

2001 PREFACE TO CHARLES HODGE'S  
*THE CHURCH AND ITS POLITY*<sup>1</sup>

by Alan D. Strange

CHARLES HODGE IS regularly, and rightly, touted as one of historic Presbyterianism's greatest theologians. Even among those who regard him as a great theologian, however, one often hears the assertion that Hodge was decidedly lacking as a student of church polity. Hodge's poor reputation in the realm of church polity stems, I believe, not from his failure to produce a fourth volume dedicated to ecclesiology that could serve as a companion to his three-volume *Systematic Theology*. Rather, Hodge's supposed inferiority in church polity is due in no small part to the alleged superiority of the arguments of some of his opponents in ecclesiastical battles.

Specifically, it is often averred these days in conservative Presbyterian circles that while Hodge's orthodoxy was unquestionable, in the area of church polity he showed himself to be a rank amateur who was routinely bested, for example, by his fellow Old Schooler, James Henley Thornwell.<sup>2</sup> Hodge and

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<sup>1</sup>*The Church and its Polity* by Charles Hodge consists of articles collected by Charles's son A.A. Hodge and was first published in London (as well as Edinburgh and New York) by Thomas Nelson and Sons (of Paternoster Row) in 1879. This 2001 re-publication of the work is by Sung-Jin Lee, Westminster Discount Book Service, P.O. Box 125-H, Scarsdale, NY 10583, from whom the book may be purchased. This *Preface* was printed in this re-published edition and is here printed by permission of Mr. Lee.

<sup>2</sup>Unlike Hodge, whose *Church Polity* has long been out of print, James Henley Thornwell has enjoyed a fine reputation as an able student of church polity whose ecclesiology and church polity are reflected in

Thornwell crossed swords over, *inter alia*, the nature of Presbyterianism and the question of the legitimacy of church boards, the definition of the “spirituality” of the church, various issues related to church office, and the validity of Roman Catholic baptism. While Hodge may be faulted here or there in these debates, particularly in his “Preliminary Principles,”<sup>3</sup> I believe that it is time that we quit shaking our heads at how misguided “poor Charles Hodge” was when it came to church polity. It is my fervent wish that the long-overdue republication of Hodge’s *The Church and its Polity* will rehabilitate Hodge’s reputation as an ecclesiastical politician and demonstrate to the rising generations that Hodge’s genius did indeed extend to church polity.

The debates within the Old School between Hodge and others—primarily Thornwell—need to be put in historical context. Before the Old School/New School division in the mainline Presbyterian Church in 1837, much of the mission work of the church had been carried on not by church boards or even committees but by extra-ecclesiastical voluntary associations. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), for instance, was founded in 1810 as an agency of the Congregational General Association of Massachusetts to carry on the work of foreign missions on behalf of those congregations. The General Assembly (GA) of the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) declined to form a foreign mission board in 1811, directing support instead to the ABCFM, an organization outside of the PCUSA. The work of Home Missions had been carried out by the GA of the PCUSA since 1802, with the Standing Committee of Missions becoming the Board of Missions in 1816. Nonetheless, much of the ministry of Home Missions, Christian Education, and Christian Publications (along with Foreign Missions) was

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Volume 4 of his *Collected Writings* (which have remained in print over the years). This volume should be consulted for the full development of Thornwell’s position which it is not my aim here to set forth.

<sup>3</sup>I refer here to the “Preliminary Principles” that form Part I of this volume, pp. 5-167. This first major section of *Church Polity* reveals overall the need that there was in nineteenth-century American Presbyterianism for more work in ecclesiology, one of the *loci* of systematic theology that has received more attention in recent decades than in Hodge’s time. All of my references in the footnotes hereafter with only the page number(s) cited are to *Church Polity*.

carried on by agencies that were outside of the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church but heavily supported by Presbyterians: the American Bible Society (1816), the American Sunday School Union (1824), the American Tract Society (1825) and the American Home Missionary Society (1826).<sup>4</sup>

The tenor of the times in early nineteenth-century America favored the organization of voluntary societies rather than denominational agencies. Following the Great Awakening of the 1740s and the War for Independence of the 1770s, America had, to the consternation of many churchmen, lapsed into irreligion. To many, the solution to such widespread unbelief lay not only in another Awakening but also in a mutual ministry encompassing members of various churches, transcending denominational lines, in a joint effort to win the burgeoning American nation to Christ. Presbyterianism was not immune to this spirit of broad cooperation among evangelicals and was loath to establish agencies of its own to carry out such ministry. Such a spirit of mutual ministry, in fact, manifested itself in 1801 when Presbyterians and Congregationalists joined together in a Plan of Union in which congregations, particularly on the ever-expanding frontier, might be connected with both denominations at the same time and served by pastors of either. Under such a scheme, Presbyterian churches might be represented in the Congregational associations by the local elders, while Congregational churches could be represented in the presbyteries by committeemen.

Presbyterians, in the 1820s and 1830s especially, who were committed to confessional Presbyterianism (as reflected in the Westminster Standards), were concerned not only at the church's abdication of her responsibilities to extra-ecclesiastical agencies, but were also, even more so, concerned by the doctrinal corruption that the Presbyterian church was suffering due to her union with Congregationalists. Insofar as many Congregationalists were in the grip of the "New Divinity" that had arisen among many of the professed followers of Jonathan Edwards, confessional Presbyterians, who came to be styled "Old School," viewed with increasing alarm the growing "New School" sympathies for the New Divinity.

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<sup>4</sup>Lefferts Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, Fourth Edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 82-91.

The New Divinity supplanted the penal substitutionary view of atonement, taught by the Reformers and Puritans, with a governmental view in which Christ's death serves as a public example of the seriousness of sin and the length to which a holy God would go to preserve the moral order of the cosmos. The New Divinity also denied the imputation of Adam's sin, moving ultimately to deny human inability and to assert the power of free choice. When Old School brethren were unable successfully to prosecute Albert Barnes in 1831 and 1836 and Lyman Beecher in 1835 for teaching New Divinity theology, they sought opportunity to break with the New School. Such opportunity presented itself in 1837 when the Old School, having effective control of the Presbyterian Church's General Assembly due to its constituency that year, annulled the 1801 Plan of Union and then expelled four New School synods (Western Reserve, Utica, Geneva and Genesee), consisting of more than 550 congregations.<sup>5</sup>

There is a particular reason that I have labored to demonstrate that the division between the Old School and New School that occurred in 1837 was not only, or even primarily, over issues of polity, but more over issues of doctrine. To be sure, Old Schoolers did not like having the work of the church under the control of extra-ecclesiastical organizations; but even more than this, Old Schoolers eschewed the doctrinal compromise and impurity that had resulted from the unsound influence of the New Divinity that had so affected the New England Congregational churches with which the Presbyterian church was in union. And the reason that I stress that theological rather than polity issues were paramount is because the tenor of these articles by Charles Hodge, both in his "Preliminary Principles" and in the "Application of Principles," is that the church is a spiritual institution and nothing is more important to her than doctrine.

To put it another way, Hodge does not believe that the Scriptures are as specific and detailed about church government as they are about doctrine. In this respect, Hodge is not a *iure divino* Presbyterian. He certainly believes that the Bible sets forth presbyterial church government but would deny that there is a regulative principle for ecclesiastical government in the same way that there is a regulative principle for doctrine and worship. And

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<sup>5</sup>Loetscher, pp. 92-100.

Hodge would argue that to maintain the catholicity of the church we must not discover the essence of the church to reside in Presbyterian government. To do so would have the effect of unchurching every congregation that is not organized along Presbyterian lines. While Hodge affirms that Presbyterian government belongs to the maturation and perfection of the church, it does not belong to the essence. He understood that to do so would be to declare that outside the Presbyterian Church there is no true church, however weak and imperfect it may be.<sup>6</sup>

Here we see something of that genius for which the Princeton men were noted, a firm commitment to the Reformed faith coupled with a real catholicity. We may experience some discomfort in reading Hodge on the “Idea of the Church” or the “Visibility of the Church” because he sounds so individualistic and lacking in appreciation for the visible church. To be sure, he might have better put his concern that the church be regarded first and foremost not as a mere organized visible society but as the spirit-filled people of God who manifest themselves visibly. He could have better developed the notion that the church as organism need not stand in contrast to the church as organization. But he is arguing for the spirituality of the church as an Evangelical entity over against what he calls Ritualistic and Rationalistic models of the church. Hodge is not indifferent to the outward forms that prevail in the church, but he is adamant that outward forms alone do not a church make, while at the same time affirming that Presbyterianism is the mature embodiment of the church.<sup>7</sup>

Hodge’s convictions about the nature of the church as spiritual in its essence informed his view that church boards were legitimate. As we’ve already seen, before the Presbyterian church split into Old and New Schools in 1837, it resisted erecting boards to carry on the work of the church, at least in several notable instances. This was not, in the main, because of any principled objections to boards *per se* but because the church was content to let extra-ecclesiastical agencies carry on the work of evangelism and discipleship. After the 1837 split, however, the Old School

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<sup>6</sup>See his discussions along these lines on pp. 5-67.

<sup>7</sup>See his particularly masterful treatment of “Presbyterianism,” pp. 118-133.

church, believing that the church *qua* church should carry on the work of Home and Foreign Missions, Christian Education, Publication, etc., erected boards to carry out this work in the cases where such were not already in existence in the church.<sup>8</sup>

Thornwell and his allies argued that church boards were unscriptural because Christ empowered only his officers acting together in concert to exercise rule in his church. In other words, only the judicatories of the church—the sessions, presbyteries, synods, and General Assembly—acting in their corporate capacities could carry on the work of evangelism and discipleship, i.e., the work that had been assigned to and carried on by the boards, acting as agencies of the whole church. Thornwell believed that no church court was empowered by Christ to commission others to act on its behalf in an ongoing fashion but was bound to retain full control and jurisdiction over all the work of the church. While a judicatory may appoint a committee of its members to carry out a limited task, it may not grant its own authority to such a body to carry out the work that the judicatory is charged to carry out. As summarized by Hodge, Thornwell “insisted that God had laid down in Scripture a form of Church government, from which we are not at liberty to depart.”<sup>9</sup> And by this, Hodge argued, Thornwell meant not simply that “the great principles of Presbyterianism are in the Bible,” but something closer to “our whole Book of Discipline is there.”<sup>10</sup>

Thornwell opposed the kind of broad grant or commission given to a board to carry on the work of the Church in a particular area. He did not necessarily oppose the use of committees to assist the judicatories in carrying on its work of missions, diaconal ministries, education, and publications. Hodge, of course, argued that the kind of principled objection that Thornwell brought to the question of the boards—namely, Thornwell’s contention that Scripture proscribed the use of boards by the church—would apply equally to the erection of standing committees to assist the church in the carrying out of her ministries. If a judicatory could not biblically commission a board

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<sup>8</sup>For the discussions on the Boards specifically, see pp. 417-445, together with his discussion on Presbyterianism, pp. 118-133.

<sup>9</sup>p. 438.

<sup>10</sup>p. 440.

to carry out its task of missions and evangelism, for instance, then neither could it erect a committee to do so, certainly not a committee that would have any executive power, the kinds of committees that labor presently on behalf of both the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church of America. Hodge was, I believe, right in his assertion that Thornwell's principles argued too much, requiring each judicatory itself to execute all of its duties corporately and forbidding delegation. Hodge could not discover such a principle in Holy Writ and believed that the Lord had left it to the discretion of the church how best to order the details of Presbyterianism.

As a matter of course, though, time has demonstrated that Thornwell was probably right in his opposition to the boards, not in his principled opposition, but right in opposing the boards on pragmatic grounds. As a practical matter, the boards tended to be autonomous and self-perpetuating. Given their structure, the boards came to eclipse the judicatories in carrying out the necessary functions of the church. Historically, the boards of the PCUSA (which had upwards of eighty or ninety members) were controlled by their executive committees for obvious reasons of size and practicality. The executive committees were frequently dominated by clergy, understandably so, given the nature of the time commitment and the inability of most ruling elders to make such a commitment. As well, such professional staffing as the boards might employ tended to be drawn from the ranks of the clergy. All of this contributed to a diminishing of the role and influence of the ruling elder whose voice was heard more in the courts of the church than on the boards of the GA. Insofar as the real work of the GA tended to shift to the boards, the real control of the church tended to be vested in the teaching elders.<sup>11</sup>

Ministerial control of the PCUSA was bad news for the church because the clergy had grown corrupt in many quarters, due, in no small part, to the corruption of the seminaries. The seminaries in the PCUSA had, by 1910, all imbibed higher criticism and liberal theology, with the sole exception of Princeton, which alone remained faithful to the Reformed heritage. J. Gresham Machen, stalwart defender of Presbyterian

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<sup>11</sup>See Lefferts Loetscher, *The Broadening Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), 90-108.

orthodoxy, discovered that he received his greatest support not from pastors but from elders in his fight against encroaching liberalism and modernism. Since liberal ministers controlled the boards and the boards controlled the church, the church became mired in modernism, necessitating the 1936 division and founding of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.<sup>12</sup>

I would therefore contend that, as a practical matter, Thornwell's animus against church boards was not misguided. But such an observation is along the lines that Lord Acton's dictum "power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely" is correct because of the deceitfulness of the heart. It is a good idea to organize the church in such a way as to minimize occasions for the expression of corruption, especially such as occurs when too much power is concentrated in too few hands. That is not the same, however, as contending, as did Thornwell, that the Bible forbids boards. They may not be wise but they are not manifestly sinful. To aver that they are is to make the mistake of believing that sin can be eliminated by adopting the right forms. One may have the most perfect form of Presbyterianism and yet be thoroughly corrupt because the doctrine and/or morals of the adherents are corrupt. On the other hand, one may have episcopacy or congregationalism with biblical doctrine and morals and be considerably better off than corrupt Presbyterianism.

This is Hodge's constant contention: elevate the polity of the church to the level of the doctrine and morals and you will bring down the doctrine and morals. Make Presbyterianism to pertain to the essence of the church rather than to the perfection of the church and you have churchianity not Christianity, bigotry and not the gospel. To be sure, you will not have vital religion without the form of godliness but you may have the form of godliness and deny the power thereof. To put it another way: the invisible church will always manifest itself in a visible organization but the existence of the visible organization alone, even if it is Presbyterian, does not guarantee doctrinal or ethical fidelity.

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<sup>12</sup>See Edwin M. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (1940; rpt., Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1992), and D. G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Committee on Christian Education and the Committee for the Historian of the OPC, 1995), 11-39.



Nothing secures the church ultimately other than its yielding to the Spirit and receiving the grace of God in Christ. We must not imagine that holiness and faithfulness can be achieved by constantly tweaking our church order so as to eliminate all of our problems.

Hodge also crossed swords with Thornwell over the issue of the spirituality of the church. It ought to be abundantly evident from what I have already written that Charles Hodge believed fervently in the spirituality of the church, i.e., he believed that the church, above all, was the Spirit-gathered and Spirit-filled body of Christ, a body that manifested itself visibly more or less perfectly depending on its stage of maturity. He also affirmed the spirituality of the church in teaching that church power is ministerial and declarative in opposition to Rome's claim that church power is magisterial and legislative. In contrast to the power of the state—whose power is physical and coercive—the power of the church is moral and suasive. The power of the church in its censures is manifested in the exercise of the keys over against the power of the state, manifested in the sword, or the power of the family, manifested in the rod. All of this was to Charles Hodge, as it had been for historic Reformed and Presbyterian ecclesiology, what was meant by the spirituality of the church.<sup>13</sup>

Where Hodge differed with Thornwell was on the precise meaning of the spirituality of the church. Thornwell argued that the church is purely a spiritual body and must not meddle with any secular or political matter. Hodge agreed with this inasmuch, as he wrote, "There is indeed a sense of the words in which the church has nothing to do with politics. She has no right to pronounce judgment on purely secular matters, or upon such questions which ordinarily divide men into political parties."<sup>14</sup> Thornwell had, arguably, developed the doctrine of the spirituality of the church as he had so that the church would not condemn chattel slavery as practiced in the ante-bellum South. Although he had defended Southern slavery as biblical, Thornwell argued against those in the church who would condemn slavery as

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<sup>13</sup>pp. 100-118

<sup>14</sup>Quoted from David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary, vol. 1: Faith and Learning, 1812-1868* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), p. 393.

unbiblical and call for Christians to repent of slaveholding. He argued that it was a violation of the spirituality of the church for the church to condemn slavery and thus insert itself into what he claimed was a political question.

Hodge, however, objected to the notion that “the action of the state, however inconsistent with the Word of God, could not be testified against.” In fact, Hodge maintained that this “new doctrine” of the spirituality of the church (as developed by Thornwell), placed a “muzzle” on the mouth of the church, keeping the church from “exercising one of the highest and most important prerogatives.” Hodge was satisfied with the statement adopted by the 1860 General Assembly that addressed the spirituality of the church in a balanced fashion: the church “disclaimed all right to interfere in secular matters” while at the same time “asserted the right and duty of the Church, as God’s witness on earth, to bear her testimony in favor of truth and holiness and against all false doctrines and sins.”<sup>15</sup>

That Hodge was sane and balanced on the question of the spirituality of the church as taught by Thornwell can be seen in his opposition to the Gardner Spring Resolutions, the adoption of which in May 1861 led to the withdrawal of the Southern brethren from the Old School Church. Dr. Gardner Spring of New York City had introduced resolutions at the 1861 GA, calling for, *inter alia*, the erection of a committee “to inquire into the expediency of this Assembly making some expression of their devotion to the Union of these States and loyalty to the Government.” These resolutions, which ultimately affirmed that the church must do all in its power to “strengthen, uphold and encourage” the U.S. Government (including the newly-elected Lincoln administration), passed by a vote of 156-66, with Charles Hodge leading the charge against the adoption of the Gardiner Spring Resolutions.<sup>16</sup>

Hodge, in the protest that he submitted to the Assembly of its actions, wrote: “We [who protest the Gardiner Spring Resolutions] deny the right of the Assembly to decide the political question, to what government the allegiance of Presbyterians as citizens is due, and its right to make that decision a condition of membership in

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<sup>15</sup>Calhoun, p. 393.

<sup>16</sup>Calhoun, pp. 394-5.

our church.” He later further amplified his opposition to the Resolutions: “Those who resisted the action of the Assembly were themselves . . . loyal to the Constitution [of the United States] and the Federal Government. . . . Why then did they refuse to avow [the Spring Resolutions] in and through the General Assembly? For the same reason that they would refuse, at the command of an excited multitude, to sing the “Star Spangled Banner” at the Lord’s Table. They refused because in their judgment it was wrong and out of place. . . . The General Assembly had no right to decide the political question as to what government the allegiance of Presbyterian citizens is due.”<sup>17</sup> Here, in the totality of Hodge’s position, one may see the true doctrine of the spirituality of the church.

It is out of Hodge’s doctrine of the spirituality of the church that he developed his view of church office. Since nothing is more important in the church than doctrine and worship, there is an office in the church dedicated to teaching and leading God’s people in worship, the office of minister, given expression in pastors and doctors (or teachers).<sup>18</sup> This stands over against the contention of Thornwell that there is no distinct office of minister but that the pastor or teacher is merely a function of the broader eldership. In fact, Thornwell goes so far as to argue that in the apostolic church there were only elders, “with the office of preacher being a function superadded to the Presbyterate.”<sup>19</sup>

Given the manifest centrality of the kerygma—of the apostolic preaching of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ—it seems quite incredible to assert that our Lord distinctly provided for rulers of the church but left to historical development the office of preacher of the Word. Hodge affirmed the centrality of preaching in the life of the church and believed that such was committed to men who were called of God to give their lives to that task. To put it another way, Hodge saw doctrine and worship as more central to the life of the church than he did government. If government is the highest calling of the church, then it makes sense to see only one office of rule and instruction, that of elder. If, however, worship is the highest calling of the church, then it

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<sup>17</sup>Calhoun, p. 395

<sup>18</sup>Pp. 242-300.

<sup>19</sup>James Henley Thornwell, *Collected Writings, Vol. IV: Ecclesiastical* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee on Publication, 1881), 115.

makes sense to see that that spiritual calling is committed to an office dedicated to giving expression to it.

Hodge is right in line here with the 1645 *Form of Presbyterial Church Government* and *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* that views the minister as the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament priesthood: “under the names of Priests and Levites, [as] continued under the gospel, are meant evangelical pastors.”<sup>20</sup> In fact, ministers (or pastors) are spoken of as the New Testament analog to priests and Levites four times in the *Form of Presbyterial Church Government*. In regards to “other church-governors” as the *Form* styles ruling elders: “As there were in the Jewish church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the church; so Christ, who hath instituted government, and governors ecclesiastical in the church, hath furnished some in his church, beside the ministers of the word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereunto, who are to join with the minister in the government of the church. Which officers reformed churches commonly call Elders.”<sup>21</sup>

Hodge saw the genius of Presbyterianism in consisting of a form of government that was neither hierarchical, as was episcopacy, nor egalitarian, as was congregationalism. In the episcopal system the church is ruled by the clergy. In the congregational system, the church is ruled by the laity. In the Presbyterian system, you have a rule in which members of the clerical rank (ministers) are joined by rulers of the people (elders) to share together in a joint rule that is neither congregational nor episcopal but presbyterial. For Hodge, to have only one office—elder—was to make all elders clergymen and thus to make a new hierarchy out of Presbyterianism. If there is no distinction of office between the minister and the elder then there is only one office in the church (not elders joining together with ministers in a joint rule) and true Presbyterianism gives way to clerical hierarchicalism.

And, finally, Hodge argued for the validity of Roman Catholic baptism on the same grounds that he argued for

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<sup>20</sup>From the edition of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* published by Free Presbyterian Publications of Glasgow, reprint, 1997, 400-401

<sup>21</sup>*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 402.

everything in his *Church Polity*, on the basis of the true spirituality of the church.<sup>22</sup> Romish baptism is with water, in the name of the Trinity, signifying participation in the covenant and the avowal of our purpose to be the Lord's. Thus Hodge finds Romish baptism valid as to matter, form and intention. Hodge had to surmount two further objections raised by the opponents of Roman Catholic baptism: that it was not administered by ordained ministers of Christ and that the church of Rome is not a true church and therefore its ordinances are not Christian sacraments. Hodge's treatment of these difficulties is masterful and quite helpful for us today in our consideration of these matters. Hodge's essential approach is consonant with the Reformers, who all affirmed the validity of Roman Catholic baptism, and who taught that there is a remnant of the true Church within the Roman communion.

Hodge's vigorous defense of Romish baptism demonstrates, contrary to what one might think given Hodge's continual insistence on the church as organism and not organization, that Hodge did not have a low view of the visible church or her sacraments. In his article "Infant Members Subjects of Discipline," in fact, Hodge maintained, over against Thornwell, that "All baptized persons are members of the Church, are under its care, and subject to its government and discipline. . . ."<sup>23</sup> Yet Hodge strenuously refused to locate that church in any particular visible organization, arguing instead that the true Church existed under many forms within its various branches. He believed it to be mere bigotry and evidence of party spirit to define the Church in a way that restricted its membership to any particular congregation or denomination. And it was out of this truly biblical and catholic conviction that his Church polity arose, the study of which I gladly commend to the reading public.

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<sup>22</sup>Pp. 191-215

<sup>23</sup>P. 215.

