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ARTICLE V.

THE PROPOSED POLITY OF THE UNITED
CHURCH.

BY WILLIAM ELEAZAR BARTON, D.D.

[The question of the church polity of the new organization was so important, and the opportunity for discussing the report of the Committee so brief, that it was regarded as entirely provisional and open to discussion. In view of this, Dr. Barton has been asked to state the problems, and shed such light upon them as he may obtain from the Congregational ministers in the vicinity of Chicago.—Ed.]

THE report of the Committee on Polity consumed more time, and was less carefully considered, than either of the other reports; but, taken as a whole, it is good. The fundamental principles which it enunciates at the outset are those on which not only these three but other denominations may unite; and the plan that follows is comprehensive and flexible.

There are, however, certain infelicities, and these, which the Council did not take time to consider, must now be considered by the churches.

First, as to the constitution of the National Conference. It is provided that this shall be determined by the annual conferences in a manner prescribed. The district conferences each nominate two persons,—one lay, the other clerical,—and from these nominations as a whole the annual conferences elect one delegate for each ten thousand members. The annual conferences correspond in a general way to the Congregational state associations. The right of direct representation of the churches through their local associations or conferences is reduced to the right of nomination.

But the state body also elects, without nomination from below, one delegate for each ten thousand members; and, where there are churches not in local conferences, the state body elects for these churches according to its own methods. Thus the state body controls, at the outset, a slight majority of all delegates, and elects the rest out of twice as many nominations. Over this state body presides the superintendent, who is also the chairman of the committee of pastoral supply. Why is so much of power within the state lodged so near the top of the system? Why may not the churches elect the large majority of delegates to the national conference through the body closest to the local church, and the smallest unit, with a sufficient membership to afford a basis of representation?

Here is wholly needless invitation to ring-rule. If Congregationalists accept it without effort to modify it, the result will be a wide departure from their past; and it will perpetuate some things which the United Brethren have been seeking to escape.

It is wise that there should be more delegates at large than the present Congregational system permits. Perhaps a fourth or a third of the delegates should be elected by the state body. Then this body, having before it the lists of local delegates, can see that no important interest is overlooked. But if the annual or state conference chooses a third or even a fourth of the delegates to the national conference, that will be quite enough. The rest should be chosen by the churches in the representative bodies closest to them.

Again, the provision for the president of the national conference is one that should be studied with care. The Congregational National Council at Des Moines gave to its moderator a representative function between councils. This was opposed solely on the ground that it is forbidden by the constitution of

that body. The proposed enlargement of the powers of the president of the national conference cannot be opposed on that ground, for he will have whatever constitutional prerogatives the adjourned council shall give to his office.

First of all, he is to be elected every three or four years, according as the national body shall be a triennial or quadrennial. And he is to give his entire time to the duties of that office. Of course he will expect reëlection. No man fit for that position, and of suitable age and standing, can be asked to give up a most influential pastorate with the expectation of walking the plank after four or three years. It will be, as Bishop Weakley said at Des Moines of the United Brethren bishops, that, though elected periodically, it was but just to say that most of them were reëlected as long as they lived and were efficient in service. It will take such a man four years to learn his task and cover his territory, and it will be folly to let him go just after he has begun to do his best. It is an episcopate, rather it is an arch-episcopate, with a prospect of life service.

This is a much higher officer than the United Brethren have or want. A motion was made at their last general conference to strike the word "bishop" from their discipline. Certainly the body of them do not want any higher ecclesiastic than they now have. This new officer is a concession to the Congregationalists, that they may preserve their moderatorship with becoming dignity.

But when the Congregationalists adopted the by-law which is appealed to in support of the moderator's representative function, they did it avowedly, and in defiance of a request of the provisional committee for a different arrangement, for the express purpose of making it impossible that any one should assume representative power between sessions of the council. Did they want, or do they want, a "president who shall pre-

side over the national conference and hold office until the next annual meeting”?

If they want such a man to resign his pastorate and give his life to this work, what is to be his work other than presiding? He is to “give his whole time to the work of the united churches, and annually, in connection with one representative from each department of church work, he is to plan for the work of the church.” These “departments of church work” are presumably the missionary and educational institutions of the churches. A most useful office he might perform in the coördination of their work, if we think well to delegate to him so much of power. The difficulty is that suggested in a recent address which the writer heard by Speaker Cannon. He said that, beyond a doubt, a monarchy was the simplest form of government, most readily adjusted, and free from grave perils of a democracy. The only trouble with it, he said, was that he knew only one man whom it would be safe to trust with so much of power; and he added, “And I am growing old.”

This is a simple and consistent system. But if the Pilgrims had wanted a system of this kind, they could have saved their passage money. There was a president in England who gave his whole time to the work, and annually, with his bishops and other dignitaries, planned for the work of the church. The name of that gentleman at the time of the great Puritan exodus was Mr. Laud. The experience of the church has been that men will use about all the power which is within their reach.

If the Congregationalists are ready for any such system, it is because they do not understand it. And the polity of the united church would be complete without it. The Methodist Episcopal Church has no such officer. Even the Episcopal Church has not yet gone that length. If the new system evolves a degree of centralization that makes it expedient, it can

be added later. But, for the present, why not drop from that section the words "he also shall give his whole time to the work of the united churches"? It may come to that later, and we may all be glad of it: but let the wisdom of experience bring us to the necessity, and let us not leap into it as an experiment for which there is no demand, and which it would be very difficult to recall.

And why should he hold conferences with *one* representative from each department of church work? Why not leave the ratio of representation in these conferences to be determined by experience? If the section were to read as suggested below, it would obviate the more serious objections.

Such a plan would give to the president all necessary dignity and sufficient influence. He might be an eminent layman who could give time to the work; or he might be a distinguished pastor whose church would gladly make the contribution of his services for so much of his time as should be needed for the work of the church at large. Or he might already be a pastor at large, as Dr. Quint was at the time when he was chosen moderator of the national council; and, if so, he could accept the office, and give the larger space of time, without the implied obligation to reëlect, and the necessity of creating duties, when an official's whole time is contracted for, and paid for, by the church at large. It would save perhaps fifteen thousand dollars a year, and might very possibly save us some serious embarrassments which no one just now is in the frame of mind to predict.

The Chicago Ministers' Union, composed of the Congregational pastors of Chicago and vicinity, after carefully considering these matters, instructed its five members who had been delegates to the Dayton Council to consider the report, and come back in two weeks with recommendations. This was

done, and the matter was reviewed with great care. After careful consideration the committee proposed certain changes in essential harmony with the foregoing suggestions. Ample time will be given to discussion before final action is taken, and the proposed changes may undergo slight modification. If this and other representative bodies do the same, there is no doubt that the Committee on Polity will give the requests careful consideration before the adjourned meeting of the Council. The Chicago Committee's report is as follows:—

"1. We recommend for the approval of our churches the report of the Committee on Vested Interests, together with the action of the Council thereon.

"2. We recommend the approval of the report of the Committee on Creed, with the addition of the following words to article 6: 'In promoting the welfare of all toilers on land and sea, and in furthering the unity and peace of the world.'

"3. We recommend the approval by our churches and associations of the report of the Committee on Polity with certain amendments, so that it shall read as follows:—

"1. PRINCIPLES.

"(a) The unit of our fellowship is the local church, and the character of our fellowship is that of a representative democracy.

"(b) Our coordinate principles are freedom and fellowship, a freedom which leaves each local church free in its separate affairs, a fellowship which unites all the churches for mutual care and co-operant action.

"2. THE VARIOUS CONFERENCES.

"(a) The local churches shall be left free to conduct their worship and business in their own manner.

"(b) It is recommended that so far as may be the churches in separate districts be united in district conferences, which shall provide for fellowship and care of the churches connected with them.

"Each church may elect to the district conference at least one delegate beside its pastor. Any conference may increase at its discretion the lay representation from the local churches. The delegates, together with ministerial members, shall constitute the district conference. Ministerial members other than pastors shall be members of some district conference; and no minister shall be a member of more than one conference at one time.

"(c) It is recommended that there be constituted state associa-

tions of the ministers and representatives elected from churches and pastoral charges; and that their territory limits be fixed by a commission of the representatives of the three bodies in the state.

"(d) It is recommended that the national council be constituted after the following manner:—

"Each district conference shall elect one delegate to the national council for each four thousand members or major fraction within its bounds thereof; provided, that each conference shall have at least one delegate.

"And each state association shall elect one delegate for each ten thousand members or major fraction thereof within its bounds; provided, that each state association shall have at least one delegate.

"These delegates from the district conferences and from the state associations shall constitute the national council,

"We further recommend that the delegates be distributed as equally as possible between the clerical and lay delegates.

"It shall be in the power of the national council to change the ratio of representation according as necessity may require.

"3. OFFICERS AND THEIR DUTIES.

"(a) In the national council there shall be elected a president who shall preside over this body and hold office until the next national meeting; and annually, in connection with representatives from each department of church work, he shall hold meetings to plan for the work of the church.

"(b) In each state association there shall be elected a committee to aid in keeping the churches supplied with pastors, and each state association shall determine for itself the mode of supplying the churches with pastors.

"(c) In each state association there shall be elected one or more superintendents who shall preside over the meetings of the committee of ministerial supply, and shall give their whole time to the general work of the church within the bounds of their respective state associations.

"4. MINISTERIAL STANDING.

"(a) All ministers in good standing in any of the denominations represented in this union shall be ministers of this body. All licentiates shall retain their standing for the period of their licensure.

"All ministers under suspension shall look for relief from their disabilities to the body that imposed the restrictions. This shall hold until new rules are formulated for licensure, ordination and ministerial standing.

"(b) Ministerial standing shall be in the district conferences, where such conferences exist, otherwise in the state association."