

A HISTORY
OF
The McCormick Theological Seminary
OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

BY

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HON. CYRUS H. McCORMICK.

exhorted, in harmony with the spirit that now pervades the general mind in church and state, to endeavor to forget all past differences and co-operate cordially in all practicable measures to secure its full endowment and to promote its prosperity and efficiency until it shall become one of the great glories of the vast and important field that looks to it for a supply of well equipped heralds of the Cross."*

The advice of the Assembly contained in the last of these resolutions was good and well intended. But it was unfortunately coupled with a measure which had already, on its first proposal, widely separated those who claimed to be friends and supporters of the Seminary, and which could have no other effect, as the result proved, than to widen still more the breach between them. There were those connected with the administration of the institution who foresaw and deplored the conflict this measure would bring, but they were powerless to prevent it.

The executive committee of the Board of Directors and the faculty were unable to procure any suitable instructor for the chair of History made vacant by the transfer of Dr. Lord. But during the session of 1867 that department of instruction was supplied partly by Dr. Elliott and partly by Dr. Lord. At its next annual meeting, in April, 1868, the Board of Directors, feeling the necessity of having the institution fully manned, resolved by a unanimous vote to ask the General Assembly to fill the vacant professorship of Biblical and Ecclesiastical History. When the matter came before the General Assembly of 1868 several candidates were nominated, but the choice fell on Rev. William M. Blackburn, D.D., then pastor of one of the Presbyterian churches in Trenton, N. J.

Dr. Blackburn accepted the position, and was installed as professor of Biblical and Ecclesiastical History at a called meeting of the Board of Directors held September 3d, 1868, in the North Presbyterian church, Chicago. After subscribing the constitutional pledge he was addressed in an appropriate charge by the president of the Board, Rev. R. G. Thompson, after which he delivered an inaugural discourse on the studies

* Minutes of the General Assembly of 1867, p. 363.

and duties of his chair. The Board fixed the salary of Dr. Blackburn at twenty-five hundred dollars per annum, and appointed a committee, consisting of Rev. R. G. Thompson, Mr. Charles A. Spring and Mr. Charles Crosby, to inform Mr. McCormick that Dr. Blackburn had been elected by the General Assembly and inaugurated by the Board of Directors as professor of Biblical and Ecclesiastical History in the Theological Seminary of the Northwest.

This committee addressed the following communication to Mr. McCormick, then in New York City, under date of October 16th, 1868:

"Cyrus H. McCormick, Esq.

Dear Sir: The undersigned, a committee appointed by the Board of Directors of the Theological Seminary of the Northwest for that purpose, have the pleasure to inform you that the General Assembly, at its sessions in Albany in May last, appointed the Rev. William M. Blackburn, D.D., to the professorship of Biblical and Ecclesiastical History in the Seminary. He was inaugurated and entered upon its duties at the beginning of this term. He promises to be an able and proficient professor. All the four professorships in the Seminary are now filled. This information is due in view of the arrangement heretofore made in regard to the last installment of your noble and beneficent gift to endow the Seminary. The institution is now in a prosperous condition, and its fields of usefulness are rapidly enlarging. Uniting our prayers with yours that the blessing of God may rest upon it, we have the honor to remain,

Yours very fraternally,

R. G. Thompson,
C. A. Spring."

To this letter Mr. McCormick replied in a long communication, giving his views in full on the subject and defining his own position in regard to the endowment. Mr. McCormick's paper addressed to the Assembly of 1866 has been given in a preceding chapter. It is necessary to quote now only so much of this second communication as will give a fair statement of the reasons which induced him to decline this application of the committee for the payment of the last installment.

“Chicago, Nov. 17, 1868.

Rev. R. G. Thompson and C. A. Spring, Sr., Esq., committee :

Gentlemen: Your letter of October 16th was duly received. Circumstances have prevented me from answering it sooner; and although very busily occupied since my arrival here from New York on business, and as I have been approached on the same subject by the present collecting agent of the Seminary (Mr. Truax), I will not longer delay an answer. In view of statements which, as I have been informed, have been made to your Board of Directors, I had not supposed that such a notice to me would be considered necessary.

“Learning, previous to the meeting of the General Assembly at St. Louis, in 1866, that, in a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Theological Seminary of the Northwest, a proposition had been made to transfer Dr. Lord from the chair of History in this Seminary to the chair of Theology, I decided to attend the meeting of the Assembly for the purpose of satisfying myself of the course to be taken by that body, and, if possible, of preventing the proposed transfer by making the Assembly acquainted with the state of things existing at Chicago, as between Dr. Lord and myself and friends, bearing upon that question. I accordingly, when there, sought an interview with Mr. Jesse L. Williams, whom I knew personally and who, I was informed, was the most active and leading member of the Assembly in connection with the action sought in relation to the affairs of the Seminary at Chicago.

“A large minority of the Board of Directors had protested against the transfer of Dr. Lord, at the previous meeting of the Board, on the ground that such transfer would be far from satisfactory to the friends of the Seminary who had contributed to its endowment and sustained and carried forward the institution successfully to that time, as well as to myself, no friendly intercourse having existed between Dr. Lord and me for some years. I informed Mr. Williams of this fact, explaining to him somewhat the character of the differences which had existed between Dr. Lord and myself and friends who had co-operated with me in the establishment of the Seminary; adding that I hoped the General Assembly would not place

Dr. Lord in that chair, that I felt that the interests of the institution would not be thereby promoted, and, as that chair bore my name and was the only recognition of the sort of my connection with the Seminary, I trusted that circumstance, as well as others, would be entitled to consideration in placing a professor in that chair."

After some further statements in relation to Dr. Lord, and a more detailed account of the conversation held with Mr. Williams at St. Louis, in which the latter claimed that the "new friends of the Seminary should have the chair of Theology and a good working majority in the Board of Directors," Mr. McCormick goes on to say:

"I then remarked to him that, if they persisted in carrying out their plans as proposed, and in thus setting us aside in disregard of our wishes and preventing us from continuing our work, especially when we had always been desirous that they should co-operate with us in support of the Seminary, they would of course not expect me to pay over the remaining fourth installment of the endowment, then unpaid. To which he replied that there would be no difficulty upon that point, as they had on their side men of wealth and ample means by whose contributions they proposed to endow the chair of Theology for Dr. MacMaster, if elected, with the sum of \$50,000, and that Dr. MacMaster would not accept the chair otherwise than with the understanding that it would be endowed by his friends. Mr. Williams said he would communicate my suggestions to the committee on seminaries, but that he had little expectation they would be adopted by the Assembly. And he afterwards informed me that no change could be made, and that Dr. MacMaster would receive the nomination.

"It appears, however, that certain of the faculty and directory of the Seminary have been in ignorance of the foregoing facts, or are disposed to look no higher than the law in the case, expressing the opinion that I am bound to pay this installment. Inquiries have also been made of the trustees upon this point. But, in view of what has been said, I now submit whether this proscription of the directors, as well as of myself and friends,

wholly upon political grounds, does not justly work a forfeiture of the whole endowment fund, instead of my being subjected to a call from you, under the circumstances, for further funds?

“When my endowment was accepted by the General Assembly, it is well known that a large majority of the Old School Presbyterian Church were opposed, as I have before said, to the agitation in the Church of political questions. My own humble views on that subject were known to agree with the views of those opposed to such agitation, as represented by Dr. Rice. The General Assembly, as I believe is universally the case when not inconsistent with duty, in accepting such donation elected professors and directors to carry forward the institution agreeing essentially in these views. At that time Dr. Lord was understood to be in perfect accord with them.

“I have always accorded to others the same liberty of opinion claimed for myself, and have had nothing whatever to say in the selection of directors or agents of the Seminary at any time, not even knowing the men; and I challenge the production of testimony to show proscription in any case while the Seminary was in the hands of its founders. The General Assembly acted then upon the principle that justice and equity, to say nothing of Christian courtesy, require that due regard should be had to the wishes and sentiments of members of the Church who have placed in her hands the means of founding and sustaining important institutions in her gift. The correctness of this principle was fully recognized by Dr. MacMaster at the time of his election.

“After the death of Dr. MacMaster and the failure to raise the sum anticipated for the endowment of that chair, Dr. Lord was transferred to it at the meeting of the next Assembly at Cincinnati, leaving the chair of Biblical and Ecclesiastical History unoccupied during the past year.

“Prior to the meeting of the General Assembly at Albany, while residing in New York, I was written to by friends in Chicago, inquiring whether, in the event of their being able at the meeting of that Assembly to elect a professor to the chair acceptable to the old friends of the Seminary and to restore the directors displaced to their former positions upon the Board

and to procure some satisfactory guarantee against similar unjust interferences in the future, I would be disposed to return to my original position in connection with the Seminary, and of course to pay over the fourth installment of the endowment fund. To which I replied that if a satisfactory arrangement of that sort could be effected I would not only willingly but cheerfully do so; that Dr. Rice was, as I was informed, in the enjoyment of better health than for some time previous, and I had no doubt could be induced to accept the professorship of Theology, if re-elected to it. He was accordingly nominated for the vacant chair in the Assembly at Albany, when Dr. Thomas was nominated in opposition to him. And when it was thought at a later day by some of his friends that he (Dr. Rice) would not be elected, they consented to withdraw his name and substitute for it that of Dr. Skinner, a man of acknowledged ability and learning. But the Rev. Dr. Blackburn was elected in opposition to him.

"I need not say that my interest in the success of so great an enterprise, labored for with so much interest and anxiety, remains unabated. And if, as stated to me by Mr. Truax, the Seminary is now embarrassed for funds, and with no reasonable prospect of obtaining them, some of the few subscribers to the MacMaster endowment refusing to pay because of the failure to raise the \$50,000 proposed, in this condition of things I would reaffirm my willingness to co-operate in the support of the Seminary, and my desire to assist in placing it on a solid financial basis, if the General Assembly will provide for such a corps of professors as the original one, and the corresponding 'working majority' of directors demanded and taken from us 'by the other side,' and with proper assurances of non-interference in the future. In this case I should be disposed not only to pay the \$25,000, but to add besides \$5,000 to the endowment of each professorship, considered by the Board also important.

"Finally, I submit whether, this issue having been made by the new friends of the Seminary, first in their refusal to co-operate with its old friends and founders, and second in their turning them out and taking possession themselves, it is not

just that they meet them in a spirit of Christian equality and fairness, and either accept this proposition or refund (without interest) the \$75,000 paid by me.

Respectfully yours,

Cyrus H. McCormick."

Mr. McCormick published this correspondence in the "Northwestern Presbyterian" of November 28th, 1868, in order that the public might understand the facts in the case touching his refusal to pay the last installment of his endowment. He had been subjected to some criticism and misrepresentation about the matter, preferring, as he said, to remain quiet and see what would be the result of the "experiment undertaken by those who had superior numbers and proffered means to wrest from its original friends the direction and management of the Seminary." But now he felt that further silence would be improper, and that it became a duty to vindicate himself by this public letter.

As might have been expected, the letter made a sensation throughout the Church. For it was quite apparent that a new party, created largely by the popular excitements growing out of the war times, had come to the front, both in church and state, which felt itself called upon to control things with a strong hand. These "new friends of the Seminary," as they were called, had so controlled the action of successive general assemblies as to secure a decisive majority in the Board of Directors; and, not content with a working majority there, they soon began the process of changing the Board of Trustees by displacing three of its oldest and most efficient members, in order to make room for three new men of their own way of thinking. This Mr. McCormick understood to be a deliberate and concerted attempt to wrest the Seminary, its management and its funds, from the control of those who had endowed it and had thus far sustained it through many difficulties. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that he, the largest donor of the funds, should hesitate and even refuse to hand over any more money. Mr. McCormick had not at any time heretofore intended to withhold the payment of his fourth installment. Nor did he now intend, as his letter shows, to

withhold payment, provided the General Assembly would stand by the original basis of 1859, upon which his endowment was given. But he was not willing to stand by quietly and see himself and his friends ostracized, according to some new standard of loyalty, by a mere partisan majority, who were determined to rule, but had comparatively little or no endowment money to give.

The publication of this letter of Mr. McCormick called out a reply from Dr. Lord, defending himself against certain personal accusations made in the letter, and in turn severely denouncing Mr. McCormick's position in relation to the obligations of his bond. This was published in the Cincinnati "Presbyter" of January 9th, 1869. To this Mr. McCormick published a rejoinder in the "Northwestern Presbyterian," which was followed by a second paper from Dr. Lord, and that again by a second and final rejoinder by Mr. McCormick. In the meantime several other parties joined in the public discussion of the points at issue. Mr. Jesse L. Williams, Dr. N. L. Rice, Dr. Thomas V. Moore of Richmond, Va., Dr. D. X. Junkin and others took part in the controversy. The whole correspondence was gathered together by Mr. McCormick and published in pamphlet form under the title "On the Presbyterian Theological Seminary of the Northwest."