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ARTICLE VIII.

HOW DOES THE PROPOSED ACT OF UNION
AFFECT CONGREGATIONALISM?¹

BY THE REVEREND THEODORE D. BACON.

PERMIT me to restate in a few words the familiar principles of Congregationalism, as they are essential to our question.

The fundamental principle is, of course, the independence of the local church. The National Council of 1865 expressed it thus: "Resolved that this Council recognizes as distinctive of the Congregational polity, First, The principle that the local or Congregational Church derives its power and authority directly from Christ, and is not subject to any ecclesiastical government exterior or superior to itself."

But, though independent, the churches are not isolated. They recognize one another as sister churches working for common ends, and in need of mutual coöperation. For this purpose they have certain customary bonds of fellowship. Foremost among these is the council, which each church is expected to call whenever it has some action of special weight before it, particularly when it contemplates ordaining a pastor. The council can give only advice, but it has become quite unusual for a church not to follow such advice. The reserved right of the churches, however, to act independently of council is like a bill of rights for state or national constitutions, or like a bank reserve: it is rarely called into action, but it is of vital importance that it should be maintained, and the consciousness that it exists has a perpetual and controlling influence on the activities of the body.

¹A paper read before the Genesee Association at Saginaw, Mich., April 23, 1907, revised and condensed.

Local, State, and National Associations, or Conferences, have also grown up within the last century, to provide for general conference and coöperation, and to give advice on general questions. Such advice, however, has never had anything like the force of the advice of a specific council, though the national body has received the misleading name of Council.

As councils for installation of pastors already ordained have ceased to be the rule of late years, it has become the custom west of the Alleghanies that membership of ministers in some local association should be regarded by churches seeking a pastor as evidence of a minister's good standing. But any church is free to choose a pastor without regard to such membership.

Other means of fellowship exist in the great missionary societies, in which many of the churches coöperate, and in other enterprises, but they do not enter into our present discussion.

A word must be added concerning creeds. Originally none of the churches had creeds, though closely united in doctrinal belief. At the time of the Unitarian controversy, however, many of the churches adopted them as a test of church-membership. But recently there has been a marked tendency to return to the original practice, to the extent at least that subscription to the creed is not required of members.

Our National Councils have also twice authorized the setting forth of statements of doctrine, but it is universally recognized that these statements are of no binding force. In the accepted phrase, they are set forth, not as a test, but as a testimony.

The whole system has been pretty well summarized in a clause of the first draft of the plan of union, as follows:

“The unit of our fellowship is the local church, and the character of our fellowship is that of a representative democracy. Our coördinate principles are freedom and fellowship, a freedom which leaves the local church free in its separate affairs, a fellowship which unites all the churches for mutual care and coöperant action.”

The system assumes the capacity and love of self-government in each unit, and, where these are present, it has proved itself invaluable. Especially has this been true of late, when the fundamental doctrines of Christianity have been undergoing investigation and change. Under these circumstances, it is of special importance that men should not be bound by the dead hand of some creed of a former age, or even of yesterday. The Creed of 1883, for instance, was intended to be broad enough to include all Congregationalists, and the only objection made to it was that it was not conservative enough; yet probably a majority of those graduated from our seminaries since it was issued would refuse to accept it unreservedly. If it had been set forth as a test, instead of as a testimony, how great would have been the injury done by it!

Other denominations have found themselves bound by strict creeds, but these have not served to keep out the newer views, though they have tended to repel some earnest men from the ministry; but they have served to injure many a conscience by inducing men to subscribe to what they did not heartily believe. The evil of this is undeniable.

If so long a statement of familiar principles seems unnecessary, the writer's excuse must be that it is these very principles that are affected by the proposed Act of Union, with apparently little appreciation of the changes that will be involved.

Before discussing this Act, however, one or two other

matters call for mention, of which the first is our general attitude toward union. There is no Congregationalist that does not desire union, if it can be obtained without sacrificing other principles that are of paramount importance. That there are such principles, the very existence of Congregationalism, or even of Protestantism, testifies.

A word also as to the council which framed the Act. The Congregational members at its Dayton session were largely men of high standing in our churches, but they were only remotely chosen by the churches. They were but a committee chosen by another committee of the National Council. At the Chicago session of the council, moreover, so many of the original members had withdrawn that it could hardly be called representative, even in the more general sense.

The action of the Congregational members was uniformly unanimous, but this unanimity has not quite the force that would appear to belong to it. One member has told me that, while he voted for The Declaration of Faith as a statement far better than he had supposed possible for the committee to agree upon, he would not be willing to subscribe to it personally. Another informed me that, while he voted for The Act of Union, he did so with extreme reluctance, rather than oppose the will of the majority. Our members of the council seem to have felt that they must reach some form of agreement, even though not altogether satisfactory, and leave it to the churches to ratify it or not, as they saw fit. The other bodies were not so bound, and so, when it came to a difference of opinion, of course our men gave way.

We come at last to The Act of Union itself. It consists of a Title, a Preamble, a Declaration of Faith, and Articles of Agreement.

The Preamble sets forth that the representatives of the

three bodies, having entered into a Declaration of Faith, hereinafter set forth, do now propose Articles of Agreement. Here the Declaration of Faith is distinguished from the Articles of Agreement, but is set forth as a prerequisite of them, and Declaration and Articles are both included under the general title, Act of Union. If then the churches adopt this Act, will they not be bound by the Declaration of Faith which forms part of it? I cannot see how this can be avoided, if the act is adopted as it stands, which is the only proposition before us. I see no way in which this act of union can become binding on our churches except by the act of individual churches; but even supposing a state association should form itself into an annual conference under the new plan, and adopt the act of union for itself, if the churches acquiesced in such an act they would, by so doing, adopt for themselves this act.

But let us look further at the wording of the Declaration itself. The first article begins, "Our bond of union consists"—and then specifies—of faith in Christ, in acceptance of the Scriptures, and in our consent to the teaching of the ancient symbols. Now if our bond of union consists of and in these things, why, if we unite, are we not bound by it? I confess I cannot see. In their circular letter to the churches, Dr. Gladden and the other members of the committee appointed to send out this letter tell us that "it is not framed . . . as a test of orthodoxy for any man or church. It was the expression of a common faith held by those present." But, if we vote to accept it as part of the Act of Union, does it not become so? Is not this a contract into which we enter with these other bodies of which the Declaration is an essential part? Do they not regard it so, and will they not feel outraged if they find that we do not so hold it? I have seen no

disclaimer on their part, and until one is forthcoming from some authoritative source, in both the other denominations, I must continue to believe that they regard this as a contract by which we are all equally bound.

But such a creed, binding on all the churches, is in direct opposition to the fundamental principles of our Congregational way. Our chief glory in these troublous times has been that no man could say that we did not believe the creeds we subscribed, since we were bound by no creeds. This glory is to be taken from us.

But it is further asserted that this creed is so general and undogmatic that it can be taken as a "catholic confession, upon which, it would seem, all disciples of Christ can stand and work together." How beautiful that sounds! But how melancholy has been the fate of all such endeavors! Name the creed that has not proved an instrument of division rather than of union, whenever it has been imposed as a test. There is perhaps no more bitter irony to be found than in the title of "The Form of Concord." From its beginning it was a continual form of discord. Or take our Andover Creed, binding only on the faculty of a single seminary, and intended to be broad enough for all true Congregationalists. Did it prove a form of concord? Or, if the Creed of 1883 had been set before us as a bond of union, to which all must assent, what would have been the result? Why then should we think that this new document is sure to succeed where all others have failed?

But, turning to the particulars of the creed, is it, in fact, so unobjectionable as to command universal assent? Personally I can say that there is but one article out of the six, the last, which commands my hearty assent, and I know of many others of whom the same may be said. But it would be out of the

question to go over the whole creed at this time. I shall confine myself to a single clause of the first article, and in that alone I think we shall find enough to show that this creed is not unifying but divisive. It reads as follows: "Our bond of union consists . . . in our consent to the teaching of the ancient symbols of the undivided church."

A word first as to the meaning of "symbol." It has been seriously and publicly asserted that it refers to the sacraments, and not to the creeds. Grammatically, it must be confessed, the meaning is possible; but logically, with regard to the context, it is evidently out of the question. Let me quote the definition of "symbol" in Schaff-Herzog's Religious Encyclopedia: "Symbol is properly a mark, badge, watchword or test. . . . Originally it had reference to the Apostles' Creed as the baptismal confession. . . . Luther and Melancthon first applied the word to Protestant creeds." Instances could be multiplied without number, but I think this will suffice. I will add, however, that Dr. Gladden informs me, in response to inquiry, that he supposes "symbol" to mean creed.

What then are these symbols? It is not easy to say exactly. Strictly speaking the Nicæno-Constantinopolitan Creed, with its two additions, the Creeds of Chalcedon and of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, would be the only one to be included; but it is undoubtedly intended to include also the Apostles' Creed, and probably the Athanasian as well, while the later additions to the Nicene Creed were probably not considered. In short, the three creeds of the English Prayer Book are probably intended.

Not even the Apostles' Creed has received full standing in the Eastern Church, and the Athanasian is used there only for private devotion. The only dogmatic objection in the East, however, to the Athanasian Creed is the double procession of

the Holy Spirit, with which we need not concern ourselves. According to general usage, as, for example, in Schaff's "Creeds of Christendom," these three are to be reckoned as ecumenical creeds, and they must be so accepted until some authority shall declare differently. It does not add, however, to our regard for the Declaration of Faith to find it so vaguely worded in a matter of so much importance.

The Apostles' Creed is far more loosely bound together than the other two, and is the one least likely to excite opposition; but, since it is set before us as one to whose teachings we are to consent, if we enter this union, we are bound to inquire into its teachings, invidious as is the task of criticising a symbol held in such high regard. There are a number of its clauses which are far from receiving universal assent, but I will speak of but three, and of these very briefly. For confirmation of my statements I refer to Professor McGiffert's thorough treatment of the subject.

1. "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church." This means the undivided Catholic church of the time when it was written, as opposed to the Gnostics and other heretics. So far as this early church has a legitimate successor, it is to be found in the Roman, and, if you choose, in the Greek Catholic Church. As Protestants we stand in the same relation to the Catholic Church as did the Gnostics and other heretics of old. To say that we mean the church invisible is to pervert the words from their original meaning.

2. "The Communion of Saints." This refers to the fellowship with the saints in heaven, and is intended to justify their invocation. To refer it to the fellowship of living Christians is another perversion of the original meaning.

3. "The Resurrection of the Body." "Body" is here a softening down of the word in the original, which means

flesh. The clause means that we are to rise again with the very flesh with which we die, and was intended to exclude the belief in a future life apart from the earthly body, now almost universally held among us. It forms an important part of the teaching of the creed, as do the other two clauses I have mentioned.

Passing now to the other two creeds, what do they teach? We shall find no better statement of their general intention than in the first two clauses of the Athanasian Creed, as follows: "Whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith: Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly." This is not the teaching of the Athanasian Creed alone; it is equally the teaching of the Nicene, as may clearly be seen in the anathema with which it closes in its original form.

But, if there is one thing on which we are all agreed, it is that this teaching is not true. Are we then to bind ourselves to consent to it?

But, aside from this, what is the doctrinal teaching of these creeds? They have one main purpose, the definition of the Trinity and of the person of Christ. Do we accept those definitions? Some do, undoubtedly; but I am breaking no confidences when I say that a large proportion of the men who occupy our leading pulpits, or are teaching in our seminaries, are very much in doubt on these very points. Are we to ask them to subscribe to what they do not heartily believe, or else to leave the denomination? Shall we not lose more than we shall gain, whichever way they may decide such a question?

Day by day it becomes more evident that these are the very points upon which important modifications must come; and shall we then bind ourselves to the definitions of men for

whose individual opinions we would not care a snap of our fingers, and whose Christian character we find it almost impossible to respect?

But is there no escape from so rigid an acceptance of their teachings? Here is where we must accord our respect. For fifteen centuries men have sought this, but without success. Beyond a slight subordinationism, there is no room for variety of opinion within the Nicene Creed. It is a closed circle. One cannot, for instance, take what one chooses to call the religious value of the creed and leave its metaphysics, and still claim to be faithful to the creed; for it is the combination of metaphysics and religion which is the essence of the creed.

But it will doubtless be urged, and rightly, that "consent to the teaching" of these creeds is not the same thing as unqualified subscription. It has been seriously maintained that "consent" means nothing more than willingness that others should teach these doctrines; but that makes nonsense of the whole clause. If it means anything at all, it must mean practically the same thing as acceptance for substance of doctrine.

But every objection urged has been against the substance of doctrine of these creeds. The necessity of right belief to salvation is of the fundamental character of both the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, and the formulation of the Nicene is so precise that it is impossible to deviate from it and yet maintain the Nicene theology. Certainly the teachings concerning the Trinity set forth by men of high standing in our churches cannot be said to conform to this creed.

Coming now to the form of government proposed in the Articles of Agreement, it is important to notice, first, what has been left out of them, namely, that clause in the Dayton draft of the articles, already quoted, which declares the

character of our fellowship to be a representative democracy, whose unit is the local church. This clause, which safeguarded, in a moderate way, our fundamental principles of government, was omitted from the articles as finally formulated at Chicago. The reason for the omission was that the United Brethren declared that, if the clause was left in, they must withdraw from the council, as it would endanger the legal possession of their property. I cannot but regard this action as highly significant, and far from reassuring.

It is urged that the omission does not impair our rights in the matter, but leaves them just where they were. This would be true if there were nothing in the articles of agreement to impair these rights; but, for one, I cannot but feel that certain articles do most seriously affect them. The reader must judge.

The significant articles are the following: Art. 4, Clause 3, "All Annual Conferences shall have power to make rules and regulations for their organization, and for the conduct of their local affairs."

"Clause 4, Ordination to the ministry and ministerial standing shall be in Annual Conferences, except where it is preferred to delegate or leave these to local bodies."

"Art. 3, District Associations shall have their boundaries, composition, duties, and prerogatives defined by the annual conferences, of which they shall be subdivisions."

Articles 3 affects the independence of the local church only as it indicates that the Annual Conference is to exercise an authority hitherto foreign to us, and which we shall be likely to find galling at times.

The focal point of the matter lies, of course, in the placing of ordination in the hands of the Annual Conference. This ignores the Congregational idea of what ordination is. Ac-

ording to our theory and practice, ordination is simply the confirmation by neighboring churches of the wisdom of one church in choosing a certain man to be its pastor, or to go forth to do other ministerial work. Fundamentally, it is not the council but the church which ordains, the council simply acting as its agent in the matter. Let me quote the third resolution of the council of 1865, of which I have already quoted the first: "Third, That the ministry of the gospel by members of the churches, who have been duly called and set apart to the work, implies in itself no power of government, and that ministers of the gospel not elected to office in any church are not a hierarchy nor are they invested with any official power over the churches." But, according to this plan, these very things are conferred upon the ministry. A man may come before the Conference and receive ordination apart from any ministerial relation to any church, or request on its part, and *ipso facto* becomes a member of the Conference, with a right to vote in it. Those who know the influence often exercised in presbyteries by members "without charge" may well hesitate, on that ground alone, to put such a body as this in authority over us.

But that is by no means all. An Annual Conference cannot act directly in ordination, as a council does, it is too large. It must delegate its powers to some committee, and provide rules for its guidance. There is nothing whatever to prevent the Conference, when once organized, from directing that the Declaration of Faith or some other creed shall be used as test of the doctrinal soundness of candidates. The fact that such a procedure would be utterly un-Congregational would be no argument, since this is to us confessedly a new method of procedure, and it would be somewhat embarrassing to ob-

ject to such action on other grounds, after having, apparently at least, heartily indorsed this Declaration.

But councils have not entirely disappeared from the new plan; they are provided for in the last half of the clause. "Ordination . . . shall be in Annual Conferences, except where it is preferred to delegate [it] to local bodies." That is, councils can exist only subject to the permission or sufferance of the conference. It is not likely that conferences, in most places, will enjoin the holding of councils; but I, for one, am utterly unwilling to give them the right to do so. Furthermore, while they may not enjoin councils, it is not at all impossible that some conferences may feel it their duty to limit their liberty. A conference which demanded subscription to the Declaration of Faith for candidates coming before it would be equally likely to prescribe a like rule for councils. Perhaps nothing of the kind would be done, but the whole process is too much like putting our heads in a bag in the hope that the other fellow will not pull the string.

How then does the proposed Act of Union affect Congregationalism? My answer is that it impairs its fundamental principles in two important particulars.

1. It imposes a creed, and one to which many cannot subscribe fairly and unreservedly, according to the most evident meaning of its words.

2. The organization proposed seriously impairs the independence of our churches. The Annual Conference is a body with considerable presbyterial authority, whose membership will frequently include a number of men not chosen by the churches, and not responsible to them.

A word in closing as to the gain to be derived from the proposed union. Acknowledging heartily the value of unity, will it be promoted by the adoption of this act? Will not the

effect be to increase rather than decrease the number of denominations? At the Council, two Methodist Protestant delegates gave notice that neither they nor their conference would enter this union unless a certain article was added to the creed. It was not added.

In our own body, several of our largest churches have given notice that they will not enter into this union, and many of the local and state associations have given it a much qualified indorsement. Will not this plan then promote schism rather than unity?

If it can be so amended as not to impair Congregational liberties, well and good. But, as it now stands, Paul's words to the Galatians seem appropriate: "Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free, and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage."