

"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour," and accept these words as from the authority of the Most High, are we not under similar obligation, if by the observance of sanitary laws we find our supposed convenience, though concealed, endangers the health of our neighbour, to forego our convenience, or perhaps luxury, and do as we would be done by? And if you would weaken the force of the conclusion by suggesting that men misread the laws of nature, do they not misapply or explain away the teachings of the gospel of grace? The suggestion, proving too much, falls.

God's will, whether revealed in His word or in His providential dealings, is authoritative; neglected at our peril. The formation of society and its natural developments may afford us authoritative voices if we study with truthful leanings, and the practical application of these teachings becomes a part of Christian ethics.

Therefore the impartial study of the development of systems in their necessary adaptation to social life reveals to us the will of God as on society he has traced those lines. Hence an important modification of Bishop Lightfoot's sweeping sentence is called for. No united work can be conducted without some organization, nor fellowship enjoyed without some basis. The reverent study of the development of systems in the Christian Church, in their relation to wants and work, may therefore read to us as authoritative a will under similar conditions as any written upon inspiration's page, neglecting which we sin and suffer: e.g., Granted the inalienable right of a Church to select and ordain its presiding officers, do we judge thereby the newly converted Hottentots to be at once delegated with that right? And may there not be among us those to whom the exercise of that right would be as mutually degrading as in mid-Africa it could be?

A contributed article in the *Boston Congregationalist*, May 24, 1882, on work among the German population in the cities of the United States, thus speaks: "Shall Congregational Churches be organized among the foreigners? Yes and no. If they are to be left to themselves without the closest fellowship of neighbouring American churches, with much oversight and care, No! Material fit to be put into such churches is in the main of the crudest. It knows little of Congregationalism beyond the name. It would accept any other denominational aid as readily. If such a church is put into the charge of a foreign born and bred minister, and left to itself, it will die, and experience seems to show that it ought to."

I care not whether you challenge this as uncongregational or no. I ask, are the underlying principles true? If so—as every experience calmly read declares—we can do nothing against the truth, and the

true excellency of our principles will be found in our Christ-bought liberty to vary our practice according to our need.

In accordance with these principles, we desire to present some teachings concerning Christ and His Church which have, if true, important bearings. I propose, therefore, first of all, to enquire, have we a divine injunction regarding the formation of a Church?

1. Let it be remembered that we must dissociate from the word "Church" all our later ecclesiastical thoughts and associations if we would view *simpliciter* the New Testament idea. Let us substitute the word *assembly*, with the underlying thought of that assembly being orderly convened, and we are nearer the simple idea, remembering that but two kinds of Christian assemblies are directly mentioned in the New Testament—e.g. Heb. xii. 22, which is the ideal assembly of all called and sanctified by Christ; and Rom. xvi. 4, which with kindred passages justify the utterance, "Wherever in any time or country two or three are gathered together by a common love and faith, there will be a Christian Church." They to whom these words are addressed will deem it a work of supererogation to prove what none will deny, but all have accepted.

2. It is not usual for statesmen to cite primitive civilization as authority in the settlement of diverse opinions regarding government. Because the father of a family or the chief of a tribe exercised in patriarchal days an almost absolute authority, we do not now argue an absolute monarchy, nor commend republicanism on the ground of an ancient order of society when "he that had the power would take, and he may keep who can." Is there any reason why we should ever be recurring to the model of the earliest Church or Christian assembly as the authoritative standard for all time to come? Has the *jus divinum* of the episcopate been slowly but incontrovertibly disproved only that on its ruins a *de jure divino* Congregationalism should be established? If the short Procrustean bed of episcopacy required in many cases decapitation, the Presbyterian some unhealthy squeezing, are we now to have one so large that it will require the rack applied both ways in order to a fit?

I freely grant, could we find a command, either express or implied, requiring us to fashion our assemblies thereby, that would at once bind us to the form, and to diligent search if that form did not readily appear; but where is the command? Can I be convicted of ignorance if I say I find none?

Is the *example* binding? This has been maintained e.g. by the late Principal Cunningham, of Free Church College, Edinburgh, who in his "Historical Theology" writes: "The scriptural proof of any arrangement or