

THE PRESBYTERIAN AND REFORMED REVIEW

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I.

THE TRIAL OF SERVETUS.

DURING the Columbian celebration a few voices were lifted in protest against the general enthusiasm. It was said that Columbus did not actually discover America, but only stumbled on the Bahama Islands, while seeking a western passage to Asia; that he was a bigoted Romanist and ought not to be countenanced by Protestants; and that, having been a pirate and a slave dealer, he was no fit example to be held up to the admiration of American youth. On the other side, it was urged that the discovery of America was an epoch-making event ever to be commemorated; that for four centuries the world has accepted Columbus as the discoverer and applauded him as a hero and a saint; and that now it would be better to preserve this ideal Columbus in the popular fancy than to render historic justice to the actual Columbus who has long since passed beyond the reach of praise or blame.

To a large number of persons the task of vindicating John Calvin at the present day would seem as hopeless, if not as thankless, as that of changing the popular estimate of Christopher Columbus. They will tell us that it is too late to reverse the judgment of history, and that if reversed it would destroy great moral lessons which are too valuable to be lost. For some generations past the world has had an ideal Calvin, who not only taught that hell is full of infants a span long, but proceeded to roast the chief opponent of that doctrine in a fire of green wood, with his heretical book tied to his girdle. The hideous story, with its dramatic incidents, has become the standing illustration of religious bigotry. It kindles the rage of poets and essayists, especially among the descendants

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

THE One Hundred and Fifth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was convened in the New York Avenue Church, Washington, D. C., May 18, 1893. The retiring Moderator, Dr. W. C. Young, preached an appropriate and eloquent sermon on "The Glory of the Church." The Rev. Dr. Willis G. Craig, Professor of Systematic Theology in McCormick Theological Seminary, was chosen Moderator; and during an unusually long, trying and difficult series of meetings won golden opinions from the body and the onlookers by the fairness, intelligence, executive ability and urbanity manifest in his administration. The churches of Washington had organized a number of committees in view of the meeting, and everything possible was done to promote the comfort and the pleasure of the members, by a generous and intelligent hospitality.

The ordinary business of the body was well cared for, though there was danger that it might be hurried through, to make time for the judicial questions which were pressing for answer. The reports of the great Boards of the Church were carefully examined by the Standing Committees, who introduced to the Assembly the Secretaries. The fine impression of the addresses of the Secretaries made on the writer is due, in part, to the exceptionally admirable reports in the *Washington Post*. The addresses seem to him to be the best made before the Assembly for many years. Dr. Cowan and Mr. Speer shared with the older Secretaries the cordial welcome and applause of the body. There is ground for special gratitude in the fact that the debates on revision and the judicial trial have not diminished the Church's beneficence during the past year. The gifts to the Board of Foreign Missions, for the first time, exceed one million dollars, and the report of the Committee on Systematic Beneficence shows an increase in the contributing churches of 625, and in the receipts of the Boards of \$178,765. The Church shows also the usual increase in ministers, congregations and membership.

The revision of the Confession of Faith has been postponed, at least for the present. For four years the subject has been debated in the newspapers and reviews, as well as in the judicatories of the Church. The attitude of the Church to the Confession has been made pretty clear. The reports from the Presbyteries show, that while we are ready to criticise with severity the words of the Confession, we are just as ready to subject to criticism quite as severe any amendments

History. 7. The present Gospel of Matthew. 8. A sixth work. 9. A seventh work. 10. An eighth work. 11. The Gospel of Luke. 12. Mark's Gospel in its final shape." It is evident that such a long series of composition and recomposition, of editing and reëditing of materials, must have been a process that would have required more time than between A.D. 40 and A.D. 70. In saying that "the evangelical literature began quite early," he must mean its *first* beginnings, that is, the first oral materials.

that may be proposed to it. So long as this state of mind shall continue, the *status quo* will be maintained. This is not an unhealthy condition. Indeed, this has always been our condition. The Confession and our form of subscription are responsible for it. The latter contemplates and provides for it. There has probably never been a time since the Westminster Confession was framed, when many of those subscribing to it did not believe that it could with advantage be amended at one point or another. The difficulty has been to secure an agreement, first, as to the parts to be amended, and, secondly, in the formulas of amendment. The discussions just closed have made plain how real this difficulty is. Meanwhile, they have made plain also that while our Church has been powerfully affected by the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, its theological position has not changed, its presbyters sincerely receive to-day the Westminster Confession in its historical meaning, as embodying the theology of the Reformed Churches.

The report of the Committee on the Relations of the Theological Seminaries to the General Assembly was heard with great interest. There are two conceptions of a theological seminary; one is that it is part of a university, the other is that it is a training school for the ministers of a particular Church. In a communion which demands so severe a training for its candidates as ours does, these two conceptions are likely to be blended, if not confused. But they are very distinct, and in some particulars mutually exclusive. The theological schools of America were not established under the dominion of the university idea; and it were simply to ignore their history to demand for their teachers a freedom in discussion at all approaching that of the members of the theological faculty in a university. Of course they must take up current questions, and solve pressing intellectual problems—so far as they are capable of solution—and investigate theological subjects. But unless the pledge taken by all incumbents of theological professorships in the seminaries heretofore affiliated with the Presbyterian Church means something other than it contains, or means nothing, the point of view in all discussions has been fixed both for and by the Professors; and that point of view is the system of doctrine in the Westminster Confession considered as ascertained truth, and not as simply tentatively accepted, like a working hypothesis. The General Assembly, representing the Church at large, evidently feels that this view needs to be brought to the attention of the seminaries, and that the relation of the seminaries to the Assembly as the ultimate interpreter of the Creed of the Church needs to be fixed. Moreover, it is felt that the property interest of the Church in these institutions requires investigation in order to secure it to the Church itself. The Committee has a delicate and difficult task before it; one which it may require several years to finish. Patience and wisdom and a disposition on all sides to coöperate are necessary to its wise accomplishment.

The case of the Presbyterian Church against the Rev. Charles A. Briggs, D.D., consumed at least one-half of the session of the Assembly. The right of the Prosecuting Committee (acquired by its appointment) to continue the management of the case, until the decision of the Court of last resort should be pronounced, was reaffirmed by the Assembly. The Committee was upheld in appealing, in this case, from the decision of the Presbytery directly to the highest Court. The appeal was sustained; 383 voting to sustain, 116 voting not to sustain. A Committee was appointed to bring in a minute embodying the action of the Assembly. One of the Committee was appointed to confer with Dr. Briggs, presumably to secure from him some statement that would enable the Committee to recommend a milder sentence than suspension. Dr. Briggs informed the Committee of his intention to preach and teach the views for holding and publishing which he had been tried. Thereupon the Committee reported to the Assembly the following minute, which was adopted:

“This Judicatory finds said final judgment of the Presbytery of New York is erroneous, and should be, and is hereby reversed; and this General Assembly, sitting as a Judicatory in said cause, coming now to enter judgment on said amended charges, finds the appellee, Charles A. Briggs, has uttered, taught and propagated views, doctrines and teachings as set forth in said charges contrary to the essential doctrine of Holy Scripture and the Standards of said Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and in violation of the ordination vows of said appellee, which said erroneous views and doctrines strike at the vitals of religion and have been industriously spread; wherefore, this General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, sitting as a Judicatory in this cause on appeal, does hereby suspend Charles A. Briggs, the said appellee, from the office of a minister in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, until such time as he shall give satisfactory evidence of repentance to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America of the violation by him of the said ordination vows as herein and heretofore found.”

In connection with this case, the Committee on Bills and Overtures reported a declaration, which the Assembly adopted, reaffirming the declaration of the Portland Assembly, that the original Scriptures were without error; and the Committee on Church Polity presented a minute setting forth the doctrinal significance of the verdict in the case of Dr. Briggs. Against both the verdict and the declarations protests were recorded; and they were answered by Committees appointed for the purpose.

The limited space at my command does not permit an adequate review of what will be known in the history of the Church as the “Briggs Case.” Perhaps the time has not come for such a review. There are two or three remarks, however, which may properly be made now.

The case exemplifies the reluctance with which the Presbyterian Church enters on a trial of one of its Presbyters for views opposed to the Church’s system of doctrine. Dr. Briggs has more than once

pointed out that the views in his Inaugural Address for which he has been tried, had been avowed by him in earlier productions; that, in this respect, the Address contained nothing new. The volume entitled *Whither*, and the address on *Biblical History* had been published some time before the Inaugural Address was delivered, and had called forth hostile criticism; but no official investigation had even been seriously proposed. It was only after he had, in the first place, consecrated his new professorship to the exposition and defense of his views, and, in the second place, challenged a trial by affirming in the most emphatic manner that they were in harmony with the Confession of Faith, that the Church, or at least his own Presbytery of New York, felt bound to begin an investigation looking toward the trial of the case, which Dr. Briggs on his side felt bound to make. But for the determined, indeed the defiant, attitude thus assumed by him, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to induce the Presbytery to appoint a Committee of Investigation. Of course, had a private prosecutor appeared, the Presbytery would have been obliged to listen to him. But the facts I call attention to are, that no private prosecutor appeared, that the Presbytery took no action, and that the Church at large did not demand judicial process until the Inaugural Address had been delivered and published.

Moreover, the opinions, which the Assembly has found itself unable to permit Dr. Briggs to hold and teach as a Presbyterian minister, have been presented by him not only polemically, but with a rhetorical violence which his best friends have publicly disapproved. I do not quote his language. The case is too recent to make quotations necessary here. Dr. Briggs has permitted himself to use expressions which, while strikingly successful as means of calling public attention to his views, have also called public attention to the fact, that they are out of harmony with the views of the Church itself, and to the additional fact, that he has supposed himself called to reform the Church's attitude to the Confession, which, since the Adopting Act, the Church has been studying and interpreting. It is needless to say, that he could not rationally have expected, in the circumstances, to monopolize the polemics of the debate. His references to the Westminster Confession, and his interpretation both of it and of the effect of subscription by means of our formula—and this in connection with his announcement of opinions which, to say the least, were new in the Church—called out remonstrances, which became more frequent and more emphatic year after year. An examination of Dr. Briggs' publications will show, I am sure, that these remonstrances neither diminished the violence of his polemical rhetoric nor changed his views. Am I going too far in saying that they made his rhetoric more intense? It required several years of this kind of agitation, in all of which Prof. Briggs himself was the protagonist, to push the Presbytery to the point of beginning a trial, and the Assembly to its completion in a conviction.

All this would probably not have been sufficient to provoke judicial action, but for the unfortunate impression made by Dr. Briggs' use of the English language. I know that I am now treading on delicate ground. In order to make my meaning clear I shall refer to a particular instance. In a pamphlet presented by Dr. Briggs to the Presbytery as part of his testimony, and entitled *Who Wrote the Pentateuch?*, on the third page, and under the head of "Credibility," he makes the following statement: "*The higher criticism of the Hexateuch vindicates its credibility.*"*

Now, if there can possibly be framed an unambiguous statement, it would seem that the writer of the sentence just quoted has been successful in making one. The proposition, "the Hexateuch is credible," one would say, is susceptible of but a single interpretation. The "Hexateuch" is the first six books of the Bible; and Dr. Briggs makes it the subject of the proposition whose predicate is "credible." But when he comes to interpret his own proposition we find that the "Hexateuch" as subject has vanished, and in its place appears a new subject, namely, "four parallel narratives." These narratives vanish in their turn and give place to what appears to be a third subject, namely, "their sources in the more ancient documents buried in them." And now when one asks the question, "What is it after all the credibility of which the higher criticism vindicates? Is it the 'Hexateuch;' or is it the 'four parallel narratives;' or is it 'their sources in the more ancient documents embedded in them?'" Dr. Briggs' statement yields no answer. The subject of the proposition is lost in a congeries of ambiguities. The credibility of the Hexateuch, as vindicated by the higher criticism, seems finally to consist in the fact that, "the writers and compilers were true to their sources of information, even when they could not harmonize them in all respects."

This is not the only subject in discussing which Dr. Briggs has used expressions to convey a meaning very different from that which they are usually employed to express. His printed remarks on the Middle State, on the interrelations of the Bible, the Church

* The following is the paragraph referred to: "*Credibility.* Is the writing incredible? Do its statements accord with the truth, or are they colored and warped by prejudice, superstition, or reliance upon insufficient or unworthy testimony? What character does the author bear as to prudence, good judgment, fairness, integrity, and critical sagacity? The Higher Criticism of the Hexateuch vindicates its credibility. It strengthens the historical credibility (1) by showing that we have four parallel narratives instead of the single narrative of the traditional theory; and (2) by tracing these narratives to their sources in the more ancient documents buried in them. It traces the development of the original Mosaic legislation in its successive stages of codification, in accordance with the historical development of the Kingdom of God. It finds minor discrepancies and inaccuracies such as are familiar to students of the Gospel, but these increase the historic credibility of the writings, as they show that the writers and compilers were true to their sources of information even when they could not harmonize them in all respects."

and the Reason, on the Biblical History, on the Original State of Man, and on the Codification of the legislation of the Hexateuch, furnish, at critical points, instances quite as striking of similar ambiguity. The impression left on the minds of a large number of Dr. Briggs' readers by these statements has not been helpful to those who sincerely desired to give effect to a policy of toleration or comprehension in the Presbyterian Church. This strong tendency to ambiguity in statement coöperated most effectively with what I have called his rhetorical violence and with a certain pedagogic manner, in forcing a trial, which the great majority of our presbyters would have been glad to prevent.

While these were *causæ sine qua non* of the trial, they were not the charges upon which he was tried; nor were they the offenses of which he was convicted. The charges and the specifications were formulated with precision and pressed with great ability by the Prosecuting Committee. But an Ecclesiastical Court is not bound to convict every presbyter, who in one or more particulars holds views out of harmony with the Confession, even if in the judgment of the members of the Court they are dangerous views. In the exercise of a wise and charitable discretion, the court may decline to prosecute, hoping that reflection will modify erroneous and dangerous views or the defendant's sense of their importance, or that time will reduce to a minimum the danger of their publication. It seems to me, not only that the Church waited as long as could reasonably have been asked; but that Dr. Briggs did nothing to help the Church to continue the *laissez faire* policy, and did everything that it was possible for him to do to push it to the exercise of its judicial functions. That, when it did exercise these functions it reached a conclusion, touching the limits of tolerable departure from the Standards, different from his own conclusion, is not a reason for wonder.

A good deal has been said unnecessarily in connection with this case about the making of new doctrines by legislation and by judicial trial. There is no disagreement in the Church on that subject. The definition of a doctrine in the Presbyterian Church is the conclusion of a long process, the details of which are set forth with singular care in our Form of Government. How hard it is to secure a doctrine's definition, the history of the attempted revision of the Confession of Faith clearly shows. The effect of a judicial trial is not the definition of a doctrine at all. In a trial the Court simply applies a doctrine, already defined, to a number of facts brought before it by competent and credible testimony. There is a loose sense, indeed, in which the Court is often said "to make law." But really no Court's "opinion" is law, and even the decision of a Court is not law in the sense of legislation. The decision is always the decision of a particular case with all its complications.

Nor has any doctrine been "defined" by the General Assembly in its "inerrancy" deliverance. The General Assembly possesses the right

of testifying, of making declarations on subjects of general interest. These declarations and testimonies are historically valuable, as indicating the general mind of the Church touching a subject at a particular time. Sometimes an Assembly renders an invaluable service to the Church in making a declaration. Presumably, Assemblies have been unwise, either in the character of their declarations or in their determination to make declarations. Wise or unwise, each Assembly is in these matters the ultimate judge of its own action ; and its action, however influential it may be, has neither the form nor the force of ecclesiastical law. Of its right to deliver its testimony there cannot be the slightest doubt. And before its exercise of an undoubted right is condemned as unwise, it ought to be shown, either that there was nothing in the Church's condition to make it appropriate, or that the declaration was faulty in form or substance.

Now in respect to the declaration of the Assembly touching inspiration, there has probably been quite as much excitement in the Church about inspiration as there has been in the country about opening the World's Fair on the Lord's day ; and there was precisely the same kind of reason for making the one declaration that there was for making the other. As to the declaration itself, it states only what in the Presbyterian Church of this country has always been the interpretation of the Confession. Dr. Henry B. Smith expounded and defended the common faith of the Church on this subject when, in his well known sermon on Inspiration, he antagonized the view of the mediating theologians, among whom was his beloved and revered Tholuck, and proclaimed as his own precisely the view to which the Assembly has given expression.

PRINCETON.

JOHN DEWITT.