

ANNALS

OF THE

AMERICAN PULPIT;

OR

COMMEMORATIVE NOTICES

OF

DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN CLERGYMEN

OF

VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS,

FROM THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE COUNTRY TO THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR
EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE.

WITH HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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FRANCIS ALISON, D. D.*

1736—1779.

FRANCIS ALISON was born in the parish of Lac, County of Donegal, Ireland, in the year 1705. He received an excellent classical education at an Academy in the North of that kingdom, under the particular inspection of the Bishop of Raphoe, and was afterwards, for some time, a student of the University of Glasgow. He came to America in 1735, and was, for a while, engaged as tutor in the family of the father of John Dickinson, Governor of Delaware, who placed his son under his care, and allowed him to receive a few other pupils. The exact date of his licensure cannot be ascertained; but he is spoken of as a licentiate, in the Records of the Synod of June 18, 1736. Between this date and the 25th of May, 1737, he was ordained by the Newcastle Presbytery, and installed pastor of the New London Congregation, in Chester County, Pa., where he continued fifteen years.

In the year 1743, he opened an Academy at New London, with a view to the general improvement of the community in which he lived, which was, at that time, exceedingly destitute of the means of intellectual culture; but it was rendered, by some concurring influences, a powerful auxiliary to the cause of theological education. About this time, the Synod of Philadelphia began to take measures for establishing a school on a permanent foundation, with special reference to training young men for the ministry. It appears from their Records that, as early as 1739, an overture for erecting a Seminary of learning was unanimously approved, and a committee appointed to visit Great Britain with a view to "prosecute this affair." The breaking out of a war between England and Spain occasioned the postponement of the matter for a time; but, in 1743, it was revived by the Presbyteries of Philadelphia, Newcastle, and Donegal, acting conjointly by a committee which met at the Great Valley in Chester County, by whom it was again referred to the Synod. The next year, (1744,) the school was established by the Synod, on the following plan: 1. That all persons who please, may send their children and have them instructed *gratis*, in the languages, philosophy, and divinity. 2. That the school be supported for the present by yearly contributions from the congregations under their care. 3. That if any funds remain, after paying the salaries of the Master and Tutor, they shall be expended in the purchase of books and other necessaries for the school. Mr. Alison was appointed Principal; and thus the new school was engrafted upon the grammar school, which he had established three years before. It became a justly celebrated institution; and served not only to aid in furnishing the Church with well qualified ministers, but the State with able civilians. Amongst those who were either wholly or partially educated here, were Charles Thompson, Secretary of the First Congress; Rev. Dr. John Ewing, Provost of the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Ramsey, the Historian; Dr. Hugh Williamson, one of the framers of the Constitution of the United States, and Historian of North Carolina; Rev. Dr.

* Miller's Ret. II.—Holmes' Life of Stiles.—Stiles' MSS.—Webster's MSS.—Allen's Biog. Diet.

James Latta, eminent as a divine and a teacher; and Thomas McKean, George Read, and James Smith, signers of the Declaration of Independence.

In 1749, Mr. Alison was invited to become a teacher in the Philadelphia Academy. He was disposed to accept the invitation, and applied that year to the Synod for leave to join the Presbytery of Philadelphia. His request, however, was not granted; but, in place of it, some improvement was made in his situation as Principal of the Synod's school. We hear no more of this until May, 1752, when it seems that he had actually left his congregation, and removed to Philadelphia, without a dismissal from the Presbytery. The matter being brought before the Synod by the Presbytery, the Synod, whilst declaring his conduct in the case anti-presbyterian, and "contrary to their known approved methods in such cases," yet regard it "in a great measure excusable," on account of the pressing circumstances in which he was placed, and its being almost impracticable for him to apply for the consent either of the Presbytery or the Synod in the usual way.

On his removal to Philadelphia, he took charge of the Academy; and when, in 1755, a College was added, he was appointed Vice Provost and Professor of Moral Philosophy. He was also assistant minister of the First Presbyterian Church. He discharged his duties, both as a preacher and a teacher, with acknowledged fidelity and success. The degree of Master of Arts was conferred upon him by Yale College in 1755, and by the College of New Jersey in 1756; and the degree of Doctor of Divinity, by the University of Glasgow in 1758. So highly was this latter honour then appreciated, that the Synod to which Mr. Alison belonged, made a formal acknowledgment of it to the University.

In the year 1755, Dr. Alison made a journey into New England, where he received great attention, and made many valuable acquaintances. He passed some time at Newport with the Rev. Dr. Stiles, in whom he found a kindred spirit, in respect to literary and scientific pursuits. In reference to these, Dr. Alison writes to him:—"I am highly pleased that you continue so unwearied in the pursuit of knowledge. I pray God that he may long spare you a blessing to his Church, and a useful instrument to promote knowledge and learning." He then proceeds to mention his own unsuccessful attempts to discover the comet expected about that time, and the injury which he hence derived to his health, which brought him to a resolution that effectually destroyed his star-gazing; and adds,—“As I hope, with more certainty and less trouble, to acquire this kind of knowledge in the next stage of my existence, if it be necessary, I have determined to give myself no further trouble, till I be allowed to converse with Newton, Halley, Whiston, and Flamstead, and some others of the same complexion, if these names be allowed to shine in one great constellation in Heaven. Yet I am far from blaming you for your careful and accurate researches; they may make you more useful here, and form your taste to examine the works of God with a higher satisfaction in the coming world.”

Dr. Alison lived during a period of great agitation in the Presbyterian Church; and, possessing a naturally active mind, and ardent temperament, it was not to be expected that he would be a mere spectator of the passing scenes. His influence was deeply felt in both the Presbytery and the Synod; and whatever he undertook, became with him, for the time, all-engrossing. About the period of his settlement at New London, the controversy between the "Old Side" and the "New Side" was raging in all

its violence. His views and sympathies were all with the "Old Side." He complained to the Donegal Presbytery of the Rev. Alexander Creaghead,* for intruding into his congregation, "to rend and divide it against his mind, the mind of the session, and the declared opinion of the congregation in general." The Presbytery having suspended Mr. Creaghead, and he refusing to submit, Dr. Alison carried the complaint up to the Synod, in 1741; and, when a hearing of the case was resisted there, on merely technical grounds, and thus "the last effort at accommodation failed," the famous "*Protestation*" was produced, signed by twelve ministers, one of whom was Dr. Alison,—and seven elders. This was immediately followed by what was called the "Great Schism"—the Church was rent into two parts, and remained thus divided for seventeen years.

In 1765, the people of New London, who had remained vacant from the time that he left them, sent him a call to come and resume his labours among them; but, after due consideration, he declined it.

Dr. Alison died on the 28th of November, 1779, in the seventy-fourth year of his age. A sermon was preached on the occasion of his death, by the Rev. Dr. Ewing, with whom he had been associated in the ministry, an extract from which was, many years after, published in the General Assembly's Magazine.

Dr. Alison was married to a lady whose maiden name was *Armitage*. They had six children,—four sons and two daughters. Two of his sons died in boyhood; a third died in his twenty-eighth year; and the rest survived their father. One of the sons was a physician. Though he left his family in indigent circumstances, he made provision in his will for giving his slaves their liberty.

Dr. Alison's only publication is a Sermon delivered before the Synods of New York and Philadelphia, May 24, 1758, entitled, "Peace and union recommended." It contains a note, suggesting that "as, in the perusal, it may to many seem long, they may conveniently divide it by pausing on the twenty-eighth page."

There are various testimonies remaining, to Dr. Alison's high character, as a man, a Christian, a scholar, and a preacher. Bishop White, who was

* ALEXANDER CREAGHEAD is supposed to have been born in this country. He was licensed to preach by the Donegal Presbytery on the 8th of October, 1734, and was ordained and installed minister of Middle Octorora, on the 18th of November, 1735. He entered warmly into the Whitefieldian revival, and being naturally ardent and impetuous, fell into some irregularities which, in 1740, became the subject of Presbyterial investigation. In 1741, the ease was carried up to the Synod, where it was debated with great earnestness. It was, however, lost sight of by the action consequent upon the famous protest brought in by the Rev. Robert Cross, by means of which the conflicting parties in the Synod were separated. Mr. Creaghead withdrew with the New Brunswick Presbytery; and we do not find his name in connection with the Synod of either New York or Philadelphia until the year 1753, when he appears upon the roll of the Synod of New York as an absentee. He was, for a time,—between 1745 and 1753, associated with the Cameronians. About 1749, he removed to Virginia, and took up his residence in the County of Augusta, on the Cow Pasture River, within the bounds of the present Windy Cove Congregation. On the defeat of Braddock in 1755, his congregation was in a great measure dispersed; and, crossing the Blue Ridge, he found a more quiet resting place in what is now Mecklenburg County, N. C. In April, 1758, a call was presented to him from Rocky River, which he accepted, and his installation took place in September following. Here he passed the rest of his days in the arduous duties of a frontier minister of the Gospel, and died in March, 1766, then the only minister between the Yadkin and the Catawba. During his residence in Pennsylvania, he was charged with being the author of an anonymous political pamphlet, which was so offensive to the Government that, in 1743, one of the Justices for the County of Lancaster, in the name of the Governor, laid it before the Synod of Philadelphia. But the Synod disowned both the pamphlet and the supposed author, agreeing with the Justice that it was of a disloyal and rebellious tendency.

a student in the College of Philadelphia, while he was a Professor in it, says of him in his Memoirs,—

“Dr. Alison was a man of unquestionable ability in his department, of real and rational piety, of a liberal mind;—his failing was a proneness to anger; but it was forgotten,—for he was placable and affable.”

President Stiles says of him—“He is the greatest classical scholar in America, especially in Greek—not great in Mathematics, Philosophy, and Astronomy, but in Ethics, History, and general reading, is a great literary character. I have had a long and intimate acquaintance with him.”

The following is an extract from the Funeral Sermon by Dr. Ewing:—

“All who knew him acknowledge that he was frank, open and ingenuous in his natural temper; warm and zealous in his friendships; catholic and enlarged in his sentiments; a friend to civil and religious liberty; abhorring the intolerant spirit of persecution, bigotry, and superstition, together with all the arts of dishonesty and deceit. His humanity and compassion led him to spare no pains nor trouble in relieving and assisting the poor and distressed by his advice and influence, or by his own private liberality; and he has left behind him a lasting testimony of the extensive benevolence of his heart in planning, erecting and nursing, with constant attention and tenderness, the charitable scheme of the widow’s fund, by which many helpless orphans and destitute widows have been seasonably relieved and supported; and will, we trust, continue to be relieved and supported, so long as the Synod of New York and Philadelphia shall exist.

“Blessed with a clear understanding and an extensive liberal education; thirsting for knowledge, and indefatigable in study, through the whole of his useful life, he acquired an unusual fund of learning and knowledge, which rendered his conversation remarkably instructive, and abundantly qualified him for the sacred work of the ministry, and the painful instruction of youth in the College. He was truly a scribe well instructed into the Kingdom of Heaven, a workman that needed not to be ashamed,—for he rightly divided the word of truth, and was peculiarly skilful in giving to every one his portion in due season. In his public exhibitions he was warm, animated, plain, practical, argumentative and pathetic; and he has left a testimony in the consciences of thousands who attended upon his ministry, that he was willing to spend and be spent to promote their salvation, and that he failed not to declare to them the whole counsel of God, while he endeavoured to save himself and those that heard him. And we have reason to hope that the bountiful Redeemer, whom he served in his spirit, has greatly honoured him by making him instrumental in the salvation of many, who shall be the crown of his rejoicing in the day of the Lord.

“He is now discharged from the labours of mortality, and is gone, we trust, to receive the approbation of that compassionate Redeemer whom he so faithfully served. For he often expressed his hopes in the mercy of God unto eternal life, and told me, but a few days ago, ‘that he had no doubt but that, according to the tenor of the Gospel covenant, he would obtain the pardon of his sins through the great Redeemer of mankind, and enjoy an eternity of rest and glory in the presence of God.’ It was this comfortable prospect that animated him to uncommon fidelity and industry in all the duties of life, and enabled him to bear the lingering dissolution of his body with patience and resignation, until he fell asleep in Jesus.”