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CONGREGATIONAL COUNCILS AND ASSOCIATIONS.

THERE IS A NECESSITY FOR EC-  
CLESIASTICAL BODIES MORE EXTEND-  
ED THAN SINGLE CHURCHES.

Each church of Christ sustains important relations to all other churches, and to the church universal, in addition to its peculiar ties to its own members. If the direct end of its organization is the due regulation and training of its own members, for the furtherance of their peace and holiness, the ultimate end of it, to which this first end is subservient, is the advancement of the kingdom of Christ in the world, the welfare of the church universal. This is evident from the fact that each church, like each individual, is but a member of the body of Christ. Hence it is bound indissolubly to that body and to all its members. Its prosperity and peace are in a high degree identified with theirs. For it is divinely ordered, so that of necessity the members should have the same care one for another, and whether one member suffer, all suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it. 1 Cor. xii, 25, 26.

Hence, while the first and immediate concern of every church is with its own members, its obligations do not terminate with them. It has still higher relations, and owes still

higher duties to the whole body of Christ. Nor can it sunder these ligaments, or disown this relationship, without at the same time committing suicide. As well might a member of the human body undertake to subsist and act for itself alone, refusing to help or be helped by its fellow members. The very attempt to appropriate its whole life to itself, or its own exclusive welfare, would sever it from the common spring of life, torn from which none can live. So is it with the body of Christ and its members. And it is well observed by Owen, that a church which isolates itself from other evangelical churches, is a body to which it is dangerous for any person to commit his soul.

Thus arises a twofold necessity for communion and concert of churches, involving of course ecclesiastical bodies more extended than single congregations of believers.

1. They are needed for the care of those common interests which affect the well being of the whole body, not less than of its single members. It is one of the clearest of all axioms in secular as well as religious affairs, that all who are affected by given measures, should have a share in their management.

*Quod tangit omnes, debet ab omnibus tractari.* Things which relate to the common defense, welfare, and peace of the churches; and in which agreement is of the highest moment to all and each of them, should be adjusted by a common council representing all, and not by the caprice of single churches. The good which they are all bound to promote, the evil which they are all bound to resist, they may manage with far greater efficiency and success in combined than separate action. United they stand against all assaults; divided they are an easy prey to foes within and without. The preservation and promotion of sound doctrine, the increase and propagation of religion, the suppression of error, discord, and prevailing sins, obviously require their united action.

2. Various cases arise in the administration of the affairs of a single church, which either deeply affect other churches in their consequences, or are beyond the ability of the churches in which they occur to issue safely without assistance from sister churches. The settlement and dismissal of pastors requires the counsel and assistance of other churches on both these grounds. Cases of discipline, either because they are weighty or complex in their own nature, or on account of the obstinate dissensions they engender, or because the person censured insists that he is oppressed, it may be absolutely indispensable to submit to a higher court for advice, before they can be issued with safety. In such emergencies it is the duty of a church to ask, and of its associate churches to render the requisite assistance, to be helpers of their joy, without lording it over their faith.

Thus it is clear that the great ends of church organization can not be realized, without the action of ecclesiastical bodies more extended than single churches, and capable of reaching those churches themselves, so far as to further their in-

dividual peace and prosperity, and render them tributary to the welfare of the whole body of Christ.

Any system of church polity, therefore, which does not make adequate provision for this purpose, is so far forth vitiated by a radical defect. A system which claims adoption, should not only show itself adapted to the internal regimen of single churches, but also well fitted to bring into exercise the communion of churches in all needful combined ecclesiastical action. It must provide ecclesiastical bodies, constituted by a union of churches, which are competent to promote the peace, purity, and prosperity of the whole body; to "provide for the common defense, and promote the general welfare." We believe it can be shown that no system of church government secures these ends so well as the Congregational.

Congregationalism reaches these objects by means of councils formed by a union of churches, each of which chooses one lay delegate to attend, together with its pastor, who is always a member *ex officio*. These councils may be either standing bodies to attend to all cases within their circuit, as in Connecticut; or occasional, selected and formed for each successive case, and dissolved when it is issued. Of the comparative merits of standing and occasional councils, we shall treat hereafter. But we have described the general character of those bodies, which on the Congregational system, transact such ecclesiastical business as is beyond the province or ability of particular churches. And it is maintained, that on a general view, aside from a minute survey of their workings, they are eminently scriptural and rational.

1. They are scriptural. The only example recorded in the New Testament of any ecclesiastical body more extensive than a particular church and its officers, is found in Acts xv. Here it appears that the

church at Antioch was annoyed with a contention about circumcision, which it could not of itself compose. They determined to send to the apostles and elders at Jerusalem for advice on the question. From the result of this council, verses 22, 23, it appears that the brethren of the church were joined with the apostles and elders, in deliberating upon and deciding this question. This case is the more striking and conclusive, as to the place which the brethren should have in these councils, from the fact that the apostles were present. Great as were their powers in the planting and organizing of churches, it appears that after these churches attained a settled state, they assumed no exclusive authority or rule over them. Much less then can such a prerogative be conceded to their pretended successors, or to inferior church officers. This example, therefore, is our divine warrant for resorting to councils to dispose of whatever lies beyond the province of single churches, and for composing such councils of ministers and people, as two co-ordinate, mutually poising, harmonious powers.

2. This is agreeable to reason. It accords with first principles, as applied in all analogous cases. All well constructed governments which preserve the golden mean of liberty regulated by laws, between the ruinous extremes of anarchy and despotism, are composed of different powers which represent the different parties in interest. These balance each other, and thus prevent all extreme and oppressive measures. In the doings of ecclesiastical bodies, ministers and churches have each a great and palpable stake. How reasonable then, that they both participate equally in their proceedings? Guarding the rights and interests of all, it secures their hearty coöperation in the great common cause.

Withal, the fundamental principles of government in particular churches, are thus carried out into

higher ecclesiastical bodies. In each case the ministry and brethren cooperate in its administration.

Finally, this construction of councils furnishes the highest security, that the choice, wisdom, and piety of the churches will be collected, and brought to manage her great and weighty concerns. They are composed of pastors, the chosen spiritual guides of the churches, who give themselves wholly to these things, and of representatives of the people, who will ordinarily be chosen on account of their superior fitness to transact such business.

Let us next consider the power of these councils, and the extent to which their decisions are binding upon churches.

THE DECISIONS OF CONGREGATIONAL COUNCILS ARE ADVISORY, AND FOR THAT REASON OF MOST SALUTARY EFFICACY.

Here we find a distinctive peculiarity of Congregationalism. As, in states, that is the best government which secures the just rights and liberties of the subject on the one hand, and the supremacy of law and order on the other; so in ecclesiastical polity, the great problem is, to preserve the rights of conscience and Christian liberty inviolate on the one side, and on the other to preserve truth, holiness and unity in the churches. We believe that no men who live, or have lived, have mastered this problem so well as our Puritan fathers: that they understood the Lord's way, and therefore the true way, of guarding each interest, without detriment to the other, and of bringing both to their utmost perfection.

According to both the theory and practice of Congregationalism, the decisions of councils are advisory, and not absolutely binding upon particular churches without their own consent. That the Scriptures warrant the assumption of no more than advisory powers by councils, appears—

1. From the fact that supreme authority, under Christ, in matters of discipline, is conferred upon the churches. Matt. xviii, 17; 1 Cor. v, 5, 13.

2. The Apostles did not assume dominion over the faith, but were only helpers of the joy of the churches. It may well be concluded that such dominion is denied to all subsequent and inferior ecclesiastical persons and bodies. It is their office to help the joy and further the peace and welfare of the churches, but not to rule over them.

3. The result of the council already adverted to, Acts xv, authorizes this same conclusion. The form of their result is more like the delivery of an opinion than a mandate. And yet it is not mere advice, in the ordinary sense of that term. It does not stand in the same relation to the parties advised, as the same counsel would if it came from any indifferent or accidental source.\* It is counsel given in God's appointed way, by those to whom He has committed the office of expounding his word, and helping the churches to

gain a knowledge of his will in such cases. As such, it is to be solemnly weighed and cordially welcomed, with a predisposition to abide by it, until it is proved to be unscriptural. The presumption is, that it is the voice of God, until the contrary is plainly proved. This being so, all doubts on the part of the churches turn in favor of the ascendancy of the council's advice. And since the very summoning of a council by a church implies some degree of doubt, the probability ever is, that the advice of the council will prevail. In questions of mere prudence or expediency, it ought always to be decisive. When conscientious objections to its advice are entertained, that advice may properly be rejected, till these scruples are removed, which is almost always accomplished. Hence, in theory and in practice, their decisions have a paramount and controlling influence, with as rare exceptions as the friction arising from human depravity occasions under any system whatever. And this acquiescence of the churches is the more perfect, because it is voluntary, and not forced upon them, against their own conscientious convictions. While this system provides for general order and unity, of the most precious, because most cordial kind, it leaves the liberty and independence of the churches unimpaired. It does not compel them to do or sanction what their consciences condemn, what they believe to be clearly wrong, and forbidden by the word of God. Thus a great provision is made for Christian liberty and purity, which is the distinctive glory of our system, viz. that whenever a church deems the advice of a council clearly opposed to the law of God, it is left free to fall back upon that first principle of all religion, that WE OUGHT TO OBEY GOD, RATHER THAN MAN. Any ecclesiastical system which does not shape itself into harmony with this great principle, is essentially vi-

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\* The only seeming exception to this view of the power of councils is found in the Saybrook Articles. Art. V. declares, that the decision of the council "shall be a final issue, and all parties shall sit down and be determined thereby." But while such is the letter of these Articles, the great principle of Congregationalism which we have declared, has for the most part ruled in practice, especially since the first half-century of the existence of the Platform. The churches of Connecticut have taken these Articles as the *general basis* of their system, without a strict observance of every clause. While associations see that their decisions are not trifled with, and are almost uniformly successful in procuring the acquiescence of the churches in them, yet they no more than occasional councils compel the churches to accept them, against their conscientious convictions. Nor do they pass sentence of non-communication for such refusal, unless in those clear cases of persistence in antichristian heresy or malpractice, which would excommunicate from the fellowship of all Congregational churches.

cious.\* The advantages of this feature of Congregationalism multiply, the farther they are traced.

1. Ample provision is made for the regulation of those matters of common interest which concern the churches at large, and of those affairs of particular churches, to the settlement of which they singly are inadequate. Councils are the organs through which the whole brotherhood of churches declares its judgment to single churches, and the body of Christ guides its separate members in orderly and harmonious action. Although it stops short of lording it over the consciences of men, it is yet no less efficient than other systems of church polity, which wield this imperial authority. It is efficient, because it is God's way, and is therefore made mighty through him. It is efficient, because it gains the conscientious, cordial, unforced consent of those who are thus guided, when the same decision, forced upon them by absolute authority, might provoke hostility and resistance. It is efficient, because it is "the judgment of the many," regularly ascertained and formally expressed. It is efficient, because in fact no churches have been more blessed with order, purity and peace, than the Congregational.

2. It provides for liberty of conscience. Although the reader's attention has already been called to

this great peculiarity, its importance warrants a further notice of it. At this point, as we think, our Congregational forefathers displayed a more thorough and delicate insight into the true genius of Christianity, than any who lived before them since apostolic times, and most who have lived after them. The conscience must be untrammelled, if we would have it unperverted and undefiled. It must be held in direct contact and communion with God, and be uncoerced, except as he coerces it. As it enters deeply into the purity and vigor of religion, so it has much to do with all freedom, manliness and dignity of character, in short, with the elevation of our whole nature. The extent to which liberty of conscience is preserved in various parts of Christendom, is a pretty exact index to the whole state of religion. The great mass of church politicians have deemed it impossible to secure this freedom, without opening the door for universal anarchy and intolerable confusion. It is the imperishable glory of our Puritan fathers, that they solved this great problem in a system of government which reconciles freedom of conscience with order and unity.

3. If it reconciles the just liberties of particular churches with the welfare of the whole body, it no less reconciles them with the just rights and liberties of individual church members. Suppose, for example, that a church member be excommunicated, and, as he deems, unjustly, by the church to which he belongs: he may refer his case, by appeal, to a council of other churches and their pastors. If the council decides that the sentence against him ought to be revoked, the church will probably hear this advice, and act accordingly. But should it be otherwise,—should they deem it a clear case, that they can not conscientiously restore the supposed offender to their fellowship, the decision of the council does not absolutely bind them:

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\* In confirmation of this view of the power and influence of councils, see *Ratio Disciplina*, pp. 182, 183. "It is an acknowledged principle in respect to councils, that they possess only advisory powers, in other words, their decisions are addressed to the understandings and consciences of men, and are enforced solely by moral obligations. \* \* \* Their proper business is to GIVE LIGHT. Nevertheless, as those by whom they were called are supposed to have been sincere in their request, it is incumbent on them to examine the opinions or decisions given, with prayerful, honest and unprejudiced minds. When their temper is such, they will generally find good reason to agree with the council."

for it is a cardinal principle, that councils, being human, are not infallible. But, although the aggrieved person should not be restored by this particular church, he has gained his redress. Any other church may lawfully, and without offense, receive him, on the ground of his acquittal by the council. Thus the mutual rights of churches and individuals are beautifully guarded and harmonized by this scheme of Divine Wisdom.

4. This scheme of church polity duly combines and proportions all those ingredients which, in human governments, are found to produce the most salutary results. Through the delegates of the Christian people, the popular and representative element has its just influence, and must forever prevent any encroachments on the part of the ministry, and stifle in the germ every tendency towards uncontrolled hierarchical power. On the other hand, the ministry can guard their own office against all invasion of its just prerogatives. They form an intelligent, considerate and conservative body, who temper crude and ill-advised movements by their superior knowledge, and infuse into the whole assembly, wisdom, stability and dignity. So far as judicial action devolves upon councils, they comprise what all experience has shown to be the strongest bulwarks of right and justice, a body professionally learned in the law, and a jury of the people. Thus the analogy is complete between them and the best constituted human governments.

#### OBJECTIONS ANSWERED.

1. It is sometimes objected to this system, that, by its own confession, it is powerless. Repudiating all pretensions to authority, it gives mere advice, which all men are at liberty to give, and all are at liberty to reject. It, after all, leaves the unruly to do as they please. May not any man or company of men give advice, whether organized as

an ecclesiastical council or not? In reply, let us ask, has not any one power to expound the Scriptures, and press divine truth upon the conscience? What advantage, then, has the preaching of the regular ministry over the harangues of unordained lecturers and exhorters? Simply this, that the ministry is an ordinance of God for the "perfecting of the saints and the edifying of the body of Christ." Being divinely instituted, it is divinely blest, and empowered to "commend the truth to every man's conscience in the sight of God." So of ecclesiastical councils. They are, as we have already shown, God's ordinance, his chosen way of *giving light to the churches*, and guiding them in the paths of heavenly wisdom. Therefore they enjoy his blessing, when rightly conducted, and, however frail in themselves, are armed with that excellency of power which is of God, far more potent than all the devices of human wisdom, all the mandates of lordly authority. So far as their workings are unmarred by human depravity, their counsels are not barren or impotent, but come to the churches, "not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance." 1 Thess. i, 5. Not only so, but all incidental influences concur to give them efficacy. They come with a kindly and winning, and not a forbidding or provoking aspect. It is the nature of a good man to listen to a serious appeal to his reason and conscience, when he would revolt at a peremptory mandate which forestalls both. Moreover, the weight of a council's decision with the public is such, that a church can not refuse submission to it, without either showing strong and urgent reasons for its course, or forfeiting the confidence and favor of sister churches. Nor is this a merely theoretical view. It is but a history of the actual ordinary working of Congregationalism. The councils

of New England have generally obtained as much deference for their decisions as bishop or presbytery, and have been quite as successful in promoting order and unity, truth and godliness.

2. It is alleged that this system affords no sufficient protection against the inroads of heresy and apostasy. It is said, that if any church or churches espouse fatal error, or uphold flagrant sin, the most vigorous remedy we can apply, is to advise them to abandon it; that we are therefore in danger of nourishing the most pestilential heresies or sins in the very bosom of the church, with no effectual power to suppress or expel them. But the only foundation of this objection is ignorance. There is an ample remedy in non-communication. If a church, after due labor for its recovery, obstinately persists in fatal heresy or sin, it is the privilege and duty of other churches to withdraw fellowship from that church, and thus guard themselves against the contagion. They are to withdraw from every brother, and much more from every congregation of brethren, that walk disorderly. This individual churches may do on their own motion, if they are conscience-bound. But it is usual, as it is more safe and becoming, to forbear, until they obtain the sanction and co-operation of other churches represented in council. Thus the orthodox churches of New England dealt with Socinianism, and purged out this old leaven, which threatened to leaven the whole lump. While Congregationalism has this remedy, it is the last and highest that can be had under any system whatever, which does not enforce spiritual by civil penalties, and sharpen their pang with the trenchant thong of persecution. For this ghostly tyranny it is now too late to contend.

But it may and doubtless will be rejoined, What advantage then remains to you, on the score of liberty

of conscience, which you have so ardently dwelt upon, as one of the crowning merits of your system? We answer, that it can not justly be called an invasion of the liberties or rights of any body of men, to refuse to own and treat them as a sound or pure church of Christ, when they furnish no evidence of being so, but plainly show themselves to be incorrigible apostates from the truth and holiness of the Gospel. But between this wholly antichristian state and a condition of perfect soundness and purity, there lies a broad interspace, in which are various degrees of error and imperfection, blended with much truth and feeling; so that the foundation remains firm, although the building has much that is crude and unsightly. Churches of this description are Christian churches, and so to be accounted and treated, and therefore to be welcomed among the brotherhood of churches, notwithstanding the hay, wood and stubble, which deface and partially hide the gold and silver and precious stones. Now this wide range of imperfection in churches, which, while it mars their beauty and hinders their prosperity, still falls short of subverting foundations by fundamental and fatal error, in various ways comes under the discipline of higher ecclesiastical bodies, for its correction and removal. But if these councils come to the peccant church with an unconditional mandate, instead of an appeal to reason and conscience, does it not provoke resistance? Suppose then it be disobeyed. Suppose the church say they can not in conscience comply with it. It is clear that, in this case, no alternative remains, but to excommunicate the offending church from their fellowship, for a scandalous contempt of their authority. They are forced to this disastrous issue, no matter how trivial was the original fault, which they aimed to correct. But when the decision of

a council is in its nature advisory, no such consequences are necessary, even if a church refuse compliance. No contempt is implied in such a refusal, because the advice was not imperative. Hence Congregationalism does not decapitate churches or ministers, or rend Christian communions, for those diversities of opinion which, in real Christians, are incident to this imperfect state, or for heresy in the bud, before there has been time to kill or cure it. A little reflection will convince all, that it is owing to this feature of our church polity, that the union of Congregational churches has survived the same causes of discord which rent the Presbyterian church into two hostile communions; a disruption which, as truth and peace are now returning, most of our Presbyterian brethren fervently deplore.

Thus also is demolished the last objection to Congregationalism, viz. that it is an insufficient bond of union. It unites churches not by chains of absolute power, which are easily snapped asunder, and if they can enforce uniformity, can never produce unity; but by the most potent and enduring of all ties, even "charity which is the bond of perfectness." Hence there is always the endeavor, and generally successful too, to "keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace." Repellant influences among them are the less violent and divisive, because they are not held in perilous contiguity, or sprung to their extremest tension by the strong hand of absolute authority. The embers of discord often die away, simply because they are not blown into a flame. Moreover, purely local and personal contentions can not spread beyond their own neighborhood, so as to convulse and perhaps divide the entire communion. An offending or heretical minister is censured or deposed by his own association, or a council in the neighborhood. His case is at

an end. He can not carry it up to an assembly, or conference, or convention representing the entire communion, and of course can not spread the agitation among them. We have no such extended bodies wielding supreme powers, and presenting an arena for the intrigues of ambition, and the pugilism of party. Hence in this tempestuous day, the Congregational churches are at peace, while of other communions, some have been already torn asunder; and the great convocations of others, attract the earnest gaze of the world at their fierce contentions; and show decided symptoms of their speedy dissolution.\*

#### OCCASIONAL AND PERMANENT COUNCILS COMPARED.

By *occasional councils* we mean those which exist only for single cases. The parties calling them determine what churches and ministers they will invite to meet in council on a given occasion. If these accept the invitation, they thus constitute the council, which expires with the occasion that called it into being. Thus when churches depend upon occasional councils for advice and assistance, a new council is formed for each new case, and so formed as to be the creature of the parties seeking its advice.

*Permanent councils*, technically called *consociations*, are formed by a permanent confederation of churches in a given district. All the pastors of a circle of churches thus confederated, and such delegates as the churches may appoint, (each church being entitled to one,) constitute a consociation. And when the theory of this system is faithfully carried out, no other councils are known, but all "cases ecclesiastical" which are beyond the province of single churches, are brought be-

\* The reader's attention is called to the recent division of the Presbyterian church, and that still later of the Methodists, and to the distracted and threatening condition of the Episcopal body.



fore the consociation. As there is a diversity of opinion among Congregationalists on this subject, some advocating permanent, and others occasional councils, we also will show our opinion.

The advantages of the consociational system are claimed by its advocates to be

1. That it affords increased security for impartiality and justice in its decisions. Occasional councils are avowedly the creatures of the parties consulting them. Such is the nature of man, that if he have the liberty of choosing his own judges, he will select those who are known to be favorable to his side, if he can find them. In all ordinary cases, in which contending parties appeal for the settlement of their dispute, or a church desires to carry a point however wrong, it will be neither impossible nor difficult to find ministers enough within a large communion, who agree with them, to form the council.

In all contentions, therefore, if both parties agree in convoking a mutual council, it will be in danger of being equally divided, in which event the quarrel is prolonged and aggravated, instead of being healed. If the council be *ex parte*, its decision of course will have little weight with the party that refused to concur in calling it. It is obvious that a tribunal created by the parties appealing to it, falls far below one constituted independent of them, before which they must litigate their disputes, if they litigate them at all, in the impartiality, justness, and weight of its decisions. So in another class of cases, which involve no contentions, the superiority of consociations is manifest. Suppose a church desires to obtain the sanction and aid of a council in settling an incompetent, irregular, or heretical minister. They may be able, by hunting over the land, to conjure up a council of congenial spirits who will install him in the sacred

office, when an impartial council of neighboring churches would have unanimously discarded him.

2. Hence it is obvious that fixed councils have the stronger tendency to preserve and promote soundness, purity and stability in the ministry and churches. They form a stronger enclosure around the flock of Christ, and leave fewer avenues, through which grievous wolves can enter in to destroy them.

3. It must be their own fault if they do not excel occasional councils, in dignity of character and accuracy of proceeding. A standing known body continuing from year to year, and from age to age, must obtain more respect and consideration among men, than an ephemeral organization, which is born to-day and dies to-morrow. It can only divest itself of this superiority by gross misconduct. Withal, a permanent body gradually gains in skill, facility and accuracy in the transaction of business. *By reason of use, its senses are exercised to discern both good and evil.* With its usages, rules and precedents, furnished by long experience, it is in a great measure delivered from the danger of crude and rash decisions.

4. It is a powerful bond of union, and medium of fellowship among the churches. This is too obvious to need enforcement. Indeed so palpable is the need of some such union among the churches, that those who have opposed consociations have strongly advocated CONFERENCES,\* which are like them in bringing the churches together by their pastors and delegates for mutual quickening, consolation and admonition, the promotion of their own welfare, and the advancement of the cause of Christ. But they differ from consociations in abstaining from all those judicial and other offices which are devolved on councils. But surely if such a confederation of churches

\* See Ratio Disciplina.

is necessary as a medium of union and fellowship, will it not cement that union, and increase that fellowship, if this body is convened on every momentous occasion in the churches, and assists in all their more weighty and solemn concerns? Does it not for example strengthen the bonds of love and fellowship on all sides, if this circle of ministers assemble at the ordination of every new minister among them, and perform the solemnities by which he is installed over his church, and introduced among themselves?

While these obvious advantages are admitted to belong to the consociational system, in theory and practice, certain objections are raised against it, which we will now consider.

1. The great objection urged against permanent councils, is the fear that they may gradually accumulate a power which will jeopardize the liberties of the churches. This is the substance of all arguments that we have seen urged against them on the score of expediency. But this argument derives its whole support from the assumption that the decisions of consociations are of necessity *mandatory* and not *advisory*. This assumption is built upon the letter of the Saybrook Platform, and the unwarranted inference that there can be no permanent councils, which do not punctiliously follow the letter of these articles. But this is clearly a *non sequitur*. As we have already shown, the Connecticut consociations in practice advise, without commanding the churches. Not even the semblance of a germ remains, therefore, out of which the most prurient imagination can evolve this monster-growth of hierarchical power. Moreover, the churches are not only guarded by their inherent power of refusing compliance with the decisions of these councils, but also in the composition of the councils themselves. The representatives of the churches,

if they attend, must always be able to outvote the ministry. The moderator is always taken from the clerical portion of the body, and while there is a delegate for every pastor, vacant churches without pastors, of which there are always some, also send delegates. This fact is enough to quell the apprehensions of the most jealous mind. Moreover, if the system involve these dangers, whether latent or palpable, why have not the baneful results already matured and disclosed themselves? It has prevailed in Connecticut for more than a century, a period amply sufficient to develop its evils as well as its benefits, and while it has promoted the peace, purity, and stability of the churches it has in no way abridged their liberties. Indeed it was adopted there after a sad experience of the evils and dangers of occasional councils, for the express purpose of avoiding them. And it has in a good degree accomplished this happy result, with no weighty counterpoise of evil, at least since the principle has prevailed, that the powers of consociations are advisory and not mandatory.

2. The other objection to consociations, is that they are not sanctioned by Scripture. It is said that the only council mentioned in the New Testament, Acts xv, was occasional and not permanent. To this we reply, that the same argument would overthrow permanent associations of ministers, which even its proposers will uphold. The truth on this subject, we suppose to be simply this. The Scripture shows us the nature and composition of these bodies, and the extent of their power. In these respects, the Bible must be strictly followed, and if it be thus followed, we gain all that is essential to their genuine and scriptural character. The minor circumstances and details of their organization are not defined in Scripture. They are wisely left, like many other unessential things, to be regulated

by Christian wisdom and prudence, adapting them to the various exigencies and necessities of the church. In this class, we rank such things as the duration of councils, and the times and places of their meeting, of their officers, and modes of doing business. In these matters we are fettered by no restrictions, except that we do all things decently, in order, to edification, and the glory of God, and do nothing which his law forbids. These views are commended to the candid consideration of those ministers and churches in New England, that are destitute of consociations, and to those Congregationalists elsewhere, that are now shaping their nascent ecclesiastical organizations. It is believed that the consociational system obviates many of the more plausible objections to Congregationalism, which have hitherto cramped its growth, and made it tributary to Presbyterianism, in the Middle and Western States.\*

#### MINISTERIAL ASSOCIATIONS.

Besides councils composed of pastors and delegates of churches, Congregationalism has its associations, composed exclusively of ministers. These, like fixed councils, usually extend over a county, or a larger or smaller territory, if more convenient, and are designed to embrace all the ministers residing within their bounds. These bodies have no authority to take cognizance of the affairs of particular churches, and are never summoned for this pur-

pose, because they are exclusively clerical, and contain no representation of the Christian people. They are designed to promote the fellowship and mutual improvement of ministers, as well as consultation and concert among them for furthering the common interests of the churches. To them also is assigned the work of examining and licensing candidates for the gospel ministry. No one is admitted to preach, even as a candidate, in our churches, who can not show his certificate of approval and licensure by one of these bodies, or by the accredited authorities of sister denominations. Thus they guard the sacred office against unworthy intruders. Moreover, all ministers without charge, must belong to some association, unless in good standing in another denomination, and be able to show a certificate of good and regular standing in it, or they forfeit all character and standing as ministers, and will neither be recognized as such by the clergy, or employed by the churches. As means of preserving a sound and able ministry, these bodies are indispensable.

They also accomplish another object of high importance. They become a medium of union and communion between all Congregational churches. Councils include only a small circle of churches and ministers. And it is not the policy of Congregationalism to give a wider range to the agitations sometimes incident to the proceedings of ecclesiastical judicatories. Hence any organic union extending beyond small districts, is impossible, except through some union of associations. This is accomplished by means of a general association, composed of delegates from a considerable number of district associations, generally from all within a single state. This general association meets once a year. It is also attended by delegates from most other general associations in the country, and from

\* It may be a wise precaution, to state, that the conductors of the New Englander are not unanimous in preferring standing councils or consociations to occasional councils. The dissentients from this opinion acknowledge, that the prevention of *ex parte* councils by the consociational system, is a point of great importance. But they are jealous of the gradual accumulation of power in the hands of permanent ecclesiastical courts. Should an argument, therefore, in direct variance with this appear in a future number of this work, we hope not to be thought inconsistent with ourselves.—Ed.

various evangelical bodies not Congregational. Thus an active communion and sympathy are preserved among all the churches. However remote and scattered, they are combined in visible union, through this union of their pastors. And it is a blessed union, held fast by love, "the bond of perfectness," not by manacles of arbitrary despotic power.

Thus we have fulfilled our pur-

pose of showing that Congregationalism is the polity which best meets the wants of collective as well as single churches, whereby the whole "body fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body, unto the edifying of itself IN LOVE." Eph. iv, 16.

### THE ROMAN CATHOLIC FAITH.

THE discussion of the leading tenets of the Roman Catholic church has been protracted far beyond our original intention. It would have been completed in the last number but for want of room. The topic which remains to be considered, forms the appropriate conclusion of the whole system of faith, but is particularly related to the doctrine of Justification. Our exhibition of that doctrine as held by the Romish church, would be incomplete without

#### THE DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY.

The Romanist regards the justified person not only as capable of fulfilling the moral law, and therefore under its authority, but as being required to fulfill it perfectly in order to attain to a state of final blessedness. He believes that he can even go beyond the requirements of the law, and perform works of supererogation, to be credited either to himself or others; while if he fails in any respect to keep the law, instead of trusting solely to the righteousness of Christ for justification, he must expiate his fault by personal suffering, or by the superabundant merits of another. His notion of justification being that of an inward transformation of the soul, in which man's agency is no less concerned than God's, he looks upon the at-

tainment of supreme felicity as impossible, till that transformation is made complete by the full obedience of the soul to all the requirements of the new law.

The Council of Trent declares, that "whoever shall say that a justified and so far perfect man is not to be held to the observance of the commands of God and the church, but only to the belief of them, i. e. the recognition of their authority, (as if the Gospel was a naked and absolute promise of eternal life, without the condition of keeping the commandments,) shall be accursed."

Dr. Moehler reasons on the subject in this manner. "It is absurd to talk of entering heaven while stained with sin, be it covered or uncovered. If then we leave this world with some stains of sin upon us, how shall we be purified from them? Shall it be by the mechanical deliverance from the body, of which the Protestant formulas speak so much? But it is not easy to discover how the *sinful spirit* is purged when the *body* is laid aside. It is only he who rejects the principle of moral freedom in sin, or who has been led astray by Gnostic or Manichean errors, who can approve such a doctrine. Or are we to imagine it to be some potent word of the Di-