

THE BIBLIOTHECA SACRA

ARTICLE I.

THE CONGREGATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION.

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FOR some time there has been a growing unrest among the Congregational churches of the United States as to the relation of their great Missionary Societies to the churches, and as to the possibilities of the National Council. This has expressed itself from time to time both in the triennial meetings of the Council, and in the annual meetings of the Societies that have been moved to make rather frequent changes in their forms of organization. Recognizing that this unrest has justification, the Council has appointed various committees to consider different phases of the question, but up to its meeting last autumn in Boston nothing very definite was done. At that meeting the Council formally adopted the Brotherhood Movement, and the work of a somewhat sporadic Apportionment Committee which had so far advanced as to secure approval, and become a clear necessity. Having taken these two important steps, in administration, with the manifest purpose of developing the work and of becoming more emphatically an administrative body than it had been in the past, the Council proceeded to create a Commission of Nineteen under the following charter: "In view of the conflict of opinion re-

garding changes in the methods of national administration which this Council should adopt, your Committee on Polity recommends that the Council appoint a carefully chosen Commission on Polity of not less than fifteen members, empowered to consider the questions on which this Council is in doubt; to develop a consistent scheme of national activity; to test its conclusions, if necessary, by a referendum to the churches, and to submit to the next Council a constitution and by-laws which shall adequately express the will of the denomination."

The appointment of this Commission has quickened interest in the questions under discussion, and has lifted the whole matter into what may be called the realm of "practical politics." It must now be considered with the seriousness of questions upon the deciding of which large interests are at stake. It is therefore very desirable to clear the field if possible for a wide and intelligent discussion among the churches, to remove misunderstandings and to get the facts clearly before the minds of all.

Already we hear the protesting term, "Presbyterianizing," as in other relations we have heard "Episcopalizing." It is desirable to show in a word the entire inappropriateness of both these terms whenever applied to our Congregational affairs. The essential fact in all forms of pure Episcopal organization is the theory that the priest or the minister creates the church; while with all non-episcopal churches the opposite theory is fundamental—the church creates the ministry. So long as that difference is maintained, there is no proper application of that term to Congregational affairs. So with Presbyterian; the Presbyterian form of ecclesiastical administration grew out of the circumstances which confronted the Reformed churches in those regions where they were

attacked by the state and had really to fight for their lives, as in the Low Countries. The new churches inevitably took on something of the form of a military organization, the situation required permanent officers with authority, and in the ranks discipline. Only so could they hope to offer a strong front to a pitiless enemy. When the age and the circumstances had passed, the method of organization remained, and ever since in the Presbyterian Church the face of its official boards may be regarded as turned inward, to govern as well as to guide the membership. The Scottish phrase "fencing the table" is characteristic of the Presbyterian attitude.

On the other hand, the face of the administration among the Congregational churches is turned outwards. The membership is regarded as adequate to care for itself, while its officers are appointed to secure effective administration, and to guide the work of the church in carrying the gospel to the outside world. They have no disciplinary control. Therefore unless a movement can be shown to have a clear purpose to reverse the Congregational principle and turn the face of its administrative officers inwards, giving them authority over the membership, an undertaking which no one has yet been bold enough to suggest, the application of the term "Presbyterianizing" to any question of Congregational development is improper and misleading. Congregationalism is essential democracy; it rests upon trust in the membership of the churches, which is made up of converted people, so far as it is possible to determine who are such.

While this is the conception of membership in all evangelical churches, only those which are Congregationally organized, of which there is a mighty host, base their organization upon this fact, and feel themselves competent to develop in any direction in which the exigency of the hour and the man-

ifest Providence of God may indicate. That the churches may be free to attend to their own affairs, they must delegate certain duties, and they must have something of united organization, by whatever name this may be called.

The settlers in Massachusetts Bay very quickly established fellowship with the Pilgrims of Plymouth, and out of that fellowship has grown the entire development of the churches of America. Now the day of haphazard systems has passed in churches, no less than in business. Everywhere there is need of a thoroughly thought-out and accepted method. This is necessary in all departments of life, to which the church is no exception, and for these reasons it is necessary, to secure economy of effort and of outlay. The lack of such method, or an imperfectly developed system, is inevitably wasteful and eventually demoralizing. It is necessary, to assure continuity, without which the lessons of experience are not learned, and dissension and discouragement are sure to ensue. It is necessary, in order to produce trained workers, without whom, under the tremendous pressure and complication of modern society, no work will be well performed. It is necessary, in short, to the highest efficiency, without the struggle for which no group of Christians, however enthusiastic and devoted, can hope to justify themselves before their Lord. We shall be responsible at last, not only for what we have done, but also for what we might have done but have failed to do if we have not availed ourselves of the best methods that were within our reach.

The changes proposed before the National Council relate to the development of the administrative functions of the Council, and to the reorganization of the Societies with relation to the Council itself, and through it to the churches. At present we have as many forms of organization as we have

Societies. This perhaps has been desirable in the past, as it was in a measure inevitable because of the history of our work. For just one hundred years we have been moving in experimental lines. The American Board originated in a few men deeply concerned for the heathen. It was inevitable, if it was not absolutely necessary, that the organization which they created should center in men of like mind with themselves, obviously very few at first, and for a long time not likely to be many. Consequently they began with a corporation composed of picked men; and the wisdom of the method has been abundantly proved by the efficiency of their work. The American Board to-day not only occupies a foremost place among the missionary organizations of the world, both for the wisdom of its administration and the character of its missionaries and their work, but also is to be ranked with the very best of commercial institutions for the solidity of its credit, the comprehensiveness of its plans, and the perfection of its administrative details.

The original method of the Board has been slightly modified in that the churches through their conferences nominate certain corporate members whom the Board elects; and the Board has thus been brought into more immediate relation with the churches.

The Home Missionary Society and the American Missionary Association have from time to time changed their method of organization extensively in the line of direct representation, while both have in practice been largely under the control of a small board of direction, or even of one or two highly efficient secretaries, whose personal efficiency and long experience have given them predominating influence. The success of their public meetings and the efficiency of their administration have come to be often measured by the com-

pleteness of this control and the thoroughness with which all the details, both of the policy and of the administration, were worked out, within the administrative office.

Understudies are a recognized requisite to-day in every form of administrative organization, in order that the work may not depend too heavily upon the life of any individual; and such careful provision for helpers who are being trained to take the place of superiors is only possible within a carefully arranged system. We have suffered much criticism whenever controversy has arisen in any of our great Missionary Societies from the claim from the East and from the West that there were plenty of men ready and competent to fill the positions of our chief secretaries at half the salary. So little have we regarded the value of definite and superior equipment.

The Church Building Society, as it has limited itself to expending only what money it at any time has within sight, has found its rôle chiefly in the work of a single official whose prime business has been to raise money. Its Executive Committee has had no larger function than to distribute that money with such judgment as it might have. As a consequence its annual meetings almost from the beginning have barely had more than a quorum, and, while its nominal membership is as great as its constituency, as a matter of fact, its membership has had little or no part in its management.

The same may be said of the College and Education Society, and of the Sunday-School and Publishing Society.

This outline is not given with any thought of criticism, but merely to call attention to the salient facts of our history. We have all felt free on our own part to begin any work that seemed waiting to be done; and we have as a denomination been ready at any time to welcome such work and such work-

ers, and to aid and forward them, to the measure of our ability or our interest.

The resulting work has in the main been well done. Our record as a denomination is one of which we need not be ashamed; but the time has come when the various methods pursued in the past need to be reviewed, and when the method which has been found to be the best, or which has most promise of efficiency, should be formally adopted. We cannot justify our work to ourselves, not to say to the Lord, and to the business of his kingdom, otherwise.

The proposed changes in the line of simplicity and system would therefore seem to be needful. First, because the people want them. As the members of our churches come to know the exact situation more fully, the demand arises, and has become widely felt, that the change should be introduced. It is necessary that the work may be more easily understood and the responsibility of it more generally accepted by the churches as a whole. We are faced with the constant necessity of making up deficits and our Executive Officers are burdened with the ever recurring problem as to how to administer their work, or to advance it, with limited and often not increasing resources. The first step to bettering the situation would seem to be so to simplify our system as to make it perfectly intelligible to the people, and so to alter it as to make them feel their responsibility for it, bringing it as close to the heart and life of the churches as may be possible.

Again, these changes may be regarded as marking our denominational growth. Everywhere in nature life and progress are indicated by development of organization; and we certainly have come to a stage in our denominational history when such development may properly be regarded as a mark both of our progress and of our vigor, and is not to be dis-

paraged because it is a development, or because in some of its aspects it may appear to be new or to some even revolutionary.

Furthermore, these changes are necessary in order to secure a better coöperation and a closer fellowship with Christians of other denominations. Federation and union are now in the air. A new spirit of brotherhood faces the Christian world. In order to respond to it and to do our part in forwarding it, we must know ourselves and have our work in hand, and for this we need a system of organization which will be readily apprehended and which will be sufficiently elastic and efficient adequately to meet any situation that may arise.

Finally, these changes are desirable because they can better be made now than they can be later. Every day the machine and its work become more cumbersome. If ever we are to simplify and clarify it, and make it more efficient, now is the time.

It is impossible to say just what the change will be, but it is possible to indicate the lines along which it will necessarily move. It will be necessary to preserve the traditions and individuality of the Missionary Societies. In each instance these constitute our best assets. We are careless enough in all things American, both of our history and of our ancestry; but the day is not distant when a new value will be discovered attaching to these. Indeed, there are signs of it already, and nothing could be more improvident than for us Congregationalists, who have three hundred years of a history so closely identified with the history of all our American institutions and life, to institute changes which would either ignore our past or cast it aside.

The starting-point, therefore, of any reorganization would

naturally be a recognition and careful estimate of our own past, and adequate provision to preserve and if possible give still larger efficiency to so much of our organic life as has come down to us. This means not only a preservation of the charters of these societies, but also the continuance and the vitalizing of the corporate body, giving it a definite place in whatever new system may be established. There is also an unmistakable demand for increasing the importance and enlarging the functions of the National Council. The fear lest it should usurp functions which properly belong to other bodies, or that it would dominate the churches, interfering with their autonomy, which has been at once our pride and our strength, a fear which was uppermost in the mind of the fathers forty years ago, has no longer serious place in our thoughts. Our denominational consciousness has become more pronounced through the years, and we have not only gained clear understanding of the essential principles which enter into our denominational life, but have also grown to a denominational self-consciousness which leaves no doubt as to our abundant ability both to protect ourselves and to preserve our distinctive characteristics. This being the case, we are safely turned to the National Council as an existing agency which has grown naturally with our growth, and we freely recognize its possibilities.

Triennial meetings will no longer prove sufficient if the Council is to represent the churches, and if delegates sent to it are to feel the importance as well as the honor of their office. It will need to meet at least biennially, and without question ere long annually. Only so can it be kept before the people as a live and responsible body, and membership in it be made to appear sufficiently important to command the respect and service of our best men.

The fact that our state legislatures have so prolonged their sessions and so dealt with their business as to have outstayed their welcome and created a growing purpose on the part of the people to make their sessions less frequent need not disturb us. The National Council has had a very different experience, and will have, as reorganized, far more dignified functions,—far more important, at any rate, in the life of our churches. The expense of such meetings will be recognized as a proper expense when the efficiency of the Council and the service which it will be able to render become unmistakable, and need not at present trouble any one. The American people are large-minded and are always willing to pay for satisfactory service.

Starting then with the National Council as a recognized and representative body, which will have behind it the support and the authority of the churches whose delegates will compose it, we shall also have the existing corporations of the Benevolent Societies whose membership can be at once, in part at least, composed of nominations from the Council to be elected by the corporations, their present membership being undisturbed. As time goes on the demand to have corporate members appointed by the Council will probably increase, until, if it be found desirable, they all will eventually come to be so created. Each corporate body will as now create an Executive Committee, to be its administrative and responsible Board. These boards may have any name designated by their functions, and need not in all cases be the same. They will be responsible through the year for carrying out the purpose of the constituency, directing the work and preparing the annual report which will be required by the Council, and which may properly come to it either directly from the Executive Committee or through the individual

Corporation. This annual report will make the relation to the Council real, and will keep alive in each Society the fact of its responsibility to its ultimate constituency, the churches. This Board of Directors should create and control the administrative staff in the same way in which the board of directors of any industrial corporation chooses its general manager, or superintendent, upon whom rests the responsibility of running the business or operating the mill.

This final function, embodied in the Secretary, or Secretaries, as the case may be, will gain in dignity and importance by as much as it will be recognized as emanating originally from the people through whose representatives he is formally chosen and because he has behind him the carefully organized system of which he becomes officially representative. We shall need in the future, as in the past, the very best men available for this administrative work. They will be relieved from interference by virtue of carefully defined duties, and will have the opportunity to win the widest and most encouraging approval because their work will be known of all, and will be performed without embarrassment, and with full individual responsibility and credit. It will be possible to adopt a system of understudies by which younger men may be put in training to sustain the hands of the general Secretaries and in time to take their place, as is not possible with our present system of election and administration. This is by no means the least important part of a possible change and one that has come to occupy a large place in the organization of all business enterprises that look to permanency.

These four features, preserving the individuality and traditions of the Societies, increasing the importance and functions of the National Council, correlating the Executive Committee first to the Corporation and then through it to the Na-

tional Council, and increasing the scope and function of the administrative officers, mark the line along which it is possible both to simplify and to strengthen our existing machinery.

The churches will find themselves adequately represented when they are called from time to time to send delegates to the National Council. These will be the only delegates they will be called upon to choose for national service, and the position will be one of honor and responsibility sufficient to command the services of the best men. The authority of the Council will in no sense reverse or interfere with our established Congregational principle of the entire autonomy of the individual church, as the Council's face will be always turned away from the churches and toward the work which it is created to do. Its authority at the same time will be adequate over the work of the denomination, as this will be guaranteed by the annual reports which each missionary Corporation would be required to make; and while membership in the Corporations can under the charter only become actual by election on the part of the Corporation, a nomination on the part of the Council to such membership will be recognized as authoritative. We would escape that travesty of democratic government which appears when a mass meeting is supposed to exercise administrative functions, while it is inevitably controlled by a cabal or a "machine." Instead of this the larger body will annually receive the report of its agents, will form its own judgment as to their efficiency, and will be called, while the matter is fresh in their minds, to express a judgment, which will be at once authoritative and profitable for instruction, for reproof, and for growth in all that is desirable. The various Corporations will receive this instruction from the Council, will seek its application to their

own particular work, will give particular instructions to their boards of directors, and will have their eyes open and themselves made watchful to the care with which the instructions are carried out, in view of the fact that at the end of another twelve months the same process will be repeated. Each Board of Direction may then meet weekly, as does the Prudential Committee of the American Board, or monthly as Executive Committees of the other Societies, according as it chooses to assume responsibility for the minute details of administration. But in the main it will turn over to the administrative officers the duty of applying their instructions to the business in hand, leaving them free to choose their subordinates and to apply the instructions in such a way as their own best judgment shall direct.

If some such plan as this be adopted, we would then have a system entirely in line with what has now come to prevail in all forms of well-organized business. Men in our churches who have little or no knowledge of the particular work of the denomination would be free to accept positions in the National Council or in the Societies, or even on a board of directors, if they knew that what is required is only such general good sense and knowledge of business methods as will enable them to understand and to pass judgment upon questions of policy and of general administration; while the direct administrative work would be in the hands of experts who would be the Secretaries and the members of their staff. This is now the established method in all business offices. The Bank of England, for example, does not seek bankers for its Board of Directors, but chooses representatives from the various great business interests of London. They elect a manager of the bank who is a banking expert, in whose hands the management of the bank rests, sub-

ject only to their general instructions. The same is true in the administration of the great manufacturing concerns in this country. The directors put the mills in the hands of a treasurer, or superintendent, and he is supposed to be competent to see that they are properly run; in any case the responsibility for success or failure rests with him. That he may meet this responsibility he must have a free hand. This will be, even to a larger extent than in the past, the place and function of the Secretaries.

How far such a system will be recommended by the Commission of Nineteen, or how completely it will be approved by the National Council, remains to be seen. But that something in this line will be necessary is growingly manifest. The time has come for it, the churches feel the need of it, and there seems no good reason why as a denomination we should be deterred from making this advance. We owe it to ourselves; and we owe it also to the Christian world, in which every denomination of Christians is now being summoned in a new way to take its place and play its part, as its contribution to that great whole which constitutes the working and visible force of the advancing Kingdom of God.