powerfully authenticated by her labour of love that the voice of unbelief must have faltered if not fallen silent. Without gain-saying, she could have pointed to her homes of healing and her almshouses, and could have claimed thereby to fulfil her Master's promise:—'Greater works than these shall ye do.'

So it might have been. A divided Church, however, has been forced to concentrate her efforts on the propagation of the gospel and the support of her clergy; and the practical question is how far it is now desirable or possible for her to lay her hand directly to the work which, in its chief departments, she has seen devolved upon other organisations. It must be frankly admitted that the fundamental question is settled, and that it is as idle, as it is undesirable in present circumstances, to hope for her resumption of the responsibilities which have been so largely assumed by the community and the voluntary association. The Church's principal duty at this time in regard to human suffering and want, as Principal Rainy was lately understood to preach, is to persuade the State and the parish to throw into the works of mercy which they have undertaken more of the spirit of Christ. It is to be admitted, indeed, that in the present transition and distress, there is ample need of the Church's contribution to supplement the liberality of public and voluntary agencies; and that our session doles, our deaconesses, and the one hospital are an all too scanty expression of Christian homage to the will of the Good Physician. But an ecclesiastical revival of mercy, welcome as it is in itself and as a spiritual symptom, can at best be now only ancillary. In regard to the relief of the poor, the most fruitful line of Christian endeavour lies, not in exhorting congregations to support their poor members, but in emphasising the duty of the community to make comfortable provision for the victims of misfortune and the veterans of honest toil. In regard to the tendance of the sick, an important forward movement is that which would enforce the duty of a Christian nation to assume the support of the infirmaries as a national burden, and to develop to an equal pitch of comprehensiveness and hospitality the essential corollary of the convalescent home. Again, the visiting of prisoners, which Christ's programme included,—that is, the proper handling of the inmates of our gaols,—has never been grappled with in the combined strength of psychology, education, and Christian love. There is reason for gratitude that the State has made so promising a beginning in practical Christianity, and probably the greatest practical work now laid to the Church's hand is to bid its sister persevere heartily with the programme of the works of mercy unfolded by Christ in the light projected from the Day of Judgment.