

THE BOARDS OF THE CHURCH.

by the editor of *The Charleston Observer*,

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The leading article in the last Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine is entitled, "A calm discussion of the lawfulness, scripturalness, and expediency of the Ecclesiastical Boards," in which the writer undertakes to show, 1st, That the system in its essential principles is directly subversive of the Constitution of the Church; 2dly, That it is unknown to the Word of God; and 3dly, That it is unsupported by any arguments of expediency or necessity, which can commend it to the understanding of a Christian man.

This is not the first article which has appeared in this Magazine in opposition to the system. As the source of this opposition is entitled to the highest respect, the question will have to be met and discussed—and perhaps the sooner it is done the better, that if the system be, as it is here represented, the proper remedy may be applied in an early state of its operations. It is not our present design to enter into the merits of the question, but to suggest some thoughts which have occurred to our own minds upon the perusal of the article.

1. The argument may be considered as defective, because it assumes the very point in dispute. It takes for granted that the "system of Boards gives us a set of officers and a set of ecclesiastical courts entirely different from those of our Constitution." That "the Boards themselves are, to all intents and purposes, ecclesiastical courts, exercising a power and jurisdiction in the Church of God in direct and unavoidable collision with the authority of the courts acknowledged by our standards." There can be no question that Boards may be so constituted as to be liable to this imputation. And this was in fact the leading objection to the system of Voluntary Societies; which exercised authority and jurisdiction in the Church independent of control. Now if it can be shown that our Boards are in fact founded upon the same principle—or that they exercise the same authority—or that they are subject to the same abuses—there would be no necessity of offering another remark. But are they Ecclesiastical Courts? Are they so in the manner in which they are constituted? In the functions of their office? In the authority which they exercise? In the limitation of their power? Or in any other appropriate sense in which the term is used? The Boards are indeed nothing more than the agents of the Church, to whom specific duties are entrusted, and who are responsible to the appointing power for the manner in which these duties are discharged. They cannot license; they cannot ordain; they have no spiritual dominion whatever; they have no authority to legislate for the Church—and the tenure by which they hold their office is limited both as to time and to powers. They are appointed for no other purpose than to do what the Church has already resolved upon doing—to execute the plans of the Church—to carry out her objects—a work which our ecclesiastical bodies cannot accomplish in the limited time which is allowed for their meeting—so that our Ecclesiastical Courts must either hold a perpetual session, or leave something to be transacted by their agents ad interim. As an illustration, select for instance the Board of Domestic Missions. Now if this Board is an Ecclesiastical Court, "promoted to a level with Sessions, Presbyteries and Synods," it could perform some of the functions peculiar to these Judicatories. But does it? Can it? Can it license? Can it ordain? Can it even locate a Missionary within the bounds of any Presbytery without its consent? Are not all its acts in subserviency to the known and expressed will of the Judicatory itself, from whom its

appointment is received, and to whom it is directly responsible?—The Boards of the Church, are, therefore, nothing more than her Committees or Agents appointed for a specific object, with specific trusts—and with no delegated co-ordinate power—and indeed with no power beyond what is absolutely necessary for the duties with which they are entrusted.

But as Agents may transcend their instructions, it is highly proper that all their transactions should be subjected to a rigid scrutiny ; and this is one of the duties of the Ecclesiastical Courts from whom they receive their appointment. Unless, therefore, the Church becomes negligent, and remiss, and corrupt, her agents, the Boards, will be always restrained within such limits as to excite no apprehension or alarm. It is not our purpose to show in what points the present organization of our Boards is defective. It is possible that the powers with which they are invested are more extensive than they should be.—There may be other evils incidental to the system which require a remedy. But it seems to us that the system will have to be continued in fact, if not in form ; or we shall have to abandon, at least in part, the great work for which these Boards are constituted. No one will dispute that it is competent to a Presbytery, or to a Synod, or to the General Assembly, to do the work which is entrusted to the Board with no such agency. And hence it becomes a question of expediency, whether such agents should be dispensed with, or whether they should continue to be employed. To this question we shall advert before we close our remarks.

2. The argument from Scripture, it strikes us, is defective, because nothing is adduced from the Word of God in opposition to the system. And yet it can be conclusively shown from Scripture that agents were employed in collecting and disbursing the bounty of the Church—to do the very work which is committed to our Boards. Were there any invasion of the rights and authority of the Church as founded on the Apostolic model—any new order of men introduced with authority to legislate or exercise dominion—any new court established with co-ordinate jurisdiction which has not the express or implied sanction of the Word of God, in the system of Ecclesiastical Boards, then, and in that case, the objection to them from this source would be valid, and they should be abandoned at once as unscriptural. But we have yet to learn that the Scriptures either expressly or impliedly prohibits the Church from the employment of Agents for the performance of such duties as are entrusted to our Boards. An individual, whether a member of the Church or not, can educate a young man for the Ministry. But he can do no more. He cannot license. He cannot ordain him. He can do as much in this respect as the Board of the Church. An individual may offer to sustain a Missionary in a selected portion of the domestic field ; but the Missionary cannot orderly labor there without the consent of the Presbytery in which this field is included.—And can the Board do more than an individual? Has the Board any jurisdiction which an individual has not? A Church Session, a Presbytery, or a Synod, may, if it chooses, establish a Mission among the heathen and sustain it. But the Board can do no such thing any more than an individual can. Where then is the unscriptural power with which it is invested? The Missionaries, until they form organizations of their own, are subject each one to his own Presbytery. And the Presbyteries are wanting in their duty, and the Missionaries fail in theirs, if the connection is not recognized by correspondence between them, and by every other means by which ministerial fellowship is preserved and cultivated. The true responsibility of Foreign Missionaries is to their Presbyteries, and only to the Boards as the Agents of the Presbyteries. As the Board cannot ordain, so neither can it discipline or depose. Nor can it do any other act which pertains to the proper spiritual functions of an Ecclesiastical Court. The silence of Scripture is therefore no argument against them.

3. The article in question insists that Presbyteries, Synods, and the General Assembly, should have their Deacons to attend to their pecuniary matters—that these might be the collecting agents of the Church, and attend to the transmission of funds to foreign parts. But what would these Deacons be but a Board, so far as one part of their duty is concerned.—Deacons are permanent officers. We should then have a permanent Board. And yet it strikes us that there would be a manifest defect in the system. Deacons in a Church cannot distribute the bounty of the Church, but by order of the Governing Judicatory.—The Deacons of the Assembly would have to receive from the Assembly an express warrant for every farthing they are to disburse. Or if, in any instance, discretionary power were given them, and discretionary power must be given them in the recess of the Judicatory, they might exercise it precisely as the Boards do. There is not a whit more security, that their discretionary power will be used with greater fidelity, than if entrusted to Boards.

From all the lights we can collect upon the subject, we cannot see how the Church can carry on, with efficiency, her operations, especially those which are connected with foreign Missions, without a Board. Call it a Board, or a Committee, or a bench of Deacons, or what you will—the Church must have her agents to do in the detail, what she cannot do in the session of her Judicatories, unless this session is a perpetual one. We can see no remedy in the principles advocated in the article for the system of Boards in the present state of the Church, and in the present state of our Mission, but a General Assembly which shall hold its sessions sufficiently long to enter into all the details of the Missionary work, and to determine authoritatively upon the minutest items of business connected with it. But would the Churches regard this as expedient? Would more light be collected, a better system organized—more efficiency and zeal imparted, and more security afforded, than through the present organization of Boards. We readily grant that if every Church, and every Presbytery, and every Synod, would do its duty, agents and Boards would be of very little use. But we have to take things as they are—not as they should be—and to supply the lack of service in one part, by the liberality of another.—What we need as a Church is a far deeper sense of our obligation to let our light shine before the world. The defect is not in the system, but in the heart.—Were our Boards all annihilated, what evidence have we that the cause of Christ at home and abroad would advance with greater rapidity and strength, than it now does? Are these the main obstacles in the way to the furtherance of the Gospel? Are these the hindrances to liberality in the Church—to fidelity and zeal on the part of ministers and people—to fervent and importunate prayer for the outpouring of the spirit, and for the enlargement and beauty of Zion?—We think not. Then what is? Let every member of the Church inquire at his own heart, and listen attentively to what the Spirit of God teaches for an answer.