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THE CRISIS

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THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

¹³²
The Rev. Dr. John T. Duffield
Princeton College.

Reprinted from "The Independent"
for April 13th & April 27th 1893

From the author's papers.

WHAT HAS CAUSED THE CRISIS?

In 1869 the Old and New School branches of the Presbyterian Church reunited, adopting a "Plan of Reunion," the first sentence of which declares, "each recognizing the other as a sound and orthodox body according to the Confession." At that memorable epoch, which was hailed by the entire Church with devout congratulation and thanksgiving, who could have imagined that before twenty years had elapsed a Professor in one of our theological seminaries—and that a seminary whose most distinguished Director and most distinguished Professor were prominent as leaders in effecting the reunion—should publish a volume impugning the orthodoxy of the accepted theology of the Church, asserting that "modern Presbyterianism had departed from the Westminster Standards all along the line;" that "it is necessary to overcome that false orthodoxy which has obtruded itself in the place of the Westminster orthodoxy;" that "the theology of a large proportion of the ministry of the Presbyterian churches stands in the way of progress in theology and of true Christian orthodoxy, and there is no other way of advancing in truth except by removing the errors that obstruct our path."

"This polemic," as the author styles his work, had not for its object, as might be supposed, to bring the Church back to orthodoxy according to the Standards, but for an entirely different—it might be said, the very opposite—purpose. With commendable frankness he says:

"The time has come for the reconstruction of theology, of polity, of worship and of Christian life and work."

He avows that

“subscription to elaborate creeds is the great sin of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches.”

He asserts that

“Presbyterians are bound by their own history to meet the Episcopalians on the platform of the Lambeth Articles—(1) the Holy Scriptures as the revealed word of God; (2) the two Sacraments—Baptism and the Lord’s Supper; (3) the Nicene Creed as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith, and (4) the Historic Episcopate.”

In a subsequent newspaper article, to which we shall have further occasion to refer, he says :

“The Episcopal Church lays aside her XXXIX Articles; let Presbyterians lay aside the Westminster Confession.”

It might have been supposed that the Directors of the Seminary would have promptly informed the author that as a Professor in a Presbyterian theological seminary it was not his business to reconstruct the accepted theology and polity of the Church, but to maintain and defend them; that if he could not conscientiously do so, he must find some other field of labor, where he might prosecute his self-appointed work without disturbing the peace of the Church. And yet—William Adams was dead; Henry Boynton Smith was dead. Instead of an expression of disapproval, a new professorship is founded, into which the author is inducted that he might devote himself exclusively to reconstructing the theology of the Church, by substituting whatever he might regard as “biblical” for whatever he might see fit to repudiate as “traditional.”

The Chair was founded and the Professor appointed November 11th, 1890. He informed the Board of his acceptance of the new professorship January 7th, 1891. Much light is thrown on our inquiry as to the cause of the existing disturbance of the peace of the Church and the impending crisis, by the following extracts from an article by the Professor-elect, published in *The Independent* of January 1st, 1891. After referring to the two parties in the Church, the conservatives and progressives, he says :

“The conservatives are, for the most part denominationalists, but the progressives are indifferent to denominational difference. The progressives have broken through the barriers, and are removing the obstructions with greater diligence and more rapidity than the conservatives can restore them. They are now the most powerful party. The only hope of the conservatives is to unite the conservatives of all denominations against the progressives of all denominations. But so soon as this is accomplished the denominations will pass out of existence, and two great parties will divide Christianity between them. The old controversies are dead and buried; it is impossible to revive them. Those differences that gave the denominations their existence have lost their importance. *The hedges are so dry and brittle that any man of nerve may walk through them without a scratch. It only needs THE STIMULATION OF A GREAT THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY, or of a great moral reform, to fuse the broad progressive party into a solid catholic mass. The signs of the times indicate that we are rapidly approaching such a crisis, that will destroy denominationalism and make the Church of Christ one.*”

The italics are ours. In the interest of the truth on the important subject of our inquiry we emphasize the avowed views and anticipations of the recognized leader of the progressives, at the time he assumed the responsible duties of a Professor of Biblical Theology in a Presbyterian theological seminary.

Three weeks after this announcement of an impending crisis, and of the causes which were rendering it inevitable, with the implication that in view of the ultimate result it was desirable, on January 20, 1891, the Professor was inaugurated. His Address on that occasion has now become historic. After an introduction in which the late eminent President of the Seminary is referred to as “one of the prophets of his time, who foresaw that the revision movement was coming, and a *transformation of theology was necessary*,” [Italics ours] he announced as the subject of the Address a theme most appropriate to the occasion—“The Authority of Holy Scripture”

We presume the statement will not be called in question that the Address was a painful surprise to those who believe the Scriptures are the word of God, the infallible rule of faith and

practice—at least a surprise to those who were not familiar with previous utterances of the Professor. With wisdom as to method, if not as to object, the work of reconstructing the theology of the Church was commenced at the foundation. Instead of a defense of the authority of the Holy Scriptures against the current assaults of rationalists and infidels, the whole trend of the Address was to invalidate the common faith in their infallibility and supreme authority. The supernatural element in their inspiration was minimized, the evidential character of miracles and predictive prophecy depreciated, and *the reason* and the Church—but prominently “the reason including conscience and the religious feeling”—presented as sources of divine authority, and *so far as indicated in the Address, co-ordinate with the Scriptures.*

The Address was received with favor and commendation by rationalistic newspapers and periodicals, and by the unevangelical religious press and pulpit. It was, with scarcely an exception, disapproved and condemned by the press of all evangelical Churches. Without preconcert upwards of sixty presbyteries overtured the General Assembly to take action in regard to it. On the recommendation of the Committee on Theological Seminaries the Assembly of 1891, by a vote of seven-eighths of the Assembly, exercised its veto power according to the compact between the Assembly and the Seminary, and expressed its disapproval of the appointment of the Professor. A substitute for the recommendation of the Committee on Seminaries, proposed by the minority, referred to the utterances of the Inaugural as “certainly ill-advised and as having disturbed the peace of the Church” and recommended

“that a committee be appointed, (1) to confer with the Directors of the Seminary in regard to the relation of the Seminary to the Assembly; (2) to request the Directors to reconsider their action; and (3) to advise that in any case the Professor be not allowed to give instruction during the year previous to the meeting of the next Assembly.”

It was therefore virtually the unanimous judgment of the Assembly that the objectionable utterances of the Inaugural

were disturbing the peace of the Church, and their continuance could not be tolerated in a Professor in a Presbyterian theological seminary.

In view of this action, and of a Presbyterian minister's ordination vow of "subjection to his brethren in the Lord," it might have been expected that the disturbance of the peace of the Church would be speedily terminated by the resignation of the Professor or action of the Directors. Instead of this, a technical issue is raised by the Directors as to the legality of the action of their predecessors in office—that is, as to the legality of their own action as a corporate body—in entering into the compact in accordance with which the Assembly had expressed its disapproval of the appointment of the Professor. The action of the Assembly was accordingly ignored in fact, though not in form, the Professor being retained in the discharge of the duties of the new professorship without assuming the title. It is proper here to remark that, in view of the decided sentiment of the Assembly, as expressed during the discussion of the report of the Committee, by both those who favored the report and those who preferred the substitute, it is unquestionable that *had there been no compact*, the Assembly, by a practically unanimous vote, in the exercise of its constitutional power "of reproof and bearing testimony against error in doctrine, and of suppressing schismatical contentions and disputations," would have expressed its condemnation of the objectionable utterances of the Inaugural in far more emphatic terms than a simple disapproval of the appointment of the Professor.

The committee appointed by the Assembly to confer with the Directors of the Seminary, having failed to adjust the points at issue in the interpretation of the compact, reported the result to the Assembly of 1892. A new committee was accordingly appointed to propose to the Directors to refer the matters at issue to approved arbitrators, whose judgment should be accepted by both parties as authoritative and final. Instead of awaiting a conference with this committee the Directors obtain an *ex-parte* legal opinion, and on the strength of it the compact which had

originally been proposed by the Seminary Directors, the validity of which had for twenty years been recognized without question, during which time the Seminary, under the conditions of the compact, had received large endowments, is declared by the Directors to have been null and void *ab initio*. Assuming that by this *ex-parte* legal opinion they were released, not only from all moral as well as legal obligation of the compact, but also from ordination vows, "to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the purity and peace of the Church," and "to be in subjection to their brethren in the Lord," and notwithstanding the practically unanimous judgment of the highest judicatory of the Church deliberately expressed, the disapproved Professor is retained, and his appointment as Professor of Biblical Theology confirmed.

A movement in the Presbyterian Church to reconstruct its theology—which is a very different thing from a revision of the Confession—might be ignored so long as it could be regarded as the vagary of an individual. But when it is indorsed by a theological seminary, and the reconstructor placed in a position of prominence and influence for the very purpose of prosecuting his assumed vocation more efficiently, *Presbyterianism being what it is*, the progress of the movement must, sooner or later, bring its leader into collision with the constituted authorities of the Church. No one can say that in the present case there has been undue haste on the part of the authorities. Those interested in the movement have gravely maintained that on the principle of the civil-law statute of limitation no effort should now be made to arrest the movement because the effort was not made sooner.

That a trial for heresy is to be deprecated is unquestionable. It is equally unquestionable that if the fundamental principles of the Presbyterian Church government were faithfully regarded by office-bearers in the church, trials for heresy would never occur. But it is also unquestionable that if these principles and regulations founded on them are persistently disregarded and violated, loyalty to Presbyterianism and fidelity

to ordination vows render a trial for heresy a righteous necessity.

What is Presbyterianism? It is not Congregationalism. This simple fact is of itself a conclusive reply to those who denounce the arraignment of Dr. Briggs by his presbytery and the appeal of the Committee of Prosecution. The discussion of this case reveals that a misconception as to what Presbyterianism is prevails to a considerable extent not only among outsiders but even in the Presbyterian ministry. To correct this misconception we call attention to the fundamental principles of Presbyterianism as indicated in the following extracts from "The Form of Government," the ecclesiastical Constitution of the Presbyterian Church. (Italics in the quotations ours.)

"God alone is the Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to his word or beside it in matters of faith and worship: Therefore the right of private judgment in all matters that respect religion is universal and unalienable."

"In perfect consistency with the above principle of common right, every Christian Church, or union or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into *its communion*, and the qualifications of its ministers and members, as well as the whole system of its internal government which Christ hath appointed. In the exercise of this right they may err in making the terms of communion either too lax or too narrow; yet even in this case they do not infringe upon the liberty or the rights of others but only make an improper use of their own."

"Our blessed Saviour, for the edification of the visible Church, hath appointed officers not only to preach and administer the sacraments but also *to exercise discipline* for the preservation of both *truth* and duty."

"No opinion can be more pernicious and absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood on the same level and represents it as of no consequence what a man's opinions are."

"Under the conviction of the above principle, they think it necessary to make effectual provision that *all who are admitted as teachers be sound in the faith.*"

"If the preceding scriptural and rational principles be steadfastly adhered to *the rigor and strictness of its discipline* will contribute to the glory and happiness of any church."

The "effectual provision" made for soundness in the faith of "all who are admitted as teachers" is as follows :

"No candidate, except in extraordinary cases, shall be licensed unless he has studied divinity at least two years *under some approved divine or professor of theology.*"

He is examined, among other things, in "theology," and is not licensed unless his examination is "sustained." He is further required to avow not only that he believes "the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice," but also that he "sincerely receives and adopts the Confession of Faith as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures." When a licentiate applies for *ordination* he is again examined in "theology"; he is required to renew the licensure vows just mentioned and to assume among others the following: "Do you promise subjection to your brethren in the Lord?" "Do you promise to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the Gospel and the purity and peace of the Church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise unto you on that account?" We may remark in passing that the latter clause of this latter vow indicates that the framers of the Form of Government anticipated the consequences of fidelity in maintaining the purity and peace of the Church, of which the recent trial has furnished a notable illustration.

Vows similar to the above are required of elders and deacons at their ordination.

In reference to these ordination vows it should be observed, the ethical principle is applicable that *a promise is binding in the sense in which the promiser believes the promisee understands him.* One who receives ordination to the ministry from a presbytery is bound by the promises required by and given to the presbytery, not in whatever sense he may be able to put upon the words of the vows but in *the* sense in which he believes they are understood and intended by the presbytery.

The above quotations from "the Form of Government," and others that might be added, clearly indicate the distinctive characteristic of the Presbyterian Church as a branch of the Church

of Jesus Christ, namely, A COMMON FAITH *formulated in a Confession containing what Presbyterians believe is the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.* For the maintenance and defense of this common faith the form of government is based on the principle implied in the vow of subjection to brethren in the Lord, namely, *the rule of the majority constitutionally expressed, including the interpretation of the doctrinal Standards.*

In the extension of the Church the maintenance of the principle is provided for by a series of judicatories, each lower judicatory being under the supervision of and responsible to the judicatory immediately above it in the series, from the lowest whose jurisdiction is over a single congregation, to the highest whose jurisdiction is over the entire Church.

The simple statement of these fundamental principles of Presbyterianism and the regulations founded on them, exposes the fallacy of the contention that the decision of a question of doctrine by a single presbytery should be accepted by the entire Church as authoritative and final—a contention the more remarkable as the fallacy had been made palpable by conflicting decisions by two presbyteries on substantially the same issue. It also exposes the fallacy of a kindred contention, that because in a civil court if one tried for *crime* be convicted he may appeal to a higher court but if acquitted there can be no appeal, therefore, if the question whether certain doctrinal teaching is inconsistent with the Standards be decided by a presbytery in the *affirmative* there may be an appeal to a higher judicatory, but no appeal if the decision is in the *negative*.

As to the main question under consideration—the responsibility for the disturbance of the peace of the Church and the graver crisis still impending—the above statement of Presbyterian principles and regulations founded on them would seem to settle the question beyond the possibility of a reasonable doubt. A Presbyterian minister receives official authority to preach and to teach from a presbytery, after having given to the presbytery certain promises—these promises being binding in the sense in which he believes they are understood and intended

by the presbytery. Not only does he thereby become responsible to the presbytery, but *the presbytery thereby becomes responsible to God, the Church, and the world for his teaching.* What then is the duty of a Presbyterian minister if, subsequent to his ordination he should be led to entertain views which he has reason to believe might have prevented his ordination had they been at that time held and avowed—if, moreover, he regard these views as so important and his conviction of them so decided that he feels it his duty to teach and to preach them?

This important practical question Dr. Briggs was called on to decide. For altho it be true that upward of sixty members of the Presbytery of New York have placed upon record their judgment that his notoriously objectionable views are within the "limits of liberty allowed by the Constitution to scholarship and opinion," we presume they would, with possibly a few exceptions, admit, that if a candidate for ordination were to avow as his belief that "there are three great fountains of divine authority—the Bible, the Church and the Reason," and should illustrate his meaning as to the authority of the Church and the Reason by the cases of Newman and Martineau; or should state that he felt it due to himself and to the presbytery to say that in avowing that he believes "the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments *to be* the word of God," he does not mean that the entire Scriptures are the word of God but that they *contain* the word of God and that we must determine what portion *is* the word of God by the reason, including conscience and the religious feeling; also, in avowing that he believes the Scriptures are "the infallible rule of faith and practice" he wishes it to be understood he does not regard the Scriptures as infallible in their historical or scientific statements, there is not a presbytery in the Church that would ordain the candidate and even in the Presbytery of New York there would not be more than a dozen, Dr. Briggs included, in favor of the ordination.

To the question above mentioned the answer clearly indicated in the principles of Presbyterian Church government

referred to unquestionably is, that in the case supposed it would be the duty of the minister—certainly under all ordinary circumstances his duty—to seek an interview with his presbytery, and state fully and frankly to his brethren in the Lord from whom he received official authority to preach, and to whom he had vowed subjection, the views he had reason to believe they might regard as objectionable, and submit for their decision whether believing as he did and publicly avowing that belief, he could remain in the ministry of the Presbyterian Church. Against the decision he or any member of the presbytery would, of course, have the constitutional right of “complaint” to Synod, and if needs be to the Assembly. Should it be decided that the views in question were inconsistent with essential doctrines of the Standards he should then peaceably withdraw from the Presbyterian ministry.

A minister in the case supposed may decline to take the course just mentioned. It is the course indicated in the terms of the Act by which the Westminster Confession was adopted in 1729. It is the course indicated in the Plan of Reunion of the Synods of New York and Philadelphia in 1758. It is implied in the fundamental principles of Presbyterian Church government. It is involved in the ordination vows “to maintain the peace of the Church” and “to be in subjection to brethren in the Lord.” It was formally recommended by the Assembly of 1878. And yet there is no statute requiring it. A minister therefore in the case supposed has the legal right to say, if any of “the brethren” regard my views as inconsistent with the doctrinal Standards let them arraign me for heresy and test the question by judicial process.

For reasons satisfactory to himself Dr. Briggs, we doubt not deliberately and conscientiously, saw fit to take the latter course. We were careful above to say we regarded the former course as the proper course “under all ordinary circumstances.” We can readily understand why Dr. Briggs should regard the circumstances in his case as extraordinary. In his article in *The Independent* on the eve of his inauguration, he assumes that *the*

organic unity of the Church is a consummation not only devoutly to be wished, but for which it is a duty to strive, by removing the obstructions that are in the way. The great obstacle is "denominationalism," of course including Presbyterianism. To reach the desired goal, denominationalism, with the exception of denominationalism based on the so-called "Historic Episcopate," must be removed. He says:

"The differences that gave the denominations their existence have lost their importance. The hedges are so dry and brittle that any man of nerve may walk through them without a scratch. It only needs the stimulation of a great theological controversy to fuse the broad progressive party into a solid enthusiastic mass. This rapidly approaching crisis will destroy denominationalism and make the Church of Christ one."

With this conception of "the hour and the man" of nerve needed for it, is it strange that a conspicuous leader in the progressive movement, indorsed in his work of reconstructing the theology and polity of the Church by the Directors and Faculty and patrons of one of the most venerable and influential of American theological seminaries, should regard his case as extraordinary and as justifying a virtual challenge of arraignment for heresy?

By amicably submitting his progressive views to his ecclesiastical brethren and, in case of their disapproval, withdrawing from the ministry of the Church, he would indeed prevent any serious disturbance of the peace of the Church, but "a great theological controversy" that *would* agitate and distract the Presbyterian Church is the one thing needful to destroy the most formidable form of denominationalism—Presbyterianism; and if the distraction can be protracted by raising issues as to technicalities of form and order, and thus prevent for another year a decision of the main issue by the General Assembly, then the continuance of the disturbance of the peace of the Church for another year is not only an ecclesiastical privilege but a Christian duty. Should a matter comparatively so unimportant as an ordination vow "to maintain the peace of the Church," prevent men of nerve from breaking down the hedges of the Presbyterian

Church when Presbyterianism stands in the way of a result so important and desirable as the unity of the Church on the basis of the "Historic Episcopate?"

We do not presume to sit in judgment on Dr. Briggs for the course he has seen fit to take; "to his own Master he standeth or falleth." But having taken his course intelligently, deliberately, and in full view of the inevitable consequences, for Dr. Briggs and his sympathizers and non-sympathizing defenders to attribute the disturbance of the peace of the Church and the graver crisis still impending to his arraignment by his presbytery and the action of the prosecuting Committee is like South Carolina and her sympathizers and non-sympathizing defenders attributing the War of the Rebellion to Abraham Lincoln. In fact, the history of the deplorable conflict in the nation seems to be repeating itself in the deplorable conflict in the Presbyterian Church. In 1860 Union men throughout the South denounced the secession of South Carolina, at the same time declaring if the Federal Government shall undertake to coerce a State, in the interest of State rights we shall defend South Carolina. Just so now many are saying, we disapprove of the views of Dr. Briggs, they are "certainly ill-advised and are disturbing the peace of the Church," nevertheless if the Assembly shall undertake by discipline to prevent Dr. Briggs continuing to teach and to preach his objectionable views as a Presbyterian minister, in the interest of freedom of thought and freedom in the expression of opinion, we shall stand by Dr. Briggs. In one respect the revolutionary movements in the nation and in the Church are not analogous. In the former the conflict was due to the attempt of South Carolina to secede from the Union; in the latter the conflict would cease if the disturber of the peace of the Church would but exercise his unquestioned right of secession. Different cases require different treatment. *Let us have peace.*

