

THE UNION SEMINARY REVIEW

VOL. XXX.

JULY, 1919.

No. 4.

A REVIEW OF THE NEW ORLEANS ASSEMBLY, 1919.

BY REV. WALTER L. LINGLE, D. D., *Editor.*

It was my privilege to be present at the opening of the Assembly and to attend all of its sessions except those held on the last day. Since the Assembly dissolved I have read with care the reports given of the work of the Assembly in all of our Church papers. It is not my purpose in this article to set down in chronological order all that the Assembly did. The reader is referred to the Church papers and the minutes of the Assembly for that. I wish the rather to pass under review the most important acts of the Assembly and to make such comments as may seem pertinent. I shall try to speak with fairness and yet with the utmost frankness. It is probably too much to hope that all my readers will agree with all that I may say, as the Assembly itself was much divided on a number of the most important questions.

FEDERAL UNION.

The question that aroused largest interest in the Assembly was that of Federal Union with other Presbyterian Churches. That question was uppermost in the minds of many commissioners when they voted for moderator on Thursday afternoon, May 15th, and continued to be so until it was voted on about 4 o'clock on Wednesday afternoon, May 21st. However, this was not the deciding factor in the election of the moderator. The man who nominated Dr. Fraser for moderator

ROBERT ALEXANDER WEBB, D. D., LL. D.

*BY THE REV. JAMES H. MCNEILLY, D. D.,
Nashville, Tenn.

The sudden death, on May 23, 1919, at his apartment in the Seminary building, of the Reverend Robert Alexander Webb, D. D., Professor of Systematic Theology in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary of Kentucky, removes from the Church on earth one of her most able, faithful, and efficient ministers of the Word of God. Her deep sense of loss is only mitigated by the confidence, that in the plan of God, his work here was done, and that having served the will of God in his generation, he has gone to be with Christ in the higher service of the heavenly sanctuary. He being dead shall still speak to coming generations, and his works shall follow him.

Robert Alexander Webb, third child of Robert C. Webb, was born on the 20th day of September, 1856, in Oxford, Mississippi. His father being a ruling elder in the Church, he was from infancy brought up according to the strict methods of the Presbyterian Church of an earlier day. In 1871 the family removed to Nashville, Tennessee, where his father became a ruling elder in the Woodland Street Church, and the large family of children were regular attendants on the Sunday school and church services. In 1873 the mother died, and in the summer of that year Nashville was visited by a very severe epidemic of cholera. Robert had a violent attack of the disease, and was brought near to the gates of death. His recovery, he felt, was by the special blessing of God, and it seemed to have confirmed his purpose to devote himself to the ministry of the gospel as his life work.

In preparing for that work he attended the noted preparatory school of the Webb Brothers, his cousins. From there he

* Dr. McNeilly was Dr. Webb's pastor in his boyhood and youth and an intimate friend during his whole life.

entered the Southwestern Presbyterian University at Clarksville, Tennessee, graduating in 1877. His theological training was received at the Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina, especially under that Prince of Preachers, Dr. John L. Girardeau, graduating in 1880.

He was licensed by the Presbytery of Nashville, and in 1883 he was ordained by the Presbytery of Bethel, S. C. For several years he served churches in North and South Carolina. He was serving the Westminster Church in Charleston, S. C., when in 1892 he was called to the Chair of Systematic Theology in the Southwestern Presbyterian University. After a service of sixteen years there, he was called to the Chair of Systematic Theology in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary of Kentucky at Louisville in 1908, where he spent his last days.

Dr. Webb was twice married. First to Miss Sarah, daughter of Rev. Dr. John L. Girardeau. She only lived a short time after marriage. His second wife was Miss Roberta Beck, of Columbia, S. C. She, with their two children, survive him—a daughter, Miss Annie, and a son, Robert Alexander Webb, M. D., who has been for two years with the American army in Europe.

So his passing breaks up a happy home. May it be reconstructed in that home which Jesus Christ prepares for His own! Dr. Webb, while generally blessed with good health, was never robust, and sometimes his devotion to his work sapped his physical strength. He was a conscientiously diligent student in preparing for his classes. During his vacations, he supplied churches or delivered lectures on Bible themes to various Assemblies, with occasional articles for the religious press. He also published two volumes, entitled "The Christian Hope," and "Theology of Infant Salvation." He realized deeply and felt keenly the prevailing unrest in the religious world. And, indeed, as he saw the tremendous forces, secular and spiritual, that are threatening Church and State, his heart was distressed, and all these things tended to a weakening of his vital forces; but not enough to cause any alarm. He was very anxious to make a visit to his son, who was engaged in hospital work in

England. But he could not secure passports for himself and his wife. He was greatly delighted a little while after to receive a message that his son was coming home on a short furlough, and he looked forward to the meeting with bright hopes.

On Sunday, the 18th of May, he preached twice, although with considerable discomfort to himself. His physician pronounced his trouble a slight indigestion, and urged him to rest quietly for a few days. He seemed to have a presentiment that his day was almost done; and he spent some time in writing letters to dear ones of his family. On Thursday, the 22d, he felt worse; but his physician reassured him and left a prescription to be taken. Suddenly in the late hours of the night, as he was about to take the medicine, he began to suffer intensely, and before his physician could reach him his heart ceased its functions, and his spirit passed into that world where pain and sickness can never come. The funeral service was held in the Seminary chapel, the professors officiating, on Saturday, the 24th of May; and on the following Monday the body was brought to Nashville, and with a simple service by the ministers of the Presbytery of Nashville, the precious dust was laid to rest beside the dear ones who had gone before him into the glory land. There in beautiful Mount Olivet his body awaits the resurrection call.

This in brief is the outline of a life that abounded in service for God and man. A life free from pretense or ostentation, but brave, faithful, and true. A pure, gentle human life, strong in intellect, warm in heart, clear in conscience, that sought ever to know and do the will of God, simply trusting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Such a life can never die. There were certain elements of character, manners, principle that made up the personality of Dr. Webb, and that were manifested in his work, giving it consistency of purpose and of achievement.

THE MAN.

The order in which Dr. Webb would have estimated the ministry was probably, first as Man, then as Christian, then as

Minister. To him the basis of all character and real success is genuine manhood—man as created in the image of God; then man redeemed by Jesus Christ, striving to regain that image; then man as officially set apart to assist men in restoring the image.

Dr. Webb was a true man, strong, purposeful, courageous, striving to use to the most the powers with which God had endowed him. He was intensely human in the best sense of the term. To use a phrase common in the old days in the South, "He was a born gentleman." It was a remark of Dr. Robert J. Breckinridge, to a graduating class in the old Danville Seminary, "Gentlemen, you will find that the ministry is no bed of roses, and some of your serious troubles will be misunderstandings, contentions, opposition from your brethren in the ministry, arising from the fact that so many ministers are not gentlemen born—they are good men, sincere Christians, but they lack the graciousness of manner, the tact, the patience, the openness of mind that is born with one, and goes so far in smoothing the asperities of life." Dr. Webb had that kindly manner, that gentle judgment of others that won him friends everywhere, and gave his opinions weight with his brethren. His convictions were strong and clear, and he never hesitated to express them, when occasion required, but he was tolerant of the sincere opinions that differed from his own. He had no patience with pretense or hypocrisy. He had that fine sense of humor that made him a genial companion; and while it was not introduced into his pulpit ministrations, it saved him from making those awkward and ridiculous blunders of manners or statement that often destroy the effect of a sermon. It was Elspeth MacFadyen, the Sermon-Taster, in Ian Maclaren's delightful story, who bewailed the lack of a Professorship of Humor in the Theological Seminary; as it would have saved many a stupid minister from raising a laugh when he intended to draw a tear. It was his bright, quick recognition of the funny side of life that made him hail-fellow-well-met with his students, and made him their confidential adviser and friend.

In person Dr. Webb was of medium height, rather slender,

with an open and engaging expression of countenance, a full suit of hair, with small hands and feet. He was easy and graceful in his carriage, and preserved to a remarkable degree the appearance of youth. A rather ludicrous episode occurred in the Presbytery of Nashville, when he came to take the Chair of Theology at Clarksville. At the same time we received a brother of middle age and rather pompous manner. Before the Presbytery met Dr. Webb was introduced to this brother, and was asked, "Where do you come from?" "From Charleston, sir." "Where are you going?" "To the University at Clarksville." "To pursue your studies, I presume?" "I go to take the Chair of Theology." "Ah, I should hardly have supposed it from your looks. A very responsible position for one so young." "Ah, Doctor, I am a great deal older than I look." But the youthful appearance betokened the freshness of a youthful spirit. But he has gone from us to that land where age does not wither, and none shall ever say "I am old."

AS A CHRISTIAN.

Dr. Webb was a deeply spiritual Christian. He realized his lost state as a sinner under condemnation of God's law. He recognized his own helplessness, and he saw in Jesus Christ a Saviour able to save to the uttermost. And with deep humility and penitence he surrendered himself to Christ as Lord and Saviour. Thenceforth his spiritual life grew and was developed, being nourished by study of the Word of God and prayer. His communion with God gave him an ever deepening sense of the riches of grace that saved him. But he was reticent as to his own religious experiences. Just as always those whose fellowship with Christ is closest, are ever slowest to speak of it before men. His daily life was the outcome and expression of his living faith.

AS A MINISTER.

Dr. Webb served as pastor of churches for ten years—five years with Bethel, York County, S. C.—one year at Davidson

College, N. C., and four years with Westminster, Charleston, S. C. By his tender and sympathetic ministrations as a pastor he won the love and confidence of his people, while by his preaching of the Word he fed and nourished their souls.

It was as preacher that he attracted the attention that sought him for the Chair of Theology in training young men for the ministry. In his pulpit ministrations he generally selected the profounder truths, the great fundamental doctrines of the Bible for exposition. His preaching was profoundly spiritual, holding forth Christ and Him crucified as the only foundation of hope for the world. He did not discuss questions of sociology or politics, moral or secular questions as affecting communities. His message was to the individual, urging subjection to Christ; believing that if a soul surrendered to Christ completely, that soul could be trusted, under the guidance of God's spirit, to settle questions of secular duty, and to determine with other Christians what duty is owed to God, and what to Caesar. In other words, he believed that the influence of the church on secular life is indirect, through its influence in bringing a new life to the individual. And he believed that thus the Church of God could most powerfully bless the world. He would have indorsed the statement of Dr. Shedd in his *Pastoral Theology*—I quote it in full as an explanation of Dr. Webb's practice: "That unearthly sermonizing of Baxter, and Howe, so abstracted from all the temporal and secular interests of men, so rigorously confined to human guilt and human redemption—that preaching which upon the face of it, does not seem even to recognize that man has any relations to this little ball of earth; which takes him off the planet entirely and contemplates him simply as a sinner in the presence of God—that preaching, so destitute of all literary, scientific, economical and political elements and allusions—was nevertheless, by indirection, one of the most fertile causes of the progress of England and America. Subtract it as one of the forces of English history, and the career of the Anglo-Saxon race would be like that of Italy and Spain."

In Dr. Webb's preaching there was an earnestness, an unc-

tion and a tenderness, which indicated his deep sense of the greatness of the issues at stake, the salvation of immortal souls. And while he depended on the Holy Spirit for results of his ministry, yet he realized his personal responsibility for declaring the truth, and this sense of having to answer to God, gave to his delivery a certain sense of laboriousness, of weariness as if bearing a great burden. It was told of the old Highlandmen of Scotland that they judged a minister favorably if he "trembles at the Word and is not able to speak because of the heavy burden of it."

AS A THEOLOGIAN.

It was in the special work of instructing the coming ministry in Apologetics and Systematic Theology that Dr. Webb vindicated for himself a place as one of the greatest teachers of the present day. He was an enthusiast in the study of the science of Theology and its kindred sciences, and by his earnestness and responsiveness to inquiries he infused his enthusiasm into his students. The science not only appealed to his intellect as he saw the mighty truths unfolding in order before his mind; but those truths were the nourishment of his spiritual life, and were precious to his heart. He could say with the Psalmist, "Lord, how love I thy law, more to be desired than gold, yea than much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and the honey comb." He accepted the Bible in its plain sense, as the Word of God, the inspired and infallible guide in the service of God. And he accepted the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechism as the clearest and fullest uninspired summary of the doctrines of the Bible separately and in their relations to each other.

The most marked characteristic of Dr. Webb's mind was clearness of vision. Whatever truth he received, he saw it distinctly in its separate value, and he saw it all around in its relation to and bearing on other truths. And he had the gift of expressing and explaining truth with wondrous clearness. He was a master of English style, and could tell his thought so

clearly that all could understand. To illustrate this: seven years ago at a meeting of Nashville Presbytery at Gallatin, Tenn., he was asked to preach on Adoption. For nearly an hour he held the rapt attention of Presbyterian people to a wonderfully clear, simple exposition. So delighted were the people he was asked to repeat the sermon. Yet it was just the lecture that he delivered to his classes. He held and taught with undeviating fidelity the great fundamental doctrines of the "Faith once for all delivered to the saints." The absolute sovereignty and electing grace of God's law—his resurrection and ascension to the throne of the Universe—the sinfulness, ruin, and helplessness of man, and the necessity and work of the Holy Spirit to apply Christ's redeeming work in saving men—and a general judgment that shall fix for eternity the destiny of all man. These were the truths more important than any earthly matters, and they were to be the burden of every minister's message. He rejected the idea that it is a matter of indifference what a man believes if his life be right, an idea very prevalent today. He believed that a man's beliefs, his faith will determine his life. "As a man believeth in his heart so is he." Faith is the basis of character.

AS A PRESBYTER.

Dr. Webb believed in the Church of the living God, as the pillar and ground of the truth. He recognized the Kingdom of God as something far wider and more enduring than the Church, which with its officers and ordinances is the divinely ordained agent for bringing in the Kingdom of God. And when that Kingdom shall come in its completeness, then all the activities of human life in heaven and in earth shall be subject to God. His will done in earth as in heaven. In later years he has been much discouraged by the tendency of the Church to turn from its divinely appointed mission of preaching Christ, and to become entangled with the various secularities of the time, depending on human plans and agencies, and losing faith in the efficacy of the simple gospel message. His

constant endeavor in the Church Courts, of which he was a member, was to keep the ministry faithful to its high calling, to proclaim in the face of a gainsaying world the spiritual nature and work of the Church, and the unsearchable riches and sufficiency of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to prepare men for every duty.

He heartily accepted the principles announced by the Southern Presbyterian Church at the beginning of her separate life; and he felt that amid the present ecclesiastical and spiritual unrest the reasons for her separate existence are still valid, and her testimony is still needed. He was not in sympathy with the idea that present world conditions as the result of the world war call for the abolishing of all denominational distinctions and the bringing of all denominations into one great organization, and eliminating those articles of faith or practice that distinguish them. It is probably true that no one nation nor people, much less no one denomination, can comprehend or express the fullness and richness of the truth as it is in Jesus; and that each nation will ultimately represent some special phase of that truth. It is true as a matter of history each of the great denominations of evangelical Christianity came into existence as a special witness for some important truth, which had been ignored or denied by other branches of the Church of Christ. Dr. Webb was a man of catholic spirit, and while holding firmly to his own Presbyterian Church, yet whenever there is a body who "worship by the spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh," there he recognized a branch of the true Church of Christ, laboring for the coming of the Kingdom of God, and could extend to them the right hand of fellowship—he could rejoice in any faithful testimony for any one of the great truths of the gospel. Probably the largest personal influence on Dr. Webb's Christian life and theological thinking, and on his ideals for the ministry, was that of Dr. John L. Girardeau, for whom he cherished the highest admiration and the warmest affection—and in his powers of thought and expression, in the depth of his spiritual experience, in his con-

secration to the service of the Lord, in his noble ideals of character and service, he was a worthy follower of that great "Master of Sentences."

But for both of them the appointed work on earth is finished, the toil and struggle of life's warfare is ended; and henceforth and forever they are together in that mighty Presence, where "beyond these voices there is peace." There with every cloud removed they see face to face, and *know* fully even as they are fully known.