

ment among men. But in times when thought is intensely active in all directions, and in consequence men differ widely from each other ; when many are fed by what is new while others live best by the old—these bonds of rigid government are very disadvantageous. They cannot hold men in real agreement ; and an artificial union overlying essential differences is the fruitful mother of insincerities and dissensions.

From these troubles the best practical escape seems to be found by letting every company of Christians who agree as to matters of faith and practice carry out their common ideas, unfettered by the consciences of other men. That is the Congregational system. That, at least, is its theory ; in practice, it may become, and oftentimes become, as arbitrary and despotic as any other system. But in a Congregational church—we use the word in its broad sense and not denominationally—there is always this idea, that it has the ultimate right to do as it thinks best, and not as other churches think best. Does a church want to alter its order of services, to make worship more prominent, to introduce responsive readings or other liturgical forms ? It is perfectly free to do so, asking permission of no Synod or Convention. Does it want to widen its terms of membership, so as to welcome all who seek the Christian life, whatever their special beliefs ? It can do so at its own will, and no man can call it to account. Does its old creed no longer represent the living belief of its members ? It can alter or simplify just as far as the general sentiment desires. If there be any change that will make its work more fruitful, its worship more devout, the life of its members more Christ-like, the church stands in the largest liberty so to change.

It is this very element of change that makes the Congregational system distasteful to men who are opposed to all novelties. There are a great many good people who want nothing to alter in religious belief or practice—nothing, that is, except that all the rest of the world should change to their way of thinking : We shall not argue the question whether absolute immobility is the ideal state of the church. It is enough to point out that the Congregational system does not in itself produce changes ; it simply accommodates itself to them when they come. The Congregational churches of New England were, during a long period, as absolutely immovable as any hierarchy ever was. They stood fast in their Calvinistic theology and in an almost uniform method of worship and church administration. That was when the general influence of the time made men conservative, and the churches were as the men within them were. So, too, the Baptist churches have been, and to a great extent still are, extremely conservative. They have changed little, because their members did not wish for a change.

As the self-governing system does not develop change, but only adapts itself to change when it comes, so, on the other hand, the complexly organized churches are powerless to prevent change in their members, powerful only to deny a natural and healthful method of change. Look at the Church of England. Under the same formularies there have been developed schools of belief so radically opposed to one another that their existence in the same organization is unnatural and mischievous. The extreme High Churchman and extreme Low Churchman represent almost the whole distance between Catholic and Protestant. Pusey is a bitter offence to the Evangelicals ; the Athanasian Creed is the abhorrence of Stanley ; Colenso is the scandal of High and Low Churchmen alike. The quarrels within the church are bitterer than any differences between the Nonconformist sects. The use of solemn professions of belief by men who at heart revolt from them is a worse reproach to Christianity than even the quarrels of Christians. And all this is the natural outcome of a system of religious authority maintained in an age whose spirit is that of religious liberty and diversity.

The Congregational system is like the bark of a tree, or the skin of man ; it changes with the wearer. But the authoritative systems are like a cast-iron jacket on a growing man. They cannot mould, but they imprison and chafe.

We have not the least expectation of winning our Episcopal and Methodist and Presbyterian brethren to abandon their various church systems. Each of these