

For the Christian Observer.

THE SOURCE OF CHURCH POWER.

The Rev. R. K. Smoot on "Powers of the Church and Methods of Beneficence."

Messrs. Editors: A section of Rev. Mr. Smoot's article in the last number of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, under the above heading, contains a censure upon those who object to our General Assembly's plan of sustentation. As a member of the party offending, permit me to offer a hand in self-defence.

It seems to me, gentlemen, that what the wise reviewer calls independency and compares to the chills, may, after all, be the very genius of Presbyterianism itself, resisting the inroads of new measures which tend to the destruction of its life, that the sustentation scheme may be the disease, and opposition to it the normal action of the body struggling for self-preservation. If this or any other method of beneficence in operation in our Church, is founded upon Mr. Smoot's theory of Church power, I cannot help thinking the sooner it is expelled the better for Presbyterianism. There is reason to fear Mr. Smoot's aversion to being charged with independency, has driven him to the other, and, in the view of some, more to be dreaded extreme.

Mr. Smoot says, and evidently means it, for the italics are his own, "We hold that Presbytery is the original source of power in the Church courts." My belief is that Presbytery is only a subject of Church power, and that no subject of Church power derives its power from another, but each from the great Head. To instance, I believe that the power of the parochial Presbytery is as directly and as much from God as that of the General Assembly.

As to the General Assembly, Mr. Smoot holds that "the source of its power is the divinely inspired word of God," and that it "has vested in it all the powers of the whole Church in all matters pertaining to its general welfare, which any Presbytery has over its own constituent elements." I am compelled to inform Mr. Smoot that I do not believe the General Assembly has vested in it all the powers of the whole Church in reference to any matter whatever. It always has its own specific powers and no other. The powers of the Church are given to the membership, to the officers, to the courts; and those given to the members are distinct from those given to the officers, those to the officers from those given to the courts, and those given to one court from those given to another. To instance, the General Assembly has power to require a Synod to do its duty, but no power while the Synod exists to assume the discharge of its functions. According to the theory of Presbyterianism I have learned, each court of the Church has functions of its own, which it is bound to discharge, and which are inalienable.

Now, one of my objections to the sustentation scheme adopted by the Assembly which met in Memphis, is that it encroaches upon the constitutional functions of the congregation and of the classical Presbytery. This objection may be both illustrated and enforced by quoting the words of the lamented Thornwell:

"The question upon whom the obligation to support the ministry devolves, is answered by our constitution in the form which it prescribes for the prosecution of a call, and in the arrangement which it makes for planting the gospel in vacant and destitute parts. The doctrine is obviously implied that this obligation rests not upon the Church as one and the Church as a whole, but upon the party, whoever it may be, that calls a minister to his work. If a church calls him as a pastor, that church promises to support him; first, in the call, and afterward when the pastoral relation is instituted. If a Presbytery calls him as an evangelist to its vacant and destitute fields, that Presbytery engages to support him. And if the General Assembly calls him to plant churches where the name of Christ is not known, the General Assembly must support him. This last is the only case in which the obligation rests upon the Church as one and the Church as a whole, and then it is only because the Church as one and the Church as a whole is the party that immediately employs him in his work."

With Dr. Thornwell, we submit:

"Whether it is not as much the duty of the Church as one and the Church as a whole to select and appoint ministers as it is to support them; whether the right of election and the right of patron are not inseparable; and if the people delegate one to a central committee, we would further enquire how long they are likely to retain the other." See *Collected Writings*, Vol. iv., pp. 484, 486. This, however, is not the only ground of objection. The unnecessary centralization of money and appointing power is the most prolific source of corruption which can exist in any government. Hence, we desire that Sessions and Presbyteries and Synods do their own work, and have their own treasurers; and that central committees should be confined to the oversight of work not properly belonging to any one of the lower courts. This distrust is not directed against this or that individual, but against human nature as it is in the visible Church. I desire conformity to our constitution, because it is our constitution, and because such conformity is prudent.

I am, Messrs. Editors, yours truly,

S. K. Y.