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BIBLIOTHECA SACRA

ARTICLE I.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY CONGREGATIONALISM.

BY THE REVEREND HENRY A. STIMSON, D.D.,
NEW YORK CITY.

"The nature of a thing is that which it has become when the process of development is over."

Aristotle.

"The binding religious fellowship is that which keeps personal wishes within bounds."

James Martineau.

"Most people you can safely restrain if you forbear to snub them. You can induce them to agree if you allow them to argue."

Edward Thwing.

"The Christ Himself had been no Law-giver
Unless He had given the life with the Law."

Mrs. Browning.

THE action of the National Council of Congregational Churches at its recent meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, is attracting wide attention. It amounts to a virtual reconstruction of the denominational life, and marks an epoch in its history. To understand its true significance, it is necessary to read it in the light of the past. At the meeting of the Council nine years ago (i.e. in 1904) the project was agitated. Three years later it was urged and a Committee appointed. Three years still later, at the meeting in Boston in 1910, the Commission of Nineteen was appointed with posi-

tive instructions, which were "to formulate and constitute a practical scheme of administration, and to submit to the next Council a Constitution and By-laws which embodied their judgment; coupled with the statement that 'The Council hereby declares in favor of the enlarged conception of the Secretaryship, laying upon that office added advisory and administrative service.'" Acting under its instructions, the Commission gave three years to consideration of the subject. They printed several preliminary Reports, of which copies were distributed by the thousand throughout the churches, drawing out criticisms innumerable in the religious papers and individual letters, numbering more than a thousand. At the meeting of the Council the Commission produced a Report, the result of their inquiries, materially modifying the plans which they first announced. They held almost continual open sessions for free discussion and criticism during the meeting; they gave constant assurance that all suggestions would be carefully considered; they continued in session, privately, most of the time, and on the morning of the final debate, they introduced still another Report, modifying their previous ones, with the benefit of suggestions and discussion up to the last moment.

When the formal debate opened in the Council, it was quickly shown that debate was already practically exhausted. Nothing new was suggested; technical problems were promptly dealt with; and at the appointed hour of noon, the final vote was taken. At the suggestion of the moment, the previous rule requiring vote by roll call was rescinded and a rising vote called for, when the whole house arose in support of the Commission and in final adoption of the new Constitution and By-laws.

That now not only becomes the accepted order of Congregational action in all denominational matters, but it becomes so with a completeness of knowledge on the part of the churches, and with a consensus of opinion that rarely is given to any project, however much it may be desired, or however prolonged the discussion. It is not likely to be changed, except possibly in such minor details as experience, and experience alone, will show to be desirable. The significance of this new order will be widely discussed. In preparation for that discussion, we venture to give a rapid review of some salient denominational history which will throw light upon the present situation, and show that it is, in effect, not a revolution but a natural and inevitable and most desirable development.

Little need be said in regard to the Declaration of Faith. It is a definite statement that the historic faith which was once for all delivered to the saints and which, through the centuries has found its more or less complete expression in the historic Creeds, is held in its full significance, by the Congregational Churches. The old Creeds are not displaced, but are put in their proper setting as marking the successive stages of the Christian expression, and constituting the outstanding landmarks of Christian history. The Preamble and Declaration of Faith, Polity and Fellowship, we give in full, as they are attracting wide attention, of which, indeed, they seem to be entirely worthy. They read as follows:—

“The Congregational Churches of the United States, by delegates in National Council assembled, reserving all the rights and cherished memories belonging to this organization under its former Constitution, and declaring the steadfast allegiance of the churches composing the Council to the faith which our fathers confessed, which from age to age has found its expression in the historic creeds of the Church universal and of this Communion, and affirming our loyalty to the basic principles of our representative democ-

racy, hereby set forth the things most surely believed among us concerning faith, polity and fellowship:

“ FAITH.

“ We believe in God the Father, infinite in wisdom, goodness, and love; and in Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord and Saviour, who for us and our salvation lived and died and rose again and liveth evermore; and in the Holy Spirit, who taketh of the things of Christ and revealeth them to us, renewing, comforting, and inspiring the souls of men. We are united in striving to know the will of God as taught in the Holy Scriptures, and in our purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord, made known or to be made known to us. We hold it to be the mission of the Church of Christ to proclaim the Gospel to all mankind, exalting the worship of the one true God, and laboring for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace, and the realization of human brotherhood. Depending, as did our fathers, upon the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth, we work and pray for the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God; and we look with faith for the triumph of righteousness and the life everlasting.

“ POLITY.

“ We believe in the freedom and responsibility of the individual soul, and the right of private judgment. We hold to the autonomy of the local church and its independence of all ecclesiastical control. We cherish the fellowship of the churches, united in district, state and national bodies, for counsel and coöperation in matters of common concern.

“ THE WIDER FELLOWSHIP.

“ While affirming the liberty of our churches, and the validity of our ministry, we hold to the unity and catholicity of the Church of Christ, and will unite with all its branches in hearty coöperation; and will earnestly seek, so far as in us lies, that the prayer of our Lord for his disciples may be answered, that they all may be one.”¹

¹ Rev. W. D. Paterson, D.D., Professor of Divinity in the University of Edinburgh, closes his book “The Rule of Faith” with these words:—

“The central content of the Christian revelation, the gospel which forms the soul and power of the Christian religion, is on an altogether different footing from the speculative utterances made by theology in the outlying provinces of religious thought. It passes down from generation to generation under the protection of expe-

Passing, then, from this, we come to the new Constitution. It contains three distinct features:—

1. The gathering up of all the missionary agencies which from time to time have come into existence, doing the work of the Congregational churches, and uniting them organically with the National Council, which, hereafter, is to meet biennially. The members of the Council become the constituent members of the various Societies. These will retain their charters and continuous history, holding their independent meetings the intermediate years between the meetings of the Council, and meeting also biennially in connection with the Council. They will create by their own action, certain corporate members, who will give a kind of visible continuity to the various organizations. Members of the Council are elected for only four years and will be continually changed.

2. The Council also created what it calls a *Commission on Missions*, a small body composed of fourteen, chosen by the Council, and one each from the various Societies, to have general oversight of the work of the Societies in a supervisory and advisory character. It is not to be charged with

rience and of God. It is accredited afresh from age to age by the fact that it is an engine for doing spiritual work of the most valuable kind and that those who make use of it find that it makes good its promises. It is also authenticated by a conviction of its truth wrought in the hearts of those who live by it, which shows such strength, tenacity and energizing activity that they confidently interpret it as a gift of God through the testimony of the Holy Ghost. Religion we are told by the writer to the Hebrews, has its disciplines of dislodgment, but it is to the end that the things which cannot be shaken may stand out more clearly in their changeless grandeur and their immovable strength. The mind is ever interested in novelties, but the heart ever seeks the permanent and unchangeable, and is assured that its quest is not vain, according to the song of our pilgrimage:—

‘His truth at all times firmly stood
And shall from age to age endure.’”

details of administration of the Societies, but it shall aim to prevent duplication of activity, to effect possible economies in administration, to seek the correlation of all, so as to secure a maximum efficiency, examining their budgets, and, finally, making such recommendations to the Council as it thinks wise, for the furtherance of the work of the several Societies. And it is the expectation of the Council that some effective simplifications and consolidations shall result.

3. The Council appointed a Secretary, who, in addition to the ordinary duties of such an office which he shall seek to have performed by subordinates, shall give his time particularly to matters of general concern in the constructive life of the denomination, and such as he shall find opportunity for in his relation to the churches. In the scope of his service he is a new officer, and much is looked for from him. In the selection, as the first incumbent of this office, of the Rev. H. C. Herring, D.D., hitherto the Secretary of the Home Missionary Society, the denomination has high hopes of greatly increased efficiency in its denominational life.

Various incidental changes were made in the methods of procedure of the Council, and a number of constructive rules were adopted, but these were relatively unimportant. Attention will center upon the features above indicated—the new Creed, the organic union of the Societies with the Council, the Commission on Missions with its supervisory function, and the Executive Secretary. Comparisons will at once be made with the existing order of other denominations, but a moment's consideration will show that a parallel does not run. It is in no sense "Presbyterianizing" or "Episcopizing." The autonomy of the individual churches is preserved in its original completeness, there are no efforts at jurisdiction, and no more authority is given to any body or any act

than "lies in the reason thereof,"—which is the historic Congregational phrase. But there is a definite forward movement in the line of efficiency and in recognition of the growing responsibility of the Congregational churches acting together, both in relation to their definite field of work and to other Christian churches. It is to throw light upon this line of development that we would call attention to a brief outline of certain notable facts in our Congregational history.

The earliest Congregational church of which we have record was constituted by a little body of Christians who, under persecution inaugurated by Bloody Mary, after being driven about from place to place in London, and after many narrow escapes, fled from England about the year 1550 and settled in Frankfort on the Main. They were not Separatists, but were free to set aside everything in their Ritual that savored of Popery, and in their exile were put under the necessity of governing themselves. In this they found great difficulty, and fell out with one another so sharply that the Magistrates took cognizance of the disturbance and insisted that they should mend their ways. They thereupon invited John Calvin and several of his friends to visit them and give them advice; which they did. This was the first Council called, in Congregational history. The advice was that they should settle their disputes and try to live at peace. They succeeded in doing this but for a short time, when trouble again broke out and the church, as an organization, disappeared.

Meanwhile Elizabeth came to the throne in England and issued the Act of Uniformity, under which a new tyranny began. A company of Nonconformists appeared in London and was also chased from place to place, its members often arrested. It divided, under persecution, and was involun-

tarily started in the way that soon led to formal separation. The rigor of the Government increased, and soon Robert Browne arose as the preacher of Separation. In 1580 he went to Norwich, where he found sympathizers, and in 1581 complete Separation was undertaken in Norwich by a company of not more than forty people. With Browne as their pastor they moved to Middleburg in Holland in 1582. Dissensions quickly arose among them. Browne, despairing of peace, returned to England. Francis Johnson came from Amsterdam to succeed him as pastor, and he, also failing to secure peace, returned to Amsterdam. By 1603 there was not a trace left of the Middleburg church. It was destroyed, as the one in Frankfort was, by its internal dissensions.

Another group of persecuted Englishmen in the closing years of the sixteenth century fled from London to Amsterdam, where Francis Johnson was their pastor, and the scholarly Henry Ainsworth their teacher. Dissensions arose among them also and they soon divided, forming two churches. Strife was so serious that when the Pilgrims from Scrooby came over in 1608, they found no congenial fellowship and but scant welcome, and moved on to Leyden. The Amsterdam church had a troubled history and finally disappeared, what was left of them being absorbed by the English Reformed Church of Amsterdam, at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In every instance these churches went to pieces from internal dissensions, and always over matters of polity, never of doctrine, concerning which there was in those days little or no question. Their rival leaders, Browne and Barrowe, could never agree, and their differences split the congregations. One cause of contention in the church in Amsterdam was over the voluntary gifts for its support, which, from some members, were so small, considering their ability,

that a fixed sum was required from them, with the result that some left the church. The evils of these controversies and the consequent divisions were such that a writer of that time said, "It is apparent that three or four hundred of the Brownists have brought forth more apostate Anabaptists and Arians sometimes in one year, than 10,000 members of the Reformed Dutch Church in this city of Amsterdam have done in ten years or more." Burrage, the latest historian of these churches, says: "Many small congregations of Barrowists seem to have existed in England after the London Church was driven out, but they also quarreled much within themselves, and ceased to be, for this reason." It was written of some of them in 1612 that "they laid manifold crosses upon one another, one half devouring the other at once." There were many called "Wandering Stars," who went hither and thither holding peculiar views like that of John Hancock, who invented "Se-separation," or Separatism by one's self.

Meanwhile the Pilgrims, the colony in Leyden, under the leadership of John Robinson, finding themselves always strangers in a strange land, and the conditions of their life growing no better, determined to emigrate to America. They had become Separatists, under pressure, Robinson himself being inclined that way, because of his brief experience in Norwich and his contact with Robert Browne. But under the influence of Henry Jacob, one of the survivors of the Frankfort church, Robinson modified his views and ceased to advocate separation from the English Church. It was with this teaching, and in this spirit, that the Pilgrims came to Plymouth. They sought only peace to worship God according to their conscience, and liberty to preach the gospel in the new land. Formal separation was to them relatively

an indifferent matter, provided they could have these essentials. The colonists who quickly followed them to Massachusetts Bay came as members of the English Church, and were Separatists only so far as the circumstances of their life forced it upon them. They may be defined as Congregational Puritans, as distinct from Separatists. These various strangers on the American coast naturally came together, and paid little attention to questions of church organization, so long as they were permitted to live at peace. The colony at Plymouth was so small that its special method of government made but slight impression, notwithstanding the story about Dr. Samuel Fuller's visit to Governor Endicott. The churches were largely left free to work out their own salvation in their own way with the minimum of organization. They did not originally separate from the Church of England, but they became Separatists, and such as they are in other respects to-day, only by a gradual and almost unnoticed process of assimilation. There was naturally continual discussion. They were afraid of ecclesiastical oppression, and shy of developing organization. And this feeling was so acute that when in November, 1681, it was proposed by many devout persons in Boston to keep a concert of prayer every Monday at noon, for the church abroad, then withering under grievous persecution, Cotton Mather records in his diary that many good men held aloof, as "having somewhat of superstition in it," though he adds, "Many good men did afterward highly bless God for the proposal." This concert of prayer lingered till the time of the Edwardses, when it was taken up by Christians both in Scotland and New England, and led to the subsequent Monthly Concert of Prayer for Missions, which has since had such a blessed history.

In contiguous localities the ministers of these churches

met in associations for mutual conference. On November 5, 1705, these three proposals were offered in the Boston Association:—

1. To give ministerial meetings, then new, an ecclesiastical character, by the introduction of business pertinent only to the churches.

2. To combine these associations, enlarged by lay members, into State Councils.

3. To allow no man to be called to preach who was not recommended by testimonial of an association.

The proposals were defeated by the speech of the famous John Wise, of Ipswich, who ridiculed them, and said they "smelled strong of prelacy." The result was that many a year passed before the first conference of Congregational churches was organized, in the little town of Buxton, Maine, though now they exist in every State. Massachusetts long delayed any action of this kind; and, as a result, her churches were left helpless before the Unitarian attack, which carried off many of the strongest churches and the larger part of the church property in Eastern Massachusetts. The churches were attacked singly, and had no united defense; while in Connecticut not a single church of any note was taken. The churches in Connecticut were already well united by their Consociation. It is well to note, in this connection, that Dorner says in his history of the Protestant Reformation, that the same, substantially, was true of the churches of Germany, as compared with those on the Rhine, the latter, because of their looser idea of the church, going down like wheat before the storm, under the attack of Rationalism in the eighteenth century, while the Lutheran churches stood, relatively undisturbed.

The interest in questions of polity among the early church-

es culminated in the Saybrook Platform, in 1708. Interest, however, began to wane, and was accompanied by a corresponding decline in religious interest. The series of great revivals which characterized the first half of the nineteenth century commenced in 1797, and continued till 1857-59. This developed a new interest in every form of Christian activity. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was organized in 1810, and the Connecticut Missionary Society, out of which our National Home Missionary Society sprang, in 1820. These were followed by similar organizations, right and left. The great College period opened in 1834, when a new denominational spirit showed itself in the growing purpose to provide educational institutions under Christian influence, over the West. Migrating New Englanders could see no reason why they should be "sheep in a large place without a shepherd," or shut out from fellowship with one another, or from the folks at home in New England. The New York State Association of Congregational Churches was formed in 1834, and others quickly followed in Ohio, Iowa, Michigan, Illinois, Kansas, California, and Indiana. The decade 1830-40 was epochal in Congregationalism. A new sense of self-respect and brotherhood arose, carrying with it a new sense of responsibility. Congregationalists who had crossed the Hudson River had begun to cease to apologize for themselves. A movement for greater organic efficiency arose with the denominational gathering of 1852 in Albany, with the repudiation of the encumbering "Plan of Union," under which it has been said that we lost 2,000 churches to the Presbyterians, and in 1871 in Oberlin, with the first National Council, the purpose of which was thus defined, in the preamble of its Constitution, "to express and foster their substantial unity of doctrine, polity and

work; to consult upon the common interest of all the churches, their duties in the work of evangelization, and the united development of their resources in all parts of the Kingdom of Christ." Triennial meetings of the churches in the National Council followed regularly thereafter. The history of the Council was thus summed up, some years ago, by the late Dr. George Boynton. He said: "It has been a most valuable means of expressing and promoting fellowship in the widely scattered churches of our Order. It has discussed questions vital to our polity; it has given advice, sometimes wise and sometimes not so well considered, which has been followed or not, as it has commended itself to the churches. It has not even been obliged to be always consistent with its early precedents which it has created. It has helped greatly in the solution of important questions, and shown that union is impossible without uniformity. It will in the future be increasingly the rallying-place of unifying power of the denomination."

In 1904, at the meeting of the Council in Des Moines, Iowa, the Committee on Polity reported as follows: "Resultant from what our inquiries have illustrated from the large body of our churches, your Committee are of one judgment, that our Congregational Churches may safely and consistently move along the line of representative order without in the least imperiling either of their fundamental principles, of autonomy or of fellowship; and we unite in the conviction that our churches should address themselves with earnestness and intelligent purpose to such readjustment of their order as shall provide for a representative administration of all our interests."

This Committee recommended that "the State and local organizations of our Churches, acting together, should pro-

vide for and direct the extension of church work, the planting of churches, the mutual oversight and care of all self-sustaining as well as missionary churches and other missionary and church activities, to the end that closer union may insure greater efficiency without curtailing local independence; that the administration of the benevolent interests of our churches be directed by representatives of the churches in the National Organization, and that this Council appoint a Commission of Fifteen, to include a representative from each of our benevolent Societies, which shall report at its next regular meeting such adjustment of these Societies to the body of the churches represented in this Council as shall secure such direction, care being taken to safeguard existing constitutional provisions of these Societies and the present membership of their Boards of Control, but also to lodge hereafter the creation and continuance of these Administration Boards in the suffrage of the representatives of the churches."

This report, which was adopted, initiated the movement in definite form, which, after nine years, culminated in the action in Kansas City. It is to be remembered that Congregationalism was not completely divorced from the State until 1818 in Connecticut, and about the same time in New Hampshire, and not until 1833 in Massachusetts. Its relation to the State has since that time been that of mutual friendship and frequent co-operation, the courts throughout the United States always acting in entire sympathy with the churches, but our churches having no longer any direct connection anywhere with the State. They are entirely free to develop their own methods of organization along such lines as they themselves may choose. The courts, whenever appeal is made to them, require of ours, as of all churches, only that their pro-

cedure shall be strictly according to such laws as they themselves have established, of course not conflicting with the laws of the State.

It remains only to note that in this present stage of development, we have given no judicial function to the National Council, or, indeed, to any organization outside of the individual church. An effort has been made to secure something of continuity in the organic life of the denomination, as represented in the National Council. Its members are elected for two meetings, two years apart, one half being elected each time. The officers continue from one meeting to the next; the Nominating Committee is a standing body, renewed in part at each meeting, but charged with the responsibility of seeing that proper nominations are made. The Council will have large influence in safeguarding and protecting the rights of the churches, to which it will keep close. It will open the way for whatever of consolidation is necessary in the Missionary Societies which are all under their own charters, having sprung up spontaneously and developed their own specific work alongside of others, who, at times, have been doing the same work. The supervision of their work, for which the Council has provided, will also tend greatly to produce harmony between our action and that of the Missionary Societies of other denominations, which, happily, are now all engaged in adjusting their relations in the interest of Christian efficiency and the avoiding of over-churching certain regions, at the expense of neglecting others. But even more important than this, within the life of the denomination, is the duty laid upon the Board of Missions, which is the executive department of the Council in this connection, that it shall supervise the raising of money for missionary and benevolent purposes, so far as

to secure the adoption of the Apportionment Plan among the churches, and to indicate how much money the denomination, as a whole, ought to aim to raise; instituting, if possible, such methods as will secure the raising of the money. In proportion as this is effectively done, the working Secretaries and officers of the various Missionary Societies will be relieved from what has hitherto been a large and burdensome part of their work. They will be left free, more than in the past, to give their time to the administration of their Societies and the promotion and supervision of their definite tasks. The late Archbishop Temple said to Christians in England: "We are now men governed by principle, and cannot any longer rely upon the impulses of youth or the discipline of childhood." Our effort as Congregationalists is to give to the Christian principles which underlie our ecclesiastical life a positive emphasis and a larger significance.

We have made something of a fetish of Separatism; and Individualism, often carried to extremes, has been our curse. The time now has come for Unity. A true fellowship with one another can alone be our salvation. Other Nonconformists have learned to work together, and yet abide in love. We have made a flag of our individualism, which bears the same relation to independence that license does to liberty.

Happily, a new spirit has come upon our churches, which was strikingly exhibited at the Kansas City meeting, which stands distinguished, before all else, for the kindness of its temper, the earnestness, and at the same time the good nature, of its debates, and the keenness of its interest in the questions that concern the life of the denomination, coupled with the overwhelming sense of the guidance of the Spirit of God, and the undisturbed spiritual atmosphere which characterized all the sessions of the Council. This may be

accepted as the harbinger of a new day, and as an earnest of the greater blessings which we may look for upon the work that is now before us.

“New times demand new measures and new men;
The world advances and in time outgrows
The laws that in our fathers' day were best;
And, doubtless, after us some purer scheme
Will be shaped out by wiser men than we,
Made wiser by the steady growth of truth.
The time is ripe, and rotten-ripe, for change;
Then let it come; I have no dread of what
Is called for by the instinct of mankind.
Nor think I that God's world would fall apart
Because we tear a parchment more or less.
Truth is eternal, but her effluence,
With endless change, is fitted to the hour;
Her mirror is turned forward, to reflect
The promise of the future, not the past.”

Lowell.

We cannot do better than to close this account of the changes which the Congregationalists are introducing into their denominational life, in the hopes of preparing themselves for the issues which are before Christendom, that they may fulfill their history and play their part bravely, than by quoting the noble words with which the late Professor Hatch, of Oxford, closed his history, “The Organization of the Early Christian Churches” :—

“And now, at the close of the nineteenth century, the Christian societies find themselves surrounded by new conditions. There are new intellectual conditions and new social conditions. The question which presses for answer and will not be evaded is how much of the form which grew out of, and was good for, earlier and different circumstances must be retained or abandoned now. The contingency which has to be faced is that the intellectual forces of the civilized world may be arrayed against Christianity, as once they were in its favor; and that the social forces which are drawing men into combination may draw them into combinations in which Christianity will have no part. For these contingencies the

Church of Christ is prepared. It survived Gnosticism, it will survive Agnosticism. It survived polytheism, it will survive atheism. It survived the disruption of European society when the Roman Empire fell to pieces, it will survive the possible disruption of European society when, if ever, Labor wins its victory over Capital, and Socialism over Aristocracy.

"But the survival of the Church of Christ—that is, of the whole congregation of Christian people dispersed throughout the world—is not necessarily the survival of this or that existing institution. After each of its earlier struggles, there was at least this mark of conflict, that there was a re-adaptation of form. . . . But, whatever be the form in which they are destined to be shaped, the work which the Christian societies, as societies, have to do, in the days to come, is not inferior to any work which has lain before them in any epoch of their history. For the air is charged with thunder, and the times that are coming may be times of storm. There are phenomena beneath the surface of society, of which it would be hardly possible to overrate the significance. There is a widening separation of class from class; there is a growing social strain; there is a disturbance of the political equilibrium; there is the rise of an educated proletariat. To the problems which these suggest, Christianity has the key. Its unaccomplished mission is to reconstruct society on the basis of brotherhood. . . . To you and me and men like ourselves is committed, in these anxious days, that which is at once an awful responsibility and a splendid destiny—to transform this modern world into a Christian society, . . . to gather together the scattered forces of a divided Christendom into a confederation in which organization will be of less account than fellowship, with one Spirit, and faith in one Lord—into a communion wide as human life and deep as human need—into a Church which shall outshine even the golden glory of its dawn by the splendor of its eternal noon."