

only which are founded on the authority of God, and derived from Scripture, and are, therefore, altogether Divine. Let us take, for example, the bending of the knee which is made in public prayer. It is asked whether this is a human tradition, which any one is at liberty to repudiate or reject? I say that it is human, and that at the same time it is Divine. It is of God, inasmuch as it is a part of that decency, the care and observance of which is recommended by the Apostles; and it is of men, inasmuch as it especially determines what was indicated in general, rather than expounded. From this one example, we may judge what is to be thought of the whole class, viz., that the whole sum of righteousness, and all the parts of Divine worship, and everything necessary to salvation, the Lord has faithfully comprehended and clearly unfolded in His oracles, so that in them He alone is the only Master to be heard. But as in external discipline and ceremonies He has not been pleased to prescribe every particular that we ought to observe (He foresaw that this depended on the nature of the times, and that one form would not suit all ages), in them we must have recourse to the general rules which He has given, employing them to test whatever the necessity of the Church may require to be enjoined for order and decency."

The notion of Calvin and our Confession of Faith, in other words, is briefly this: In public worship, indeed in all commanded external actions, there are two elements—a fixed and a variable. The fixed element, involving the essence of the thing, is beyond the discretion of the Church. The variable, involving only the *circumstances* of the action, its separable accidents, may be changed, modified, or altered, according to the exigencies of the case. The rules of social intercourse and of grave assemblies in different countries vary. The Church accommodates her arrangements so as not to revolt the public sense of propriety. Where people recline at their meals, she would administer the Lord's Supper to communicants in a reclining attitude. Where they sit, she would change the mode.

Dr. Cunningham, the noble principal of the Free Church College at Edinburgh, and one of the first divines of Europe, has not scrupled, amid the light of the nineteenth century, to teach the same doctrine:

"Of the views generally held by the Reformers on the subject of

the organization of the Church, there are two which have been always very offensive to men of a loose and latitudinarian tendency, viz., the alleged unlawfulness of introducing into the worship and government of the Church anything which is not positively warranted by Scripture, and the permanent, binding obligation of a particular form of church-government. The second of these principles may be regarded, in one aspect of it, as comprehended in the first. But it may be proper to make a few observations upon them separately, in the order in which they have now been stated.

“The Lutheran and Anglican sections of the Reformers held a somewhat looser view upon these subjects than was approved of by Calvin. They generally held that the Church might warrantably introduce innovations into its government and worship, which might seem fitted to be useful, provided it could not be shown that there was anything in Scripture which expressly prohibited or discounted them, thus laying the *onus probandi*, in so far as Scripture is concerned, upon those who opposed the introduction of innovations. The Calvinistic section of the Reformers, following their great master, adopted a stricter rule, and were of opinion that there were sufficiently plain indications in Scripture itself, that it was Christ’s mind and will that nothing should be introduced into the government and worship of the Church, unless a positive warrant for it could be found in Scripture. This principle was adopted and acted upon by the English Puritans and the Scottish Presbyterians; and we are persuaded that it is the only true and safe principle applicable to this matter.

“The principle is, in a sense, a very wide and sweeping one. But it is purely prohibitory or exclusive; and the practical effect of it, if it were fully carried out, would just be to leave the Church in the condition in which it was left by the Apostles, in so far as we have any means of information; a result, surely, which need not be very alarming, except to those who think that they themselves have very superior powers for improving and adorning the Church by their inventions. The principle ought to be understood in a common-sense way, and we ought to be satisfied with reasonable evidence of its truth. Those who dislike this principle, from whatever cause, usually try to run us into difficulties by putting a very stringent construction upon it, and thereby giving it an appearance of absurdity, or by demanding an unreasonable amount of evidence to establish it. The principle must be interpreted and explained in the exercise of common sense. One obvious modification of it is suggested in the first chapter of the Westminster Confession, where it is acknowledged ‘that there are some circumstances, concerning the worship of God and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be

ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.' But even this distinction between things and circumstances cannot always be applied very certainly; that is, cases have occurred in which there might be room for a difference of opinion, whether a proposed regulation or arrangement was a distinct thing in the way of innovation, or merely a circumstance attaching to an authorized thing, and requiring to be regulated. Difficulties and differences of opinions may arise about details, even when sound judgment and good sense are brought to bear upon the interpretation and application of the principles; but this affords no ground for denying or doubting the truth or soundness of the principle itself."¹

These citations are sufficient to show that the doctrine which we advocated in the General Assembly, touching the power and discretion of the Church, so far from being "a peculiar theory of Presbyterianism," is the doctrine of our Standards, the doctrine of the prince of the Reformers, and the doctrine of the soundest exponents of Presbyterianism across the water. If we have erred, we have no reason to be ashamed of our company.

Now, what is the counter doctrine of Dr. Hodge? He holds that, beyond the positive injunctions of Scripture, the Church has a wide discretion, determined only by its positive prohibitions; that the rules of Scripture are general and regulative, and not constitutive and prescriptive; that, consequently, the Church is not restricted to any one mode of organization, but may change her forms according to the exigencies of times and circumstances. "There are fixed laws assigned by God, according to which all healthful and normal development of the body is regulated. So it is with regard to the Church. There are fixed laws in the Bible, according to which all healthful development and action of the external Church are determined. But, as within the limits of the laws which control the development of the human body there is endless diversity among different races, adapting them to different climes and modes of living, so also in the Church. It is not tied down to one particular

¹ The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation, pp. 31, 32.

BOARDS AND PRESBYTERIANISM.

251

mode of organization and action, at all times and under all circumstances.”¹ So long as the Church keeps within the limits of these general laws, she may create new offices, erect new courts, and ordain new organs and organizations, at pleasure. The limit of her discretion is the principle of non-contradiction to Scripture. She is not bound to produce a warrant—a “thus saith the Lord,” for all she does. Nay, more, she has a right to delegate her powers. She is not obliged to exercise them “through officers and organs prescribed in the Scriptures.” She is competent, if she chooses, to appoint a vicar; the opposite doctrine being an element of a “peculiar theory of Presbyterianism.” These are astounding pretensions; they carry in their bosoms the deadly tyranny of Prelacy and Popery. Dr. Hodge maintains the very same principles—only a little more extravagantly—which were maintained by Hooker, in the third book of the Ecclesiastical Polity; and he parades the same objections against us which Hooker paraded against the Puritans of his day. We want the reader distinctly to apprehend the point at issue. It is not, as Dr. Hodge represents it, whether the Church has *any* discretion—that is conceded on both sides—but, What is the measure or limit of that discretion? We hold it to be the *circumstances* connected with commanded duties, and hence affirm that whatever is not enjoined is prohibited. He holds that it pertains to actions themselves, and maintains that whatever is not prohibited is lawful. We make the Church a ministerial agent, he a confidential agent, of God. We hold that her organization is given; he holds that her organization is developed. He holds that any system which shall realize the parity of the clergy, the rights of the people, and the unity of the Church, is a *jure divino* government; we hold that, if these principles are realized in any other way except through Presbyters and Presbyteries, the government is not scriptural. It is not our purpose to argue the question

¹ Princeton Review for July, 1860, p. 552, and Appendix B to this volume, p. 620.