

The Presbyterian Guardian

November 28, 1936

VOLUME 3, NUMBER 4

One Dollar a Year

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Published semi-monthly by
THE PRESBYTERIAN GUARDIAN PUBLISHING COMPANY
1212 Commonwealth Building, Philadelphia, Pa.

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THE SECOND GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA

THE outstanding action of the Second General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church of America, which met in Philadelphia November 12-14, was the adoption of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as the doctrinal standards of the church without the compromising amendments and Declaratory Statement which the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. adopted in 1903, and without any new declaratory statement on the subject of Premillennialism or on any other subject. This action was taken by an impressive roll call vote of 57 to 20.

A proposal to adopt those doctrinal standards *with* those 1903 amendments, and merely to recommend that the 1903 Amendments be eliminated by the presbyteries or (after discussion) by the next General Assembly, was rejected. So was a motion made by a member of the Presbytery of California "that a Declaratory Statement be appended to the Confession of Faith to this effect, that The Presbyterian Church of America does not interpret any part of the Westminster Confession of Faith or Catechisms as being opposed to the Premillennial view."

These and other proposals being in one way or another rejected, the Assembly proceeded to adopt, by the roll call vote mentioned above, the exact form of the Confession of Faith and Catechisms which was proposed by the Committee on the Constitution elected by the last General Assembly. That form is the form in which the doctrinal standards of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. existed in 1902 before the objectionable 1903 amendments were adopted, except that

two brief statements—one declaring the Pope to be Antichrist and the other declaring it to be sinful to refuse an oath when the civil magistrate requires it—are omitted. Thus the doctrinal standards of The Presbyterian Church of America have taken over from the 1903 amendments only *omissions*. They contain not one word which those amendments *added*. The result is that The Presbyterian Church of America stands at the beginning on an absolutely square doctrinal basis—the basis of the historic Westminster Standards alone.

It is, we think, not at all correct to say that this action was hasty. On the contrary it is the action really not of one General Assembly but of two. The June Assembly definitely ordered the Committee on the Constitution to present to this November Assembly for adoption as the doctrinal standards of the church the Westminster Confession and Catechisms in the form which they possessed in the 1934 edition of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. without any changes whatever except the elimination of those 1903 amendments. The question whether those amendments should be eliminated was referred to the Committee, but no other question whatever regarding the doctrinal standards was referred to it. Thus not only the proposal to adopt all the rest of the Confession of Faith and Catechisms without change, but also the question whether those 1903 Amendments should be eliminated, has been before the whole Church ever since the time of the June Assembly.

It would have been a calamity if the adoption of the standards had been further postponed, and it would have been a still greater calamity if those highly objectionable 1903 Amendments had been adopted in

The Presbyterian Guardian is published twice a month by The Presbyterian Guardian Publishing Company, at the following rates, payable in advance, for either old or new subscribers in any part of the world, postage prepaid: \$1.00 per year; five or more copies, either to separate addresses or in a package to one address, 80c each per year; introductory rate, for new subscribers only: Two and a half months for 25c; 10c per copy. Address all editorial correspondence to: The Rev. Ned B. Stonehouse, Th.D. No responsibility is assumed for unsolicited manuscripts. Editorial and Business Offices: 1212 Commonwealth Building, Philadelphia, Penna.

any way whatsoever. For The Presbyterian Church of America to have had those compromising amendments as part of its doctrinal standards, no matter for how short a time, would have been a very serious lowering of the flag.

As for the refusal of the General Assembly to "write eschatological liberty" into the constitution of the church, that was also a great victory for the Reformed Faith. In saying that, we do not for one moment mean that there should not be liberty for those who hold the premillennial view of the return of our Lord to enter into and remain in the ministry. Such liberty already exists, and it has never, so far as our knowledge goes, ever been denied by any human being in the church. But to put into the doctrinal standards such vague terms as "eschatological liberty" or "the premillennial view" or the like would be to insert something utterly incongruous with the whole underlying character of the rest of the standards and indeed would be to advertise to all the world that The Presbyterian Church of America has very little notion of what doctrinal standards are.

Our guiding star in this whole matter ought to be the determination to stand on the basis of our great historic standards pure and simple. This is not a creed-making age, and if we try to tinker with the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms we are pretty sure to mar the witness of our church to the things for which those great instruments stand. When the Christian Church really proceeds to define doctrine, it does so in a very different way from the way which would be followed if we should perpetuate the present unfortunate misunderstanding and suspicion in any addition to the constitution whatsoever. The proposed "liberty" planks are not only entirely unnecessary but would tend to divide the church permanently into two hostile camps. They would, moreover, be only the entering wedge for all sorts of queer excrescences and vagaries.

As it is, the Westminster Standards have been adopted in all their purity. The Presbyterian Church of America stands forth before all the world not as some strange new sect but as a true exponent of the Reformed Faith. Thus one of the commonest pitfalls into which new ecclesiastical bodies have fallen in our day has been avoided by our church. That is cause for profound rejoicing and for profound thankfulness to almighty God.

THE BUSINESS OF THE ASSEMBLY

Certain striking differences appear between the method of doing business which was followed by this General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church of America and the methods to which many of us have

grown accustomed in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The Moderator, Dr. J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., President of Wheaton College, did not make partisan "speeches from the throne," but left the chair in parliamentary fashion when he desired to make a proposal to the Assembly. He did not engage in attacks upon anyone in the church. He did not breathe out threatenings of ecclesiastical discipline against those who might be in the minority in ecclesiastical councils. He did not try to be a kind of moderatorial toastmaster by making jocose remarks when commissioners arose to speak. He did not use the weapon of ridicule against speakers who might arise to oppose measures which he favored. He did not, in short, employ any of the moderatorial methods which have attained such a painful vogue in certain ecclesiastical bodies of the present day. On the contrary, he conducted his office not only with the dignity and fairness which was to be expected of so distinguished a Christian leader, but also he endeared himself yet more to his brethren in The Presbyterian Church of America who already held him in high respect and warm affection.

The Assembly itself also exhibited characteristics that were markedly different from the characteristics of certain other Assemblies that might be mentioned. Discussion of dangerous and possibly divisive questions was not postponed until the late afternoon (when everyone could be counted upon to be too tired to attend to them), but began in the freshness of early morning and went on, if necessary, straight through the day. Speeches were not limited to five minutes, or to any particular number of minutes. Commissioners were not prevented from speaking a number of times on the same subject if they had anything to say. In other words the Assembly was a truly deliberative body. An honest effort was made to let everybody have his say; and if at one point certain commissioners did not get a chance to say what they wanted to say about treatment of oaths in the Confession of Faith or about other points, we feel sure that that happened not of set purpose but because the Assembly really thought that full opportunity for debate had been given.

All that is very refreshing. It may be wearisome to listen to brethren who *will* be foolish enough not to recognize the complete and final wisdom of views that you and I personally hold; it would no doubt be refreshing if everybody would say only what you and I personally want him to say: but in the long run truth, we are convinced, will flourish only if there is the utmost freedom of speech. May the General Assemblies of The Presbyterian Church of America always be truly deliberative bodies as this one unquestionably was.

Of course this General Assembly did unquestionably

exhibit certain faults. It did seem at times as though certain commissioners, in their effort to be democratic and avoid centralization of power, were a little lacking in a brotherly recognition of what has actually been done. In their reaction against letting a "machine" do everything, it did seem as though they were inclined to be unwilling to let anybody do anything. One wondered how, on the principles enunciated by some commissioners, any business could ever by any possibility be carried on.

But such was not the attitude of the majority; and in general the faults of this Assembly were youthful faults. It must be remembered that most of these commissioners have been in a hopeless minority in the church to which they have hitherto belonged, and thus have had little opportunity for practice in carrying on administrative enterprises. They will unquestionably learn, and we may well hope that when they do learn the business of the church will be conducted in a manner both efficient and democratic.

THE PRESBYTERY OF CALIFORNIA AND THE "CHRISTIAN BEACON"

IN OUR last issue we expressed the view that the actions of the Presbytery of California of The Presbyterian Church of America regarding supposed attacks upon Premillenarians by the editors of THE PRESBYTERIAN GUARDIAN and others grew out of the editorial in the October 1st issue of the *Christian Beacon* criticising a paragraph in the article of Professor Kuiper which appeared in the September 12th issue of THE PRESBYTERIAN GUARDIAN. The reason why we expressed that view was that both the California actions mentioned the editorial. As a matter of fact, however, we were in error. A later communication, signed by the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of California (see p. 82 below), states that the misunderstanding of Professor Kuiper's article by the Presbytery of California was entirely independent of the editorial in the *Christian Beacon*.

We are glad to point that out in justice to the *Christian Beacon*. The editorial in that paper has plainly been not the only cause, even though it has certainly been a very important cause, of the spread of this serious misunderstanding throughout the church.

At the same time, while we say that gladly, we are inclined to take a rather serious view of the widespread state of mind which this whole episode reveals. According to the latest communication from the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of California, there are a very large "number of persons throughout the nation" who arrived at the same interpretation of Professor Kuiper's words as did the editor of the *Christian Beacon*. What

does that mean? It means that a great many people think that "Premillennialism" and the "Dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible" are the same thing, so that when Professor Kuiper declared that the "Dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible" is an anti-Reformed heresy he was also declaring that Premillennialism is an anti-Reformed heresy.

In view of that fact, one of the pressing needs of the hour is the sharp separation between these things that are so sadly confused. The Premillennial view of the time of our Lord's return is not an anti-Reformed heresy. A man may hold to it and be a minister in a truly Reformed or Presbyterian Church. But the Dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible is, we are convinced, just as Professor Kuiper says it is, an anti-Reformed heresy indeed. It is quite out of accord with the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms.

As we say that, we are afraid that many of you who are our readers will be offended. Many of you use and love the Scofield Bible, and you are grieved by even a breath of an attack upon it.

But we beg you, brethren, to look at this question calmly and clearly. Dr. Scofield's notes are not Scripture, are they? They are not sacred. They represent just the attempt of a fallible man to interpret the Word of God—no doubt a truly Christian man, but still a man who was subject to error as other men are. Well, then, if that is so, is it right to regard those notes as being above criticism? Is it right to resent every adverse opinion regarding them as though it necessarily meant an attack upon the orthodoxy of all the users of the notes? Is it not better to give patient consideration to any criticism that may be offered?

We, for our part, think the notes—though of course they contain many things that are fine and true—are in important particulars and in their underlying structure untrue to the Word of God. You, on the contrary, think they are true. Well, if that is the situation, will you not be willing at least to listen to what we have to say? If you become convinced that we are right about those notes, then you will use them—if you use them at all—with great caution. If, on the other hand, you are convinced, after careful examination of our arguments, that we are wrong, you will return to the notes with all the better conscience and with all the clearer understanding of what the notes mean. Whichever one of us is right, earnest discussion of these things can hardly be amiss. No human book should be put on a pedestal. Every human book should be ready to justify itself ever anew by a comparison of it with the one infallible Standard—namely, God's holy and unchanging Word.