

MINUTES

OF THE

✓ PHILADELPHIA CONVENTION

OF

MINISTERS AND RULING ELDERS

IN THE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES.

CALLED BY THE

MINORITY OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF **1836.**

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souls of men. We fear that not a little of that which has assumed the precious name of revivals, in various parts of our bounds, is of this latter description. This lamentable fact, however, creates no prejudice in our minds against genuine revivals of religion. It rather excites us to desire and long for them with more ardour; to pray for them with more importunity; to promote them with more care by an edifying example; and to guard against all counterfeits with more enlightened vigilance.

Brethren farewell. May the God of Israel bless you all—every one. We love, with a tenderness which we cannot utter, our own portion of the Church of Jesus Christ our Lord. But we love also every other portion of the inheritance, of that dear Saviour—and rejoicing in the confident hope that heaven will ring with praises of the redeemed from amongst every Christian denomination—our ardent and constant desire is, to draw the bonds of union between us, and all the rest, as close as possible here below. Hence the present epistle to our brethren. Hence our earnest desire to explain clearly to them our posture, our action, and the solemn crisis which having first overtaken several of our sister churches, has at length fallen upon us, and will unquestionably overtake, in succession, all denominations of Christians.

And now may God of his infinite mercy set the seal of his visible approbation upon what his providence and grace have enabled us to do. And may you brethren be preserved from the evils which we have endured—or be enabled to meet them with more promptitude and fidelity than we have done.

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, abide richly on all who love his holy name.

By order of the General Assembly.

DAVID ELLIOTT, *Moderator.*

JOHN McDOWELL, *Stated Clerk.*

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE CHURCHES UNDER THE CARE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY.

Dear Brethren,—As the doings of the present General Assembly have been of an unusual character and such as may produce important consequences, we think it proper to lay an abstract of our decisions, and the reasons of them, before the churches under our care. Discerning men have perceived for a number of years, that the affairs of our beloved church, were hastening to a crisis; and when the members of the present Assembly, came together, the state of parties was such, as to make it manifest, that a division of the Church was the most desirable object that could be effected. What are called the Old School and New School parties are already separated in fact; in almost every part of our country, where those parties exist they have less ministerial or Christian communion with one another, than either of those parties has with Christians of other denominations; and they are so equally balanced in point of power, that for years past, it has been uncertain until the late General Assembly was fully organized, which of those parties would predominate in that body.

From these circumstances, as well as from other things, not necessary to mention, it is known to our brethren, that the floor of our highest judicatory, as well as of our Synods and Presbyteries have for years presented scenes of contention and strife, such as many of us never expected to witness in the Presbyterian Church, and such as are highly disgraceful to our Christian character. This spirit of contention deprives the church of all power for maintaining the purity of her standards, and securing that wholesome instruction, either in our pulpits or presses, which would conduce to the edification of the body of Christ; and until the parties are separated and formed into different denominations there is no ground of hope, that these contentions can be terminated.

So fully was this Assembly convinced, that a separation of the parties, was the only cure for the evils under which we labour, that a committee was appointed by common consent, composed of equal numbers from the different sides of the house, to adjust if possible the terms of an amicable division of the Church, into two separate and independent denominations. This joint committee agreed upon the principles of the division but could not agree upon the form. It was admitted on all hands, that the Old School party should retain the name and the funds of the church, and especially all the funds and property connected with the Theological Seminaries at Princeton and Pittsburgh. But on the mode of separation the Committee could not agree. The New School party would consent to no other plan than that of referring it to the Presbyteries in order to have the division made by the next General Assembly. To this plan, the other party thought there were insuperable objections. It was believed, that our Presbyteries being so widely dispersed, the returns from them would be uncertain; that many things might occur to defeat the arrangement,—and that as the probable result, the parties would come to the next Assembly, with more determination to contend for the power and government of the whole Church than on any former occasion.

On reviewing the causes from which our troubles have arisen, another plan presented itself to the view of the majority, which appeared better calculated to effect, in a peaceable manner, that division of the Church, which all seemed to consider as a matter of indispensable necessity. The contentions which distract the Church evidently arose, from the plan of union formed in 1801 between the General Assembly and the Association of Connecticut. This plan was indeed projected and brought into operation by some of the wisest and best men the Presbyterian Church has ever known, and it evidently originated from the purest and most benevolent motives. It has however been disastrous in its effects. We mean no disrespect to the Congregationalists of New England, as such; indeed there is no denomination of Christians beyond the pale of our own church whom we esteem and love more sincerely; and yet we believe that the attempt by this plan of union to bring Congregationalists and Presbyterians into the same denomination has been the principal cause of those dissensions which now distract and rend the Church to pieces.

We allude to these circumstances merely for the purpose of explaining the only remedy which appears applicable to our present troubles. The Plan of Union adopted in 1801 was evidently unconstitutional in its nature, and of a tendency to subvert the institutions and distinctive character of the Presbyterian Church. And such being the fact, it was certainly the duty of the present Assembly to abrogate said plan and to declare it void from the beginning. From this act of abrogation, and from the declaration that it was void from the beginning, it would necessarily follow, that the Churches, Presbyteries, and Synods, formed under said plan, were of course not to be considered as parts of the Presbyterian Church. From this view of the subject, it appears, that the *separation*, so necessary for the well being of the Presbyterian Church exists already, and that we have nothing to do, but to act on the facts of the case, to secure our tranquility.

1. In the first place, we have said that the act of union of 1801 was unconstitutional. It will be admitted that the most fundamental and sound parts of the constitution of any community, are those parts which form the legislative and judicial councils of the community, and designate the qualifications of the members of said councils. These are parts of the government, in all societies, deemed too sacred to be touched by any authority, excepting that which can make and unmake the constitution at its pleasure. Should any authority in the United States, assume to introduce into the State Legislatures or Congress, men not constitutionally qualified, and who were subjects of another political power, the alarm would be given at once, that a

most violent outrage had been inflicted on our governments and our rights. And although we would say it with respect, yet we *must say*, that this was the very thing which the act of 1801 effected in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church. By *that act* committee-men, belonging to the Congregational Church, and under its government, were introduced into our Presbyteries, and by the subsequent execution of the act, into our Synods and our General Assembly. Men who were under the authority of a body without our church, exercised the highest power of the Church. This was a most palpable infraction of our constitution.

In the next place all the churches formed and constituted under the operation of this *act* were at least, as much trained in doctrine and church order, on the Congregational as on the Presbyterian plan, and had just as much preparation for becoming members of a Congregational as of a Presbyterian church; and therefore any subsequent acts of any of our judicatories, forming such churches into Presbyteries or Synods, and connecting them with us as constituent parts of our body were unconstitutional. This has been the source of all our present evils; the raising up of Presbyteries and Synods out of men who had at least as much of the Congregational as Presbyterian character, has scattered the elements of discord through all our regions, and torn our afflicted Church to pieces. These indeed were consequences not perceived from the beginning; it required the light of experience to teach us, that the amalgamation of such bodies as the Congregational and Presbyterian would produce a ferment sufficient to agitate the whole American nation.

Having traced thus far the unconstitutional and pernicious tendency of this *Act*, it only remains to say; that when this act is abrogated by the proper authority, (as a matter of course,) every thing which arose under its influence and training, is abrogated with it. This we presume is the ground on which all the jurisprudence of our country stands, and upon which all our political courts and legislatures act. It has indeed been said, that when an unconstitutional law forms a contract, the abrogation of the law cannot set the contract aside, as this would suppose that a person might take the advantage of his own wrong to relieve himself from a just obligation. But to this it may be answered, that an unconstitutional law can give rise to no binding contract. The unconstitutionality supposes that the organ of government is granting what it has no right to grant, and therefore no obligation can be imposed. But in the present case the *Act in question* goes to the subversion of the Presbyterian Church, and therefore any contract which could arise under it calculated to destroy that Church, would be of such an immoral tendency as could impose no obligation;—it is one of the first principles of morals that an unlawful contract is not to be fulfilled.

It then appears plain to us, that by the abrogation of the act of 1801, the Synods of the Western Reserve, Utica, Genesee, and Geneva, are independent bodies standing on their own ground, and free to choose their future connexions, and that thus far a separation exists between us and them which may greatly conduce to the peace and comfort of both parties; and as both the majority and minority agreed in expressing the opinion, that a division of the Church in conformity with the sympathies of the present parties, was both desirable and expedient, we were much surprised to find, that the minority would not agree with us in carrying out the existing separation, so as to form the Church into two distinct bodies, either of which would be sufficiently large to form a General Assembly, and which might act peaceably in promoting the common interests of our Redeemer's kingdom. In our present connexion there is no hope of peace. The controversy threatens to become more fierce, more extensive, and more destructive of all the vital principles of religion the longer we continue together. Indeed the great motives for all the measures of separation to which we have resorted on the

present occasion are the peace, prosperity, and holiness of our beloved Church, and these objects we believe can never be obtained, until this separation is effected.

Our brethren of the minority seemed to consider it as an insult, when we urged the fact, that the abrogation of an unconstitutional law left us as distinct and separate bodies;—we intended no insult; the ground we took and the language we used implied none; we only said that they were separate from us, and we from them; if this implied disgrace on them it implied the same on ourselves; we wished both parties to consider themselves as on equal ground; and as to the unconstitutional law from which all our misapprehensions had arisen we were willing that the greater blame should lie on us. In fact our wish was and is to part as brethren, and as in certain important points of doctrine and Church order we cannot agree, let each party take the word of God as their rule of faith and practice, and pursue their course, as those who must give account to the Great Shepherd and Bishop of their souls.

We have now, dear brethren, briefly explained the reasons, for the course we have taken on the present occasion, and we believe it would have been a blessing to our Church if the measures now adopted had been resorted to at an earlier period. The progress of controversy has greatly destroyed brotherly confidence. Indeed, the union between the parties, for several years, has only existed in name; in fact, they have been two separate bodies, and we believe the sooner they are brought to consider themselves as forming distinct denominations, the sooner will they return to the spirit and principles of the Gospel of Christ.

We must observe in conclusion, that on whatever side the principal fault of our present disturbances may lie, the whole Church has abundant cause of deep humiliation and repentance before Almighty God. Our calamities have not arisen from the dust; our Heavenly Father has stretched forth his hand over us, and let us acknowledge "the rod and Him that hath appointed it." Let us return to him that he may return to us,—if he has wounded, it is he alone that can heal: if he hath broken down he can build us up.

By order of the General Assembly.

DAVID ELLIOTT, *Moderator.*

JOHN McDOWELL, *Stated Clerk.*

Philadelphia, June 8, 1837.