

CHRISTIANITY TODAY



Editor
SAMUEL G. CRAIG

November, 1946

Advisory Editors
OSWALD T. ALLIS
LORAINÉ BOETTNER

Published from time to time by THE
PRESBYTERIAN AND REFORMED PUBLISHING CO., Inc.
525 Locust Street, Phila. 6, Pa.

No yearly subscription price.
All issues sent to those who
contribute \$1.00 or more.

The 158th General Assembly: An Interpretative Report

The 158th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. met in Atlantic City, N. J. on May 23, 1946. For the first time since 1942, war restrictions having been removed, the various presbyteries sent their full quota of commissioners.

The morning session of the first day was confined, as usual, to worship, a sermon by the retiring Moderator, and the observance of the Lord's Supper. Taking as his theme "Choose Your Verdict" (text, Matt. 25:21 and 26) Dr. William B. Lampe addressed the Assembly in a manner that was at once searching, challenging and forward-looking. His concern was that the Church so use its vast resources as to gain the verdict passed on the faithful servant.

Dr. Frederick W. Evans Elected Moderator

The afternoon session of the first day of the Assembly was devoted to the election of a Moderator by the Assembly as a whole and of the members of the Standing Committees (except their chairmen who are appointed by the Moderator) by the 22 electing sections into which the Assembly had been divided as provided by its Standing Rules.

The Rev. Raymon M. Kistler of the Presbytery of West Jersey was nominated by the Rev. E. Lansing Bennett of the same Presbytery and his nomination seconded by the Rev. Albert G. Butzer of the Presbytery of Buffalo-Niagara. The Rev. Frederick W. Evans of the Presbytery of Troy was nominated by the Rev. R. Lewis Jones of the same Presbytery and his nomination seconded by the Rev. Alfred Lee Wilson of the Presbytery of Chicago. Of the 830 votes cast Dr. Evans received 464 and Dr. Kistler 366.

The result of the election was something of an upset. Apparently it was a surprise even to Dr. Evans. His election was due in large measure, if we mistake not, to the manner in which his sponsors

took advantage of the strategic error of Dr. Kistler's sponsors. Dr. Bennett made out a strong case for his nominee—too strong a case in fact as he gave the impression that Dr. Kistler is something of a superman. We would not be understood as implying that Dr. Bennett exaggerated in describing Dr. Kistler's qualifications for the position but he did open the way for Dr. Jones to commend his nominee, not as a superman but as an average working pastor, a sort of "Abraham Lincoln type of a man" and with a sly dig at what some would call the "Church Bureaucrats" said that it should not be held against him that he had not been a member of any of the big boards or agencies of the Church—a representation which made an obviously favorable appeal to the commissioners. This favorable impression was greatly enhanced when Dr. Wilson stressed the fact that Dr. Evans had expressly forbidden any pre-election solicitation of votes by his friends either by mail or by personally contacting the commissioners—a statement that was the occasion of Assembly applause. Due to the fact that the Assembly had again voted that the seconding speeches should be in reverse order of the nominating speeches—an arrangement that ordinarily gives an unfair advantage to the first nominee—Dr. Butzer's speech followed those of Drs. Jones and Wilson. He, however, could do little or nothing to counteract the affect of their speeches. He made a strong appeal for his nominee but was unable to reverse the sentiment for Dr. Evans that had swept the Assembly.

No doctrinal issue was raised in connection with the election. The fact that one of Dr. Evans' sponsors thought it advisable to say that he had never been aligned with any separation movement would seem to indicate either that he had been or was in danger of being represented as having been sympathetic with

The Liberal Attack Upon the Supernatural Christ

By DR. WM. CHILDS ROBINSON

This article first appeared in The Southern Presbyterian Journal in its issue of May 1, 1946. Its author is Professor of Historical Theology in Columbia Theological Seminary, one of the leaders of the group in the Presbyterian Church U.S. who are opposed to union with the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. as matters now stand. The article set forth what he regards as the main obstacle in the way of the union of the two churches. The article has been widely circulated in the Southern Church and is deserving of an equally wide circulation in the Northern Church. Its factual statements are, we believe, beyond informed dispute.

In articles appearing in the *Christian Observer* of March 13th and in the *Presbyterian Outlook* for April 8th, Dr. Walter L. Lingle paints the Auburn Affirmation as a constitutional protest against an effort of the USA General Assembly to set up new doctrinal standards. No doubt the constitutional claim caught many of the unwary ministers of the USA Church and led them to sign the Auburn Affirmation. But when Dr. Lingle goes on and cites with endorsement such a "liberal" leader of the movement as Dr. Henry S. Coffin when he says that "our objection was constitutional not doctrinal" we must demur. On the contrary it is the contention of this article that these "liberal" leaders in the USA Church had and have as their aim the opening of the doors of Presbyterian ordination to men who do not accept the supernatural Christ in His preexistent Deity, in His Virgin Birth, in His substitutionary atonement, in His bodily Resurrection and in His personal Return in glory. In support of this position we set forth the following facts.

(1) The trouble in the USA Church did not start where Dr. Lingle begins with the action of the 1910 USA Assembly in passing a resolution setting up five points as necessary for ordination. The trouble began with candidates for licensure and ordination who were unable to accept the Virgin Birth and the bodily Resurrection in New York Presbytery. Objection of these ordinations were filed before the General Assembly and an effort made to bring the recalcitrant presbytery to book. But moderate men in the USA Assembly urged milder measures and the "five points" were passed as such a compromise measure. It was hoped by conservative members of New York Presbytery that the simple enunciation of the fact that the General Assembly regarded these points as among the teaching held necessary for ordination, without sharp action against the individuals or against their presbytery, would be sufficient to deter any additional ordinations of the kind. When the first kindly effort was not successful, the same action was repeated in 1916 and again in 1923. The USA "liberals" made no

Auburn Affirmation against either the 1910 or the 1916 action, as they would have done had their interest in the matter been wholly constitutional. They quietly bided their time, getting their men ordained and into prominent churches and no doubt happy that the Assembly was content with such mild measures. It was only after the third action when they could not expect further patience from the General Assembly for their wilful defiance of the Church and when they felt themselves strong enough to strike that they drew up the Auburn Affirmation late in 1923.

(2) The Auburn Affirmation itself is not a mere constitutional protest, but it is a doctrinal attack upon the supernatural Christ. The Auburn Affirmation, Dr. Coffin's letter and Dr. Lingle's article all cite the second ordination vow without reference to the first vow on which the second depends and which gives to the second its true doctrinal import. Isolating the second from the first permits men to think that they themselves or others who give a kind of adherence to this isolated vow are doing all that is required for Presbyterian ordination. Because in the first vow we accept the Holy Scriptures as being the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice; therefore the second vow obligates us to accept the system of doctrine set forth in the Westminster Confession as being the true system of doctrine and our own faith.

Again, Dr. Lingle has dismissed the charge that the Auburn Affirmationists stigmatize such facts as the Virgin Birth as "theories" in too facile a fashion. He has cited one only of the four sentences in which the Affirmationists repeatedly describe the five points as "theories" and he has cited that one which is susceptible of the most favorable interpretation. The first sentence which gives meaning to the whole paragraph and to the following uses of the theories is: "Furthermore, this opinion of the General Assembly attempts to commit our Church to certain theories concerning the inspiration of the Bible, and the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, and

the Continuing Life and Supernatural Power of our Lord Jesus Christ." Now this sentence does label the Virgin Birth a "certain theory" of the Incarnation, and it labels the statement of the Priestly work of Christ in our Shorter Catechism a "certain theory" of the atonement, and it labels the bodily Resurrection of Christ a "certain theory" of His Resurrection. Repeatedly to stigmatize the great facts of Christ's mission as "certain theories," as "particular theories," as "not the only theories allowed," as "whatever theories they may employ" is to minimize the doctrinal assertions about these facts of the faith.

The real nub of the controversy was the effort of the USA Church to make these doctrines stick as necessary for licensure and ordination. That is the sense in which the Assembly used the word "essential." This usage goes back to the Adopting Act of 1729 which gave the courts of the Church the right to decide concerning any scruple that any minister had against any statement of the Confession, as to whether such scruple concerned a matter necessary or essential to the system of doctrine and hence to ordination. There was no intention to treat these five points as of the *esse* of the faith above other facts and doctrines. And the real drive of the Auburn Affirmation was to set aside these five points as unnecessary to ordination and to allow candidates to hold to "whatever theories they may employ to explain" the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection. And concretely that means liberty to explain away the Virgin Birth, and the Atonement as a sacrifice to satisfy Divine justice and reconcile us to God, and the bodily character of the Resurrection of Christ.

(3) The declaration of nullification read by Dr. Henry S. Coffin in the face of the General Assembly of 1925 shows that his purpose was not merely constitutional but doctrinal. That Assembly examined into the case of Mr. Cedric Lehman and Mr. Henry P. Van Dusen, two candidates licensed by New York Presbytery even though they could not accept the plain historical statements in Matthew and Luke on the Virgin Birth of Christ. It declared that the Presbytery erred in licensing these two men and remanded the case to New York Presbytery for appropriate action. This act of the General Assembly was not based on "the five points" nor on the second ordination vow which the Auburn Affirmation cites without setting forth its relationship to the first vow. The act of the USA General Assembly was based on the first ordination vow, or the first question for licensure which uses the same language. The Assembly held that being unable to accept the teachings of Matthew and Luke on the Virgin Birth—an article of faith—they could not properly answer the first constitutional question asked for licensure in the affirmative. That is, they could not affirm their acceptance of the Holy Scriptures as being the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice.

Therefore, their licensure was improper and the Presbytery was directed to correct the same. But Dr. Coffin arose, took from his pocket a typed statement, and read this declaration refusing to obey the mandate of his General Assembly and declaring the same null and void. Can Dr. Coffin say that this declaration of nullification "was constitutional and not doctrinal"?

This act and the immediate support for it from Auburn Affirmationists saying that they would split the Church if the action was enforced led the Moderator to offer a compromise. The effect of the compromise was that the acceptance of the Virgin Birth was not required for ordination. Dr. Van Dusen continued in good and regular standing despite his doctrinal views on the Virgin Birth and as the successor to Dr. Coffin in the "liberal" leadership has put out a view of Christ which makes Him not the true and eternal God who became also man for us men and for our salvation, but only a human temporal person in whom God was as personally present as He could be in a man of Galilee in the period of the Roman Empire (cf. *Liberal Theology: An Appraisal*). Other men who could not accept the Virgin Birth were ordained and also advanced to posts of honor and authority in the USA Church. Among them, Dr. Cameron Hall was a U.S.A. Board secretary until the Federal Council recently called him to a similar task in that body. Dr. Ilion T. Jones after denying the historicity and the objectivity of the Resurrection of Christ was made Chairman of the USA Committee on Theological Curriculum and later Vice-President of one of their theological seminaries (cf. *The Presbyterian Tribune*, March 30, 1939).

(4) Dr. Henry S. Coffin's treatment of our Declaratory Statement of 1939 when that was regularly brought before the USA Assembly of 1941 in the Cedar Rapids Overture shows that Dr. Coffin's objection to the doctrines of the supernatural Christ is not merely constitutional but doctrinal. Our statement does not use the word "essential" and is couched exclusively in terms of the Confession and Catechisms which the Church accepts as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice. Cedar Rapids (USA) Presbytery asked their General Assembly to concur with ours in the following language, to wit: That the General Assembly declare that it regards the acceptance of the infallible truth and Divine authority of the scriptures, and of Christ as very and eternal God, Who became man by being born of a virgin, Who offered Himself a sacrifice to satisfy Divine justice and to reconcile us to God, Who rose from the dead with the same body with which He suffered, and Who will return to judge the world, as being involved in the ordination vows to which we subscribe.

Dr. Lingle states that our US General Assembly voted down the effort to put through doctrinal tests similar to "the five points" in the Assemblies of 1923, 1924 and 1928. This statement leaves the impression on many readers that we have never passed doctrinal tests. But our Assembly of 1939 unanimously passed the resolution given above, it reiterated the same interpreting it as an *in thesi* deliverance in 1940, and re-endorsed it in passing the Lilly Resolution in the 1942 General Assembly.

What did Dr. Coffin as Chairman of the USA General Assembly's Committee on Bills and Overtures do with the Cedar Rapids Overture? To have adopted the overture would have been to have condemned his earlier act of nullification and the candidates he had engineered through the USA Presbyteries. Accordingly, Dr. Coffin entirely rewrote the Cedar Rapids Overture and professing to affirm it made it say the opposite of what the overture asked. He rewrote it so as to make it say that the ministers and elders of the USA Church are loyal to their ordination vows, thus making the action requested unnecessary.

Dr. Coffin could not attack our declaratory statement as he did the five points on the alleged ground of constitutionality and so he turned it completely around and professing to accept it completely rejected it. If this is not a fair statement let Dr. Coffin and his colleagues even now pass our Declaratory Statement by their General Assembly, write it into the printed Plan of Reunion and sincerely stand for the faith of the Son of God which it is designed to safeguard and we are willing to let by-gones be by-gones and unite with them. We do not enjoy having thus to rake over the ashes of the past—but we are set for the defense of the Gospel.

(5) The current attack upon our Southern Presbyterian ordination vows as they are written into the Plan of Reunion by the "liberal" *Presbyterian Tribune* shows that the "liberal" leaders are not interested in constitutional matters. When the Plan of Reunion was published with our ordination vows in them containing the promise that whenever one finds himself out of accord with the system of doctrine in the Standards he will of his own initiative notify his Presbytery *The Tribune* vigorously objected. We deeply regret that the joint committee of the two churches has accepted the "liberal" objection and has stricken out this section of our ordination vow from the printed Plan of Reunion. Can Dr. Lingle or Dr. Coffin say that this action is also only constitutional and not doctrinal? The "liberals" are in the prominent places in the USA Assembly and they have no intention of putting their necks under a vow which would make every man who does not accept the supernatural Christ moment by moment a liar until he notifies his Presbytery and thus risks

deposition. Their position is understandable but it is doctrinal and not merely constitutional.

(6) The Claim of Dr. Coffin that "there was no one of us who prepared that Affirmation who does not accept *con amore* the Confession of Faith as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures, and who does not accept the Scripture as the Word of God the only infallible rule of faith and practice" is not substantiated by Dr. Coffin's writings. A full study of these writings in their contrasts to the Presbyterian doctrines has been presented by Dr. S. G. Craig of the USA Church. I shall point out only one item of this contrast.

In his *The Meaning of The Cross*, pages 118-121, Dr. Coffin writes: "Certain widely used hymns still perpetuate the theory that God pardons sinners because Christ purchased that pardon by His obedience and suffering. But a forgiveness which is paid for is not forgiveness . . . There is no cleansing blood which can wipe out the record of what has been . . . The Cross of Christ is not a means of procuring forgiveness."

In the sharpest possible contrast to Dr. Coffin's Socinian doctrinal attack upon the atonement stands the teaching of our Confession: "Christ, by His obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real and full satisfaction to His Father's justice in their behalf. Yet in as much as He was given by the Father for them, and His obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead, and both freely, not for anything in them, their justification is only of free grace, that both the exact justice and rich grace of God, might be glorified in the justification of sinners."

In full accord with the Confession and in strict opposition to Dr. Coffin, the Word of God says: "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God set forth a mercy-seat."

We would close our statement with our invitation to Dr. Coffin and the other "liberal" leaders to unite with us in the Cedar Rapids Overture as that overture was presented to the USA Assembly of 1941. If Dr. Coffin is sincere in saying that his objection was constitutional not doctrinal, let him lead his "liberal" wing of the USA Church to accept our Declaratory Statement which has substantially the same doctrines as the five points but which is so stated that it is not open to the "constitutional" objections that the Auburn Affirmation brings against the five points, let the Joint Committee put this into the Plan of Reunion, restore to the Plan our Southern Presbyterian ordination vows, and the other difficulties can be ironed out and the Plan of Union accepted.