

# REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

## FIRST GENERAL PRESBYTERIAN COUNCIL

*CONVENED AT EDINBURGH, JULY 1877.*

WITH RELATIVE DOCUMENTS

BEARING ON THE AFFAIRS OF THE COUNCIL, AND THE STATE OF THE  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.

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1877.

DR. M. D. HOGE, of Richmond, Va., said that across the sea they were not only familiar with the history of Presbyterianism in Scotland, but also knew some of the families who were distinguished for their loyalty to the Presbyterian polity and doctrine, and they knew that their cause would be safe as long as it was defended by men of the lineage and of the name of Lord Moncreiff, who had just addressed them. He would be most happy if he could succeed, not in saying what might be said, but what ought to be said on the comprehensive theme assigned to him, within the limits of a quarter of an hour. He was to demonstrate the capacity of Presbyterianism for indefinite expansion, and its adaptation to the wants of the world, in every land and in every generation of mankind, and this he was expected to do in fifteen minutes!

The power of Presbyterianism to propagate its faith and order, and its universal adaptation to men of every clime, colour, and condition,—why, this is virtually the theme upon which *all* of us are to speak! This is the great theme of the Council itself. My Lord, it is to unfold and enforce this truth that we are met in this august assembly of the representatives of all the Presbyterian Churches throughout the world, in this the noblest attempt ever yet made to give visible expression to our Presbyterian unity—an attempt which is arresting the attention and attracting the sympathy, and calling forth the prayers of thousands of the distant people to whom we minister, and of dear households from which we are separated—some of us by intervening seas.

I glance over this programme, with its admirable arrangement of subjects, and I find scarcely one which has not some bearing on my special theme.

We spent this morning in discussing the "Harmony of Reformed Confessions,"—there in that harmony we have one happy illustration of the adaptation of Presbyterianism to give expression to the doctrinal views, and Christian experience of all who have been led by the Divine Spirit to the knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus. This afternoon we discussed the "Fundamental Principles of Presbyterianism" in their power to antagonise the popular errors of the day—then here is another demonstration of its adaptation to overcome the obstacles to the extension of Christ's kingdom throughout the world. "The Home Work of the Church"—"The Foreign Work of the Church"—what is this but the practical exemplification of the methods by which we propose to advance the cause of Christ, through the propagation of our faith and order everywhere? And whether we discuss the right way of maintaining the sanctity of the Sabbath, or of disseminating a healthful Christian literature—or promoting genuine revivals of religion—or training the young to an early consecration of themselves to God and his service in every department of Christian work,—it is all comprehended under the one general topic of the expansive power and adaptation of Presbyterianism to fulfil the great ends for which the Church of God has been instituted, and to comply with the great command of its adorable Head to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." It is not necessary to enter into any analysis of the terms in which my subject is expressed. Indeed, the one implies the other. Presbyterianism would not have the capacity of indefinite expansion unless it were adapted to the intellectual and spiritual needs of men everywhere, and in every age. It is this universal adaptation which is one credential of

its divine origin, and therefore one element and pledge of its future success.

It would be utterly foreign both to my disposition and purpose to make invidious comparisons, or unfriendly comments upon the creeds and forms of other Churches. I desire only to illustrate some of the characteristic advantages which our own possesses for holding the ground it occupies and for ever-widening and ever-advancing conquests.

1. The organic structure of Presbyterianism is admirably adapted to give it stability and enlargement. The minister to labour in word and doctrine—the ruling elder to co-operate with him in all that pertains to spiritual government and instruction—the deacon to have oversight of the temporal interests of the Church—each working in his own appropriate sphere, and all acting in unison with reference to a common end,—all this forms a combination for stability and for efficiency not to be surpassed. And the adaptation of this organisation to bring under cultivation outlying fields hitherto unoccupied and destitute, is equally evident. All that is requisite is for the minister in the discharge of his high commission to go forth proclaiming the message of salvation through Christ, in dependence upon the power of the Spirit; and as he sows the good seed, and God gives the increase, he has the authority to gather those from without into the household of faith, and to complete the organisation of a new Church by ordaining such elders and deacons as the people may select. And the body thus constituted is a church, prepared, not only for its special work in the field where it has a local habitation and a name, but prepared also to affiliate with other churches which have been organised in like manner until they form a Presbytery; and when churches continue to multiply, new Presbyteries constitute the Synod, and when Synods become sufficiently numerous they form a General Assembly. Distinct churches thus organised have all the corporate efficiency which belongs to the Independent or Congregational system, with the additional advantage of being connected by a bond of union which enables them to co-operate as a unit, each developing its own spiritual life, and yet all assimilated by a common standard of doctrine and discipline into one body, compacted together, yet acting freely through all its members, stable in structure, flexible in administration; conservative in principle, aggressive in work; thoroughly furnished with every instrumentality for the extension of its boundaries whether in the home or in the foreign field.

2. Not only does the outward ecclesiastical structure of our Church give it these facilities for expansion, but there are some elements of its inner life and spirit which give assurance of its future growth and influence for good.

Among these characteristics I mention first, the fidelity and fearlessness with which the authorised expounders of divine truth, whether in our pulpits, in our theological schools, or in their contributions to our Christian literature through the press, have ever manifested in proclaiming and defending *all* the doctrines of God's Word—doctrines which some suppress, which others qualify, and which others repudiate.

We cannot overlook the fact that in some quarters there is a growing distrust as to the propriety and policy of giving free and fearless expression to what some call the unpalatable doctrines of the Bible—that there are those who hesitate to use even the phraseology in which Paul gave utterance to some of

the grandest truths announced in his Epistles—truths in which he gloried—truths before which modern craven-hearted temporisers quail. They say, even admitting these doctrines are in the Bible, do not preach them, they will excite prejudice, they will give offence; their proclamation is potent for evil, powerless for good. This is certainly taking a strange liberty with the Divine Word, to bring it to the test of human views of expediency. This is presumption indeed, to bottle up certain truths and label them “poison,” which God intended to be cordials to the hearts of his people. This is arrogance indeed, to shut out certain portions of the green pastures with high fences and say, Do not feed there; that grass is unwholesome, which God designed for the nourishment of his beloved flock.

If all Scripture is profitable; if every portion of divine revelation has its ordained efficacy in the conversion of men, and in the development of the soul's true life; if “the gospel plan of salvation is a complete system all of whose parts are perfect as the whole is perfect;” if to remove one stone from the foundation which has been laid in Zion is to imperil the whole superstructure based upon it; if all duty derives its inspiration and incentive from doctrine; if he who made man originally in his own image, knows what truths are best adapted to regenerate and sanctify, and restore him to the likeness which was lost by the fall, then it follows that the Church which never hesitates to declare the whole counsel of God, without evasion, qualification, or suppression, which is neither afraid nor ashamed to go to the utmost length of doctrinal statement to which the Scripture will carry it, will be the Church upon which Heaven's blessing will signally rest, and whose crowning honour it shall be to stand acknowledged as God's chosen instrument in advancing the kingdom of him whose right it is to reign.

3. But while our Church is thus distinguished by its loyalty to its doctrinal standards, it is equally conspicuous for the *Catholicity of its spirit*. It is not a broad Church in the sense of embracing a Calvinistic creed with an Arminian clergy; or, in a sense of believing in a trinity of persons in the Godhead—the same in substance, equal in power and glory—and then fraternising with those who deny the divinity of Christ. It is not broad enough to believe that there is but one name given under heaven among men whereby we can be saved, and then, to escape the charge of narrowness, conceding that there may be other ways of salvation provided those who walk in them are only sincere. It is not broad enough to teach that there is a system of Church government, discipline, and worship, derived from the Bible, and then to admit that these things are matters of human devising, or of mere expediency; but it is broad and liberal enough to recognise the fact that, notwithstanding the differences existing among Christians of other denominations as to forms of government and modes of worship, that a true Christian unity may exist even where there is little outward uniformity, and that this unity not only may, but does, and must exist among those whose lives are hid in Christ with God.

We rejoice in the belief that the true invisible Catholic Church is composed of those who hold to Christ the Head, and who by that connection are incorporated in his body, and so made members one of another, thus constituting the sacramental host over which he reigns on earth, and who shall one day reign with him in his consummated kingdom in heaven.

We believe that there is this blessed unity existing among all true Christians, whatever their ecclesiastical organisation or forms of worship, because all such derive their spiritual life from one source, each one in the confidence of a joyful trust able to sing:—

“My faith looks up to thee,  
Thou Lamb of Calvary,”

and all together ready to unite in the ascription:—

“Bring forth the royal diadem,  
And crown him Lord of all.”

Cherishing such sentiments as these, we can therefore, without doing any violence to our principles or preferences, in the most cordial way, unite with Christians of other names in the publication and circulation of the Holy Scriptures. And when it pleases God to pour down his Holy Spirit in such copious effusion that whole communities are moved, and all hearts burn together, and all eyes weep together, we can labour with others in the promotion of genuine revivals of religion. We can invite them to our Communion table, and sit at theirs, as at the late meeting of the Evangelical Alliance in New York, when, at the celebration of the Lord's Supper, a Baptist and a Methodist brother, and a Moravian, and the Dean of Canterbury, and a converted Brahmin from India, and the Presbyterian pastor of the Church, all together could sing:—

“How sweet and awful is the place  
With Christ within the doors.”

Here is another illustration of the facility with which Presbyterianism can adapt itself to every new providential opening and opportunity for usefulness; and this facility must be an element of progress and expansion, for while our Church believes itself to be based upon the foundation of the Prophets and Apostles, while it glories in its orthodox creed and Scriptural form of government, it can, at the same time, practically demonstrate its regard for the Communion of Saints, by extending the hand of fellowship to ministers of other denominations, by labouring with them in every good word and work, and rejoicing in the successes of all who are toiling to advance the kingdom of truth and righteousness in the world.

And now keeping, as I do, my eyes fixed upon the clock opposite to me, and seeing how rapidly my time is going, I pass over at a single step three of the heads, the discussion of which seemed necessary to the full and symmetrical development of my subject, and hasten in conclusion to say, that while there are systems of faith and modes of worship which enchain and enfeeble the understanding by suppressing free inquiry, and committing both thought and conscience to the keeping of spiritual rulers, the tendency of the Presbyterian system has always been just the reverse of this. The saddest, and yet the brightest pages of our ecclesiastical history are those which recount the struggles of our fathers in behalf of the sacred rights of conscience. I need not speak of the practical power of our principles as they have been so often illustrated in the heroic conflicts for the right and the true, whether in the glens of Scotland or on the plains of Holland, or in the villages of France or on the northern coast of Ireland, or among the mountains of Switzerland. A portion of the people of my native State trace their ancestry back to the noble race of men who were compelled by Bourbon tyranny to flee from their once happy homes on the fertile plains of Languedoc, or in the delightful valleys of the Loire, and who found their asylum on the high banks of the James

River in Virginia, or on the low lands of the Cooper and Santee rivers of Carolina. Others of my Virginia people are the descendants of the men who contended for Christ's Crown and Covenant at the foot of the heath-clad Grampians, or who fought the dragoons under Claverhouse at Bothwell Bridge, or who at the siege of Londonderry held out to the bitter end against James himself. There is yet in a branch of my own family, the old family Bible which their Huguenot ancestors carried with them first to Holland, and then to Virginia. Its covers are worn, its leaves are yellow and faded; they have often been wet with the salt spray of the sea, and the salt tears of the sorrowing exiles, but though the names are growing dim on the family register, I trust they are bright in the Book of Life; and now, thank God, the descendants of the Huguenot and Covenantant, and of the noble martyrs of the north of Ireland, are found dwelling together in one happy ecclesiastical household on our peaceful Virginia shores, with none to molest or make them afraid; yet ready, as I trust in God, ready once more, if need be, to brave and peril all for the testimony of Jesus, and for the defence of the faith once delivered to the saints.

My Lord, Fathers and Brethren, principles like these are worth contending for; a Church which has borne such fruits is deserving of our grateful love—of our most heartfelt devotion. And now what remains to us but to make our admirable system of doctrine and government more efficient than ever, by properly working it. How to promote this efficiency is one great object of the gathering of this Council. If we have practically illustrated the expansive character of Presbyterianism, and shown its adaptation to every locality on the earth, and to every exigency that might arise in that locality—with such an organisation, with such facilities for extension, if we have not made the progress that might be reasonably demanded of us, then the failure has not been due to any defect in the theory and constitution of our Church; the fault is not in the system, but in the men whose business it was to make it operative and efficient. What we now need is a new, sweet, and heavenly unction from on high—the effusion of that quickening grace and power which will arouse the slumbering energies of our Church, and cause every man to do his duty at his post, and by properly plying every instrumentality for good within his reach, to demonstrate the efficiency of our outward organisation. This morning, in visiting one of your cemeteries, I stood at the grave of one of your noble servants of Christ. I remembered that he tells us in one of his books that when he asked the engineer of the delaying train if they were waiting for water to fill the boiler, “No,” the reply was, “it was not water, but *fire* that they wanted,” to generate the steam, and set the wheels in motion. There is a baptism of fire which is not consuming, but kindling, life-giving, power-imparting, and that is what we want, that our Church may stand confessed before all men, as one of God's chosen instruments for filling the world with the millennial light and glory.

REV. MR. HENDERSON, Ballarat, Australia, said that he represented rather a big section of the Presbyterian Church and of the world, but it almost seemed as if they had been overlooking the southern hemisphere, and although that portion of the world was largely made up of water, and water was not good for growing Presbyterian Churches on, yet it must be remembered that the Presbyterian Church had taken deep root there, at the Cape, and at Aus-

tralia, and New Zealand. It was therefore only right that they should seek to do something for these Churches. He had travelled over rather more than half the world to be present at the Council. Dr. Schaff had quoted from Calvin that Calvin would have gone over ten oceans in order to insure the union of the Reformed Churches. He (Mr. Henderson) did not know what Calvin meant by ten oceans. He did not know whether he would have been satisfied with the Pacific and the Atlantic, and the Pentland Firth in addition. He did not know where else Calvin could have gone to satisfy his soul, and carry out the great purpose he had in view. The people of Australia looked therefore to the Council for encouragement to them in their work. The Australians were beginning to court friendly relations with the Presbyterian Church in the United States, so he did not grudge all the attention that the American brethren were getting; but at the same time they might remember that not only behind the Rocky Mountains, but beyond the Ocean on the other side there were Presbyterian Churches, and he thought the Council had been forgetting them. He had heard the word “Australia” used, but it seemed to him as if it had been used more from oratorical than any other purposes, not because there was any true appreciation of the needs and requirements of the Australian and other Churches. He desired to show them that Presbyterianism was adapted to the wants of new countries like Australia and New Zealand, that it had been doing good work there, and, with encouragement from the delegates from the various parts of the world, they would go on working out still greater and higher results. They in Victoria had managed to get over all differences among themselves, and that was a new thing in the history of the Church. Professor Flint, in his very admirable discourse the other day, spoke of not hurrying on outward union. He (Mr. Henderson) agreed with all that, but if they wanted a thing to grow, they must help it a little. If he were to send home an Australian plant which was capable of growing, they would not toss it out and say it was meant to grow, and let it grow; but they would take good care of it, or he would not send home any more. And so they found that this union was a living thing. They had to allow themselves to be led by the laity in this direction. The laity, who belonged to several denominations, said they were not going to pay three men for what one could do. They were not going to have an Established Church, a Free Church, and a United Presbyterian Church minister in the one neighbourhood, and so the Presbyterian element was carried out, in so far as it gave the laity a power in the Church. So the clergy, however much they had been disposed to hoist their several banners and fight under them, were forced on by the laity, and if the laity of other Churches did the same thing as their Australian brethren had done, the clergy would have to follow them too. It was their business to be Presbyterians alone, and not Free Churchmen, or Established Churchmen, or United Presbyterian Churchmen, but to be Presbyterians, and meet the wants of the Presbyterian people all over the colonies. They in the colony of Victoria were proud of themselves, rather because in this respect they showed an example to the world. They had read with pleasure the accounts of the union of different Churches throughout the world which had taken place since; more especially that grand union that took place in America. At the same time they were in the field first, their union having been consummated in the year 1858. That