

## CHAPTER XVI.

### *THE BOARD QUESTION.*

DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE BOARDS OF THE CHURCH.—RISES OUT OF THE PREVIOUS CONTROVERSY.—DEBATE IN SYNOD.—INCIDENT IN THE SAME.—FIRST WRITTEN ATTACK ON THE BOARDS.—ARTICLE ON APOCRYPHA.—SECOND ARTICLE ON THE BOARDS.—LETTERS ON THE SAME SUBJECT.

IT has been stated, in a preceding chapter, that most of the discussions in which Dr. Thornwell was engaged, were a sort of remainder from the original controversy by which the Church was rent, in 1837-'8. The first that emerged into view was the discussion about Boards. During the period when the Church was brought under a species of vassalage to Congregationalism, the great National Societies, which usurped her functions, conducted their operations by the agency of Boards. The Church had become familiar with that mode of action; and when the effectual blow was struck for her emancipation, this was supposed to be fully accomplished, when these national organizations were disowned. The great principle upon which the argument turned, that the Church, in her organized form, must do her own work, was supposed to be satisfied, when Boards exactly analogous were established by the Church herself, as the agents by whom her will was to be carried out. It could not be long, however, before it was perceived that the above-named cardinal principle must be extended further: that a Board, consisting of many members, distributed over a large territory, to whom her evangelistic functions were remitted, did not satisfy the idea of the Church acting in her own capacity, and under the rules which the Consti-

tution prescribed for her guidance. Dr. Thornwell was one of those who planted themselves firmly against their continuance in the Church. It is not the business of the biographer to discuss his views, but only to afford him the opportunity of presenting them. It may be remarked, however, that he was not opposed to combined or united action on the part of the Church, but only insisted that the central agency should be simply executive: the mere instrument by which the Assembly acts, and not an agent standing in the place of the Assembly, and acting for it. The first occasion on which he publicly developed his views was at the meeting of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia; where a stiff debate was held upon the principles involved, and in which the Rev. Thomas Smyth, D. D., of Charleston, S. C., was his chief antagonist. An incident is related of this debate, so characteristic of the man, that it deserves to be recorded. In the heat of the discussion, he suffered himself to be borne beyond the bounds of strict propriety. The old spirit of invective and sarcasm, which later years so perfectly subdued, manifested itself in expressions a little too scornful of his opponent, and the impression was not pleasant upon the house. It so happened that his speech closed exactly at the hour of recess at noon, and there was no opportunity for rejoinder. Immediately upon re-assembling, he arose and apologised in handsome terms for the discourtesy into which he had been betrayed, and declared his profound esteem for the learning, ability, and piety of his adversary. It was done so spontaneously, and with such evident sincerity, that criticism was completely disarmed; and there was a universal feeling of admiration for the magnanimity and courage which could so fully redeem a fault.

This discussion is thus referred to in the first of many letters it will be our pleasure to transcribe, addressed to Dr. R. J. Breckinridge, with whom he was thoroughly associated in the discussion of all these Church questions:

“COLUMBIA, *December 17, 1840.*

“REV. AND DEAR SIR : Above you have a draft on the Commercial Bank of Pennsylvania for seventy dollars. I endeavoured to procure one on some of the banks of Baltimore, but could not succeed. You will please apply the money to the Evangelical church at Lyons, and the Theological Seminary at Geneva. I read to my people the correspondence between your church and that of Lyons, and between yourself and J. H. Merle d’Aubigne; and without any other solicitation than what is contained in your Magazine, they made up among themselves the amount forwarded. It is but a pittance, but still it is a free-will offering. You may give half to the church and half to the Seminary.

You will probably hear exaggerated accounts of the discussion in our Synod on the subject of Boards and Agencies. For your February number, I intend to send you a document which I have carefully prepared upon this subject, and which has received the sanction of a very respectable minority among us. I would have sent it to you before; but affliction in my family, combined with other circumstances which it is useless to mention, prevented me from complying with the promise which I made in Philadelphia

“Your sincere friend and Christian brother,  
J. H. THORNWELL.”

This was followed, a month later, with a fuller exposition of his views on the same subject, in a letter addressed also to Dr. Breckinridge:

“COLUMBIA, *January 27, 1841.*

“REV. AND DEAR SIR : I have detained my manuscript in my hands much longer than I had any idea of doing, when I wrote to you before. My object in the delay has been to copy it; but day after day has passed over, and I have been so constantly occupied that I have had no time for the drudgery of re-writing it. I send it to you, therefore, with all the imperfections of a first draft. It was written before the meeting of our Synod, with the view of presenting it to that body, and in their name sending it as a memorial to the Assembly. This, however, was not done. I submitted the manuscript to a few members of Synod, who cordially concurred in its leading statements. My object in publishing it is not to gain a point, but to elicit discussion. I believe that the Boards will eventually prove our masters, unless they are crushed in their infancy. They are founded upon a radical misconception of the true nature and extent of ecclesiastical power; and they can only be defended, by running into the principle against which the Reformers protested, and for which the Oxford divines are now zealously contending. This view of the subject ought to have been enlarged on more fully than has been done in the article, because the

principle involved in it is of vital importance; but I thought it better to reserve a full discussion of it for some subsequent article.

“There is a fact connected with the influence of the Boards that speaks volumes against them. A few men in the Church have presumed to question the wisdom of their organization. These men are met with a universal cry of denunciation from all parts of the land. If, in their infancy, they (the Boards) can thus brow-beat discussion, what may we not expect from them in the maturity of manhood ?

“It is not to be disguised, that our Church is becoming deplorably secular. She has degenerated from a spiritual body into a mere petty corporation. When we meet in our ecclesiastical courts, instead of attending to the spiritual interests of God’s kingdom, we scarcely do anything more than examine and audit accounts, and devise ways and means for raising money. We are for doing God’s work by human wisdom and human policy; and what renders the evil still more alarming, is that so few are awake to the real state of- the case. Your Magazine is the only paper in the Church that can be called a faithful witness for the truth. I do sincerely and heartily thank God for the large measure of grace which He has bestowed upon *you*. I regard the principles which you advocate of so much importance, that I could make any sacrifice of comfort or of means, consistent with other obligations, to aid and support you.

“I rejoice that you remember me and my poor labours in your prayers. My field of labour in the College is arduous and trying; but God has given me the ascendancy among the students. I have an interesting prayer-meeting and a Bible-class. My sermons on Sunday are very seriously listened to; and I have succeeded in awaking a strong interest in the evidences of our religion.

“I have formed the plan of publishing an edition of ‘Butler’s An alogy,’ with an analysis of each chapter, a general view of the whole argument, and a special consideration of the glaring defects in the statement of Christian doctrine, with which the book abounds. It is a subject on which I have spent much patient thought, and on which I feel somewhat prepared to write. What think you of the scheme ? If you should favour it, any suggestions from you would be gratefully received. At some future day—I shall not venture to fix the time—you may expect an article from me on Natural Theology. I have been carefully collecting materials on the subject, and shall embody them in a review of ‘Paley’s Theology,’ Bell and Brougham’s edition.

“In regard to the article on Boards,\* I give you leave to abridge, amend, correct, wherever you deem it necessary. If you can conveniently do so, I would be glad to have you return the manuscript, as I have no copy of it.

“Sincerely yours,

J. H. THORNWELL.”

\* This article appeared in the Baltimore *Literary and Religious Magazine*, in 1841. It will be found in the fourth volume of his collected writings.

A little earlier than this, his opinions on this and kindred topics are given in a letter addressed to the Rev. John Douglas, one of his bosom friends through life :

“COLUMBIA, *August 4, 1840.*

“MY DEAR BROTHER : I received your letter of inquiry, warning, and rebuke, a few days ago ; and was not a little amused at the apprehensions which you expressed in relation to the *rectitude* (I use the word in its primitive acceptation) of my course. If I were disposed at this time, I might break a lance with you on the great principle which you have assumed, as axiomatic in relation to the use of reason in matters of religious worship. I shall just refer you to the second question in the “Shorter Catechism,” with its answer, for the *only* rule of *practice* as well as faith ; and the answers to the one hundred and eighth and the one hundred and ninth questions of the “Larger Catechism,” for the true ground on which all the inventions of man, no matter how reasonable, are to be disapproved, detested, and opposed. And if I am singular, at the present day, in maintaining that the Bible is our *only* rule, and that where it is silent we have no right to speak, I have the consolation of knowing, that I stand on the same ground which was occupied by Calvin, Chillingworth, Owen, and the venerable Assembly of Divines at Westminster. I would particularly direct your attention to ‘Calvin’s Institutes,’ Book IV, chapters 8th, 9th, 10th, and 11th.

“I am satisfied that there is a dangerous departure, in the present age of bustle, activity, and vain-glorious enterprise, from the simplicity of the institutions which Christ has established for the legitimate action of the Church. He has appointed one set of instrumentalities, and ordained one kind of agency in His kingdom; but we have made void His commandments, in order to establish our own inventions. I believe that the entire system of voluntary Societies and ecclesiastical Boards, for religious purposes, is fundamentally wrong. The Church, as organized by her Head, is competent to do all that He requires of her. He has furnished her with the necessary apparatus of means, officers, and institutions, in Sessions, Presbyteries, Elders, Pastors, and Evangelists. Let us take Presbyterianism as we have it described in our Form of Government, and let us carry it out in its true spirit, and we shall have no use for the sore evil of incorporated Boards, vested funds, and traveling agencies. If it is wrong to hold these principles, it was certainly wrong to lay down such a form for the government of the Church ; and if we do not intend to execute the form, let us cease requiring our ministers to assent to it. Such is a skeleton of my views. I should like to go into a full investigation of the subject with you, but a single letter would hardly give room for an introduction.

“In relation to Temperance Societies, I am accustomed to draw a distinction. I regard them as secular enterprises, for temporal good, having no connection whatever with the kingdom of Christ : a mere embalming

of the corpse to arrest the progress of putrefaction. In this light, I think it well that the potsherds of the earth should engage in them. They are of great service to society. Others regard them as really helps to the cause of Christ, instruments of building up His kingdom ; that is, as a *means* of *grace*, for the kingdom of Christ on earth consists in grace. In this sense, I oppose them, because they are not appointed by Christ. Their true position is among the institutions of civil society. There I cordially recommend and encourage them.

“Remember us kindly to Mrs. D., and let us have a full chat before you set me down as an Antinomian.

“Your friend and brother,

J. H. THORNWELL.”

The next contribution of his pen was destined to bring him more conspicuously before the public as a controversialist, and involved him in labours which he never anticipated. It was an article on the Apocrypha, written at Dr. Breckinridge’s request, and published in his Magazine in 1841. Being subsequently reprinted in a local paper in South Carolina, it drew forth a reply from Dr. Lynch, subsequently a Bishop of the Roman Catholic church in Charleston. Dr. Thornwell’s rejoinder expanded into a book, which was published in 1845, and entitled “Romanist Arguments Refuted.” They may all be found in the third volume of Dr. Thornwell’s “Collected Writings.” With this preliminary statement, the reader will readily understand the allusions in the correspondence which follows, opening with a letter to the Rev. Dr. Breckinridge :

“SOUTH CAROLINA COLLEGE, *March* 8, 1841.

“MY DEAR BROTHER : According to your request, I send a short article on the Canonical Authority of the Apocrypha. As I write a free and open hand, and the sheets are small, I do not suppose that it will fill more than two columns of such a paper as the *Visitor*. I have written under some disadvantage. I presume that it was your desire that I should keep my eye upon the article of the Priests, in one of the papers sent me. This I endeavoured to do, but I had to rely exclusively upon my recollection of its contents, as one of my servants destroyed the paper soon after I received it. Whether my article notices all that was important in their’s, I cannot say. I have noticed all that made sufficient impression upon my mind to be remembered. If what I have written meets your approbation, and will be of any sort of service to

you in this controversy, it is at your disposal. I sincerely hope that God may bring great good out of this unexpected movement in Baltimore.

“The destruction of the paper is my excuse for not verifying the quotations of the Priests for you. If you are at any expense in sending the numbers of the *Visitor*, containing this controversy, I would thank you to put down my name as a subscriber for *the year*. By the first opportunity, I wish to send for your ‘Papism in the Nineteenth Century in the United States.’

“Praying that God may guide you and bless you in all your ways, I remain,

“Your sincere friend and brother in Christ,

J. H. THORNWELL.”

Upon his return from Europe, and resumption of his duties in the College, the discussion on the subject of the Boards was revived. This was occasioned by a reply to his first article, from the pen of Dr. Smyth. The history will be developed in the correspondence that follows:

“SOUTH CAROLINA COLLEGE, *October 14, 1841.*

“MY DEAR BROTHER: Having recently returned home, I have been able to accomplish nothing yet. In fact, I have been threatened with fever every day since my return. I sent you Paxton’s tract, ‘Heading no Preaching,’ which I have had copied; how correctly, I cannot say. If you think it worth publishing, it is at your service. I presume that *Smyth* is the reviewer of my article on Boards. I shall soon notice his lucubrations. I have many things to say to you, but have not time now. May grace, mercy and peace be multiplied upon you.

“Your sincere friend,

J. H. T.”

To this Dr. Breckinridge replies:

“BALTIMORE, *November 12, 1841.*

“DEAR THORNWELL: After a long and painful absence, I returned to this city the last of October; and found here your favour of October 14, with the tract inclosed. I will print it in our January number. If you can, let us have something about your European trip. We and the public will be glad; when, and as you please. Your reply on the Boards, (which should cover the whole ground, nearly all which is *given up* in the long review of your article,) should be in time for our spring Presbyteries. By the way, there is a deep and wide feeling growing up in our Church; and there must be, and will be, a change in our mode of conducting benevolent operations. The review rather confirms me in my former opinions. The writer seems to consider the *brief and annual meetings* of the Assembly conclusive against its doing its work

personally. But besides the clear distinction between a small, standing, and responsible Committee, and a large, permanent, ill-constituted, and virtually irresponsible Board, what should forbid the Assembly itself, or a commission of it, to meet as often, by adjournment, as our Boards do? none of which meet oftener than monthly; one, at least (the Foreign one,) only yearly; and as fourteen commissioners, by our constitution, make an Assembly, (and, in point of fact, not so many as fourteen persons regularly attend our Boards,) the argument is for us, and not for the reviewer. Excuse this. God bless you.

“ In much haste and much esteem, yours ever,

R. J. BRECKINRIDGE.”

Three letters from Dr. Thornwell follow in quick succession, on the same subject, and addressed to Dr. Breckinridge:

“ SOUTH CAROLINA COLLEGE, *January 17, 1842.*

“MY DEAR BROTHER: I am sorry that my reply to Smyth’s review will not be ready for the next number of your Magazine. I shall commence writing it to-morrow, and shall easily finish it in a week ; so that you will receive it early next month. You may think me very slow in my motions ; but I have been waiting for some books which I purchased in Europe, and which I have been expecting every day. They have not yet arrived; and wind and tide are so uncertain, that I do not know when they will arrive. Some passages in the review have filled me with grief and amazement, and show but too plainly that the first principles of ecclesiastical polity are not clearly understood among us. The fundamental fallacy of the whole production, and of the system which it is designed to uphold, is that the Church, instead of being the *kingdom* of the Lord Jesus Christ, is really one of His counsellors and His *confidential* agent. This rotten principle is the basis of the whole fabric of discretionary power, and the multitude of inventions which have sprung from human prudence. But I have no idea of troubling you with an argument here, of which you will have enough in due time. I am satisfied that what of all things we need most, is a revival of pure religion in all our churches. The cause of Missions lags, and all our interests decay, because the Spirit of Life, to a mournful extent, is withdrawn from our congregations. The Church has almost dwindled down into a secular corporation; and the principles of this world, a mere carnal policy, which we have nick-named *prudence*, presides in our councils. Until she becomes a spiritual body, and aims at spiritual ends by appointed means, and makes faith in God the impulsive cause of her efforts, our Zion can never arise and shine, and become a joy and a praise in the whole earth. It is my fervent prayer that God would bless us, and that right early. I am satisfied that our Church has a noble destiny to accomplish. With all her defects, I believe her to be the purest Church on earth; and as I am fully persuaded that our beloved country



must take the lead and that at no distant period, in the civilization of the world, I would fain hope, that the purest Church in our land will be particularly prominent in sending forth the waters of salvation, to gladden and fertilize the earth. Hence, I am earnestly desirous that she should be furnished for the enterprise to which I believe her to be called. \* \* \* \* \*

“You ask me to give some account of my excursion abroad. You will laugh when I tell you, that the notes which I took have never been written out, nor reduced to any kind of order. These are mere *memoranda*, made for *my own satisfaction*, and not worth publishing. Still, I would cheerfully comply with your request, if I had the leisure to write them out; but in addition to two sermons every Sunday, I am preparing lectures on Natural Theology, and certain branches of Christian Evidences, and a series of discourses on the Inspiration of the Scriptures. These labours are as much as a feeble body can sustain. Your kind letters were of great service to me, particularly in Glasgow. I left there your reply to Wardlaw, and would have had it published, if Dr. Mitchel had not dissuaded me from it. In the hope, and with the earnest prayer, that God may be with you, and abundantly bless you, I am

“Your sincere friend,

J. H. THORNWELL.”

“SOUTH CAROLINA COLLEGE, *February 7, 1842.*

“MY DEAR BROTHER: I send you my reply to Smyth. I am sorry that I have been obliged to confine myself to a mere reply to his argument. I should have liked to enter into a full and positive vindication of my own principles, but my article would have been too outrageously protracted. I hope I have said nothing offensive or unchristian. If I have, please strike it out. I have been obliged to write in mere scraps of time, and therefore have indulged in repetition, which would be corrected if I had time to copy. I wish you would take up Boards on the ground of experience, and show how little they have really accomplished. I have not the details which are necessary for an argument of this sort. The thought has occurred to me, that the next General Assembly ought to appoint a committee, to take the whole question of Boards into consideration, and report to the succeeding Assembly. Let the committee consist of men on both sides, and let two reports go up, bringing the whole matter fully before the body. Something must be done. I trust my article may be in time for the March number.

“In great haste, I am your sincere friend and brother,

J. H. THORNWELL”

“SOUTH CAROLINA COLLEGE, *February 23, 1842.*

“MY DEAR BROTHER: I received your letter “this morning, acknowledging the receipt of my manuscript, and of the letter which succeeded it. In regard to a central agency, I have expressed no opinion, because my object has chiefly been to awaken our Presbyteries to a proper sense

of their own responsibilities. Whenever they shall undertake, in good earnest, the work of the Lord, in conformity with the spirit of our system, the details of their plans will not be found, I apprehend, very hard to settle. On the present plan, our churches are not reached; the whole body is not, and cannot be engaged as one man; the principles of our polity, by which we are bound together and united into one body, are set aside; and we are evidently proceeding in a method suited only to the lame and crippled constitution of the Independents. This clumsy method I wish to see abandoned; I want our distinctive principles clearly brought out; and I am very indifferent as to the details by which this may be done, so that it is effectually done. If a central agency can be suggested, which shall give us a proper security against error and abuse, and interfere with the regular operations of no part of our system, I shall have not a word to say against it.

“I deplore bitterly that our ecclesiastical courts, to such a mournful extent, have ceased to be spiritual bodies, and degenerated into hewers of wood and drawers of water. Our business is, for the most part, purely secular; and when we have nothing of this sort to engage our attention, we are apt to complain that we have no business; are impatient to adjourn and return home; though a world is lying in wickedness, and millions are perishing daily for lack of knowledge. Our courts must be roused up to a just sense of their true relation to our dying race; they must be brought to feel the spiritual nature of their vocation, and to appreciate the work which they are required to do in the vineyard of the Lord. This deplorable state of things the Boards have a tendency to engender and perpetuate. And on this account, apart from all other considerations, I must regard them as an incubus upon the body. But when you combine with their dangerous results their unsoundness of principle, I cannot see how any true hearted Presbyterian can give them his sanction. I must again urge you to expose, more fully than you have done, their inefficiency. Do join issue with their advocates, upon the plain matter of fact, and show that they have not accomplished what they were established to do; that, in sober truth, they are an utter failure, as agents of the Church. This you can do, and I cannot. I have not the facts; and a method of reasoning like this would be ten-fold more effective than all the abstract arguments that could be produced from now till dooms-day. It would absolutely demolish them; for they stand only by creating the impression that the Church can, by no manner of means, get along without them.

“Your Magazine will soon become the favourite periodical of this part of the Church. You have only to be as diligent, faithful, and uncompromising as heretofore, and the Lord will richly and abundantly bless you and your labours. I cannot better express to you my sense of the value and importance of your labours, than by mentioning to you a fact, which I do simply to encourage you. During my absence from home, when tossed upon the ocean, and wandering in a foreign land, I do not know that I ever bowed my knees to the God and Father of our

Lord Jesus Christ without specially remembering you. I sometimes had reason to think that I was very near the eternal world; and as I thought myself approaching the Church above, I felt a deeper interest in the Church below; and loved to pour out my heart before God in regard to its faithful and tried servants. The children of God, how widely soever separated, form but one family; their hearts and sympathies are one, their aims are one, and their home shall finally be the same.

“I am very busily engaged in preparing my course of lectures on Natural Theology. I remember that we had a conversation on Paley’s argument, in Baltimore; but I am not sure that I am master of the process of reasoning by which you made him prove an indefinite number of gods. I should be glad that you should state it in your next letter. By the first private hand, I will send you an article, which comprises the substance of my first sermon here as chaplain. I think it suited to the design of your paper, and I hope it is calculated to do good. You need not be afraid that I intend to flood you with my lucubrations; I shall probably not trouble you in this way very often. I am very busily engaged, just now, upon my lectures. \* \* \* \*

“Your sincere friend and brother,

J. H. THORNWELL.”