

## SELF-GOVERNING CHURCHES.

We suppose that church governments are divinely ordained in the same sense in which clothing is divinely ordained. God has made men so that they need clothes, and has given them the capacity to invent and make such clothes as suit their wants. So he has so constituted their religious nature, that it needs social combination for its best development and use; and he has left men to combine in churches under such forms of organization as best meet their needs.

This paper is in no sense an organ of the Congregational denomination. But we are impressed with some advantages in the Congregational form of church government which have special importance in times like our own. The essence of this system is that the local church administers its own affairs, and acknowledges no human authority outside of its own bounds. It may ask advice of other churches; it may unite with them, for practical convenience, in many administrative acts; but it holds itself always free to follow its own best judgment, and calls no man or body of men its master.

This system, like every other, has its advantages and its defects. But it has one merit which in times like these is almost inestimable—we mean its flexibility. Under those systems which subordinate the local church to a series of authorities culminating in a national council or synod, there may come to be a wide disparity between the sentiment of the local church and the practice to which it is bound. This very difficulty is coming up everywhere in all the highly organized churches, and is making endless trouble. Here, for example, is an Episcopal church whose pastor and people thoroughly disbelieve in the doctrine of baptismal regeneration which the Prayer-book seems to countenance. But they are absolutely bound to the use of the objectionable phrases until one of the triennial councils of the general church shall legislate in their favour. Here, again, is a church of the same denomination in which the people desire a very elaborate ritual. But they are restricted by the will of the church at large—that is, by the majority of its three thousand congregations, which do not like an elaborate ritual, and will not allow it in their sister congregations. Take an example from the Presbyterians. David Swing is preaching to the delight and edification of his congregation, when he is challenged and forced to go before the representatives of thirty or forty other congregations to prove his due conformity to certain standards of doctrine. This court being satisfied, he is again summoned to a higher tribunal, and a prospect opens of almost endless litigation; all this while his own people, whom alone his preaching practically concerns, are perfectly satisfied with it. Sooner than encounter such endless interference, pastor and people drop their ecclesiastical connections with other churches and agree to manage their own affairs as one household.

These difficulties are inevitable in every highly-organized church system. By the very nature of such a system each congregation is mutually responsible to all the rest in certain great particulars of doctrine, worship, and administration. This state of things may do very well in a time of quiescence and general agreement 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 often does 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 Christlike, 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.

And 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 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 a 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 has some admirable features of its own, and each is suited to some kinds of work which no other could accomplish so well. Our concern is rather to urge on those who already adhere to Congregational practice its immense possibilities for good. Freedom is worth nothing unless it be rightly used—then it is worth everything. It is the privilege of free churches, and therefore it is their duty, to gather the first-fruits of all human progress. Whatever of new and good is developed in religious thought, in philanthropic effort, in all that relates to the worship of God and the service of man, that should be laid hold of and assimilated in its life by every church that stands with its hands united. And we cannot forbear to point out to such ministers and congregations as feel themselves burdened and hindered in their work by ecclesiastical

restraints, how complete a relief may lie, not in any formal union with the Congregational denomination, but in taking ground as a self-governing church, in friendship with all and subjection to none. The world at large does not yet comprehend how easily and satisfactorily a company of Christian people can manage its own affairs.—*Christian Union*.

## TEN THOUGHTS FOR THE TIMES.

I will venture to state, as briefly and clearly as I can, ten things which, as it seems to me, a preacher in his pulpit now may do to make the time in which we live less sceptical, and so to help forward the ages of faith which are sure some day to come, and are sure when they come to be ages of better faith than any which the ages past can show.

1. It is needful that our clergymen should be far more familiar than they are now with the character of the scepticism by which they are surrounded. The popular scepticism is one in source and really one in character with the scepticism of the school and of the scholars. The minister ought to be acquainted with the newest developments of thought, not in their details, not so that he can completely discuss them from the pulpit, for that is impossible, and the attempt to do it only hurts the Christian cause and makes the Christian minister often ridiculous. But he ought to be so familiar with what men are thinking and believing that he can know the currents of present thought, see where they cross and oppose, and where they may be made to harmonize with the thought of Christ. This familiarity is something which must be constantly kept up in the active ministry. But its foundations ought to be laid in the theological school. And here more than anywhere else one fears, I think, for the faithfulness with which our theological schools are doing their whole duty by their students and the times. I cannot doubt, as I look back, that many of our noblest and most faithful teachers have failed to realize how much their boys needed to be furnished with an understanding of the precise nature of the unbelief of the nineteenth century, and of the character of thoughts in which that unbelief would show itself among the people to whom these boys, when they were ministers, would have to preach. They might have saved many of their scholars more than one anxious hour and more than one embarrassing surprise.

2. The second necessity is that every preacher should clear up his own faith; that each man should decide just what he believes himself. Let us trust truth. There is nothing so terrible as the glimpses we get occasionally into a minister's unbelief, and sometimes the confusion which exists below seems to be great, just in proportion to the hard positiveness of dogmatism which men see upon the surface. The most pitiable and powerless of all preachers is he who tries to preach doctrine which his own soul does not really believe and use.

3. And, thirdly, the minister in days like these ought to make it his duty as well as his right to claim and express the fullest fellowship of faith with all believers, whatever Christian name they bear. There is need of the solidity of faith being made manifest. Let not religion come to seem to men the affair of a party. Let us insist that when the host is against us we will have nothing to do with the miserable business of making hits and singing captious criticism at one another. I think that hardly any man does more for popular scepticism than he who while the world is trembling on the brink of atheism spends his life in championing the shibboleths of his denomination.

4. We ought never to seem to have despaired of truth, and to have left the religion of thought, and to have retreated into organization and drill as safe refuges. This is just what ecclesiasticism and ritualism seem to the world to have done, and the world is largely right. This of all others is the time to keep Baptism and the Lord's Supper reasonable and spiritual and grandly simple, and to guard them from all suspicion of magic and mechanics.

5. Never forget to tell the young people frankly that they are to expect more light and larger developments of the truth which you give them. Oh, the