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THE BACKGROUND OF DANIEL

The critics are in the habit of making one or more unfounded assumptions and then basing upon these unproved and unprovable assumptions still others equally baseless. In the case of Daniel they have assumed that the book is unhistorical, that its miracles are impossible, and that its presumably predictive prophecies are dim recollections of long past events. They even assume that there was no man called Daniel living in the time of Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus,¹ and that the customs, objects, and events mentioned or not mentioned in the book, as well as the language in which they are mentioned, indicate the age of Judas Maccabeus. That there is no ground for denying the existence and the deeds of Daniel as recorded in the book named after him has been shown in *Studies in the Book of Daniel* where the harmony between the life of the man and his surroundings has been maintained. The existence of such a Daniel is upheld by the testimony of his great contemporary Ezekiel who mentions him three times as a model of wisdom and righteousness (xiv. 14, 20, xxviii. 3). No other man worthy of being placed alongside of Noah and Job, as is done by Ezekiel, is known to history, or would, so far as we know, have been known to the Jews whom Ezekiel addressed. The critics, in their endeavors to account for this singular prominence given by their favorite author to an otherwise unknown person, are reduced to the most absurd conjectures. Hitzig supposed that Daniel was another name for Melchizedek.² Prince conjectures that he was "really a well known character under the disguise of another name," probably "some celebrated ancient

¹ Prince, *Commentary on Daniel*, p. 28.

² *Commentary on Daniel*, p. viii.

THE ADOPTING ACT OF 1729 AND THE POWERS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

A document entitled "An Affirmation designed to safeguard the unity and liberty of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America" has quite recently been "submitted for the consideration of its ministers and people." It bears the signatures of one hundred and fifty ministers; and is occasioned, we are told, by "certain actions of the General Assembly of 1923" as well, as by "persistent attempts to divide the church and abridge its freedom." The gist of the "Affirmation" is that these actions were *ultra vires* and imperil the liberty of office bearers under the broad terms of their subscription to the Standards of the Church. Appeal is made to the magna charta of Presbyterian liberty, the Adopting Act of 1729, which, it is asserted, anticipated and provided for dissent by individuals from portions of the Confession. This is a sweeping claim and if it can be justified will go far to support the contention that a minister may be in good and regular standing in the Presbyterian Church even though he does not accept the clear teaching of the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms or even the Brief Statement regarding such doctrines as the Infallibility of the Scriptures and the Virgin Birth and Bodily Resurrection of Christ. But a careful reading of the Adopting Act and of the interpretations put upon it by the adopting Synod gives no warrant for the loose terms of subscription which the "one hundred and fifty" are claiming.

As is well known, the original Synod, although Presbyterian in its character, was in existence twelve years before it adopted a written constitution. In 1728 an overture framed by the Rev. John Thompson was presented to the Synod by the Presbytery of New Castle. Mr. Thompson was a native of Ireland who came to this country as a probationer in 1715, and was ordained over the congregation of Lewes in 1717. The specific design of the overture as stated at the time was to prevent "the ingress and spreading of dangerous errors

among either ourselves or the flocks committed to our care." The errors specifically alluded to were Socinianism and Arminianism, and it seems that these errors were creeping into the churches in this country, having prevailed to a certain extent in Scotland and in more alarming measure in Ireland. Already the Synod had rejected a ministerial applicant coming over from Ireland because of his unsoundness in the faith. The ranks of the American Presbyterian Church were being recruited by men from the Irish Presbyteries, and the main purpose in preparing an Adopting Act was to allay the fears and perplexities of mind "lest we should be corrupted with the new schemes of doctrine which for sometime had prevailed in the North of Ireland." These "new schemes" which caused alarm two hundred years ago and compelled the Synod to safeguard the faith by adopting the Westminster Standards are most illuminating in relation to discussions now going on in our Church.

In the influential City Presbytery of Belfast there was a group of brilliant young ministers led by the Rev. John Abernethy, a man of undoubted talents and learning, and who uniformly maintained a high character for piety and integrity. These young divines organized themselves into a Society and began to teach, among other things, that the Church has no right to require candidates for the ministry to subscribe to a Confession of Faith prepared by any man or body of men, and that such a required subscription is a violation of the right of private judgment and inconsistent with Christian liberty and true Protestantism. The first public pronouncement of the Society was a sermon preached by Mr. Abernethy under the title "Religious Obedience Founded on Personal Persuasion," and the position maintained was essentially that the Ritschlian of today, viz: "He taught that every man's persuasion of what was true and right was the sole rule of his faith and conduct—that there was no culpability in error after what each man believed to be a deliberate and impartial investigation of the truth—that it was in the highest degree unjust and unscriptural to exclude from Chris-

tian fellowship any who walk according to their own persuasions, however palpably erroneous in the judgment of the Church on non-essential points—and that all doctrines were non-essential on which human reason and Christian sincerity permit men to differ.”*

In the course of time the members of the Belfast Society began to acknowledge their doubts regarding “the Deity of the Saviour,” asserting that even if the doctrine were true, it was by no means a fundamental doctrine. At the meeting of the Synod of Belfast in 1721 in response to memorials that came in from seventeen congregations, supplicating the supreme judicatory to silence the aspersions of enemies and remove the apprehensions of her own people by making subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith obligatory upon all ministers of the Presbyterian Church, a strong deliverance was proposed by the Synod to this effect: “The doctrine of the essential Deity of the Son of God, his essential divine perfections, particularly his necessary existence, absolute eternity and independence, has always been regarded by this Synod as an essential article of the Christian faith.” This declaration, however, was not unanimously adopted, the members of the Belfast Society, taking refuge under the cardinal principle of religious liberty, and refusing to vote in the affirmative. The minutes of Synod state that they declined voting for it not because they disbelieved the article of Christ’s supreme deity, for this article they professed in the strongest terms to believe, but because they were against all authoritative human decisions as tests of orthodoxy, and because they judged such decisions unreasonable at the time. This was regarded as a very subtle distinction: to feel at liberty to profess in the very strongest terms their belief in a doctrine, and yet to feel it to be a grievous infringement of Christian liberty to be required to concur with their brethren in a resolution to the same effect. Dr. Reid, the Irish historian, in recording the refusal of the Belfast Society to adopt the declaration of Synod makes this significant comment: “It

* J. S. Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*. Vol. III, p. 117.

must be added, also, that, in this debate, several of the Society drew another nice distinction, which tended still further to raise doubts, even in the minds of the most candid, of the soundness in the faith of those who urged it. They distinguished between the truth of the doctrine of the Saviour's Deity, which they professed to hold, and its being an essential or fundamental doctrine of the Gospel, the belief of which was necessary to Christian or ministerial communion, which they denied—a distinction which, if carried out in harmony with their doctrine of personal persuasion, prepared them for admitting to the ordinances, and even the ministry of the Church, an Arian or Socinian." To meet this situation, that of a divided church, it was proposed not to enjoin, but simply to *permit* all the members of the Synod who were willing to do so, to subscribe the Westminster Confession of Faith. In this connection it is interesting to note that the Faculty of Cambridge Divinity School has recently made the same suggestion for the ministers of the Protestant Episcopal Church with reference to the Apostles' Creed. The result of the proposal in the Irish Church was to separate the ministers into two parties, *subscribers* and *non-subscribers*, and to precipitate a controversy, the lessons of which have a direct bearing upon the plea that is now being made for individual liberty in the interpretation of the Standards and for the privilege of dissent from portions of the Confession.

It is to be noted that the members of the Belfast Society who were opposed to any objective standard of truth and of faith drifted in a sure and constant shift away from the moorings of the evangelical faith. And although they resented such epithets as "Arians" and "Socinians," it became quite evident that their doctrine of the person of Christ was widely divergent from the teachings of the Scriptures and of the Confession. Consequently, in the year 1726, the Synod was compelled to take clear and positive action regarding subscription to the system of doctrine embraced in the Standards, believing that only in a straightforward adoption of

these standards was there any remedy for dissension, or any hope for peace and unity. This action was carried in the Synod, we are told, largely through "the faithful and honest eldership of the church," and the historian of that whole distressing chapter makes this illuminating remark: "Let the Presbyterian Church in Ireland learn the important lesson of abiding faithfully by her Confession of Faith. That Confession may be enlarged or abridged or varied to suit abounding error; but let her ever 'hold fast the faithful Word she hath been taught' in a definite and authorized confession, and let her suffer no latitudinarian pretext of Christian liberty to absolve those who seek to exercise the ministry in her communion from declaring their concurrence in her recognized standards."

This experience of the Irish Presbyterian Church contributed directly to the action of the General Synod in 1729, for it reveals the "new schemes" of doctrine which alarmed a majority of the early American Presbyters, coming recently as they did from Ireland, where controversy regarding the standards had been going on, and also from Scotland where "moderatism" had occasioned a similar agitation regarding the evangelical faith. These agitations abroad made it obvious that something must be done in the American Church to safeguard that Church from the inroads of error and also prevent the blunders incident to loose terms of subscription. The overture presented in the year 1728 by the Presbytery of New Castle under the leadership of Mr. Thompson, was laid over for one year and then at the meeting of the Synod in 1729 "An Act preliminary to the Adopting Act was after long debate upon it agreed to and is as follows:

"Although the Synod do not claim or pretend to any authority of imposing our faith upon other men's consciences, but do profess our just dissatisfaction with, and abhorrence of such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority in the Church, being willing to receive one another as Christ has received us to the glory of God, and

admit to fellowship in sacred ordinances, all such as we have grounds to believe Christ will at last admit to the kingdom of heaven, yet we are undoubtedly obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so handed down to our posterity. And do therefore agree that all the Ministers of this Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this Synod, shall declare their agreement in, and approbation of, the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine, and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our faith. And we do also agree, that all the Presbyteries within our bounds shall always take care not to admit any candidate of the ministry into the exercise of the sacred functions, but what declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession, either by subscribing the said Confession of Faith and Catechisms, or by a verbal declaration of their assent thereto, as such Minister or candidate shall think best. And in case any Minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministry shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall, at the time of his making said declaration, declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds, and to ministerial communion, if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government. But if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge such Ministers or candidates erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith, the Synod or Presbytery shall declare them incapable of communion with them. And the Synod do solemnly agree, that none of us will traduce or use any opprobrious terms of those that differ from us in these extra-essential and not necessary points of doctrine, but treat them with the

same friendship, kindness, and brotherly love, as if they had not differed from us in such sentiments."

This was adopted in the morning, and in the afternoon took place the "Adopting Act" proper of which the following is the record:

"All the Ministers of this Synod now present [names are omitted], after proposing all the scruples that any of them had to make against any articles and expressions in the Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, have unanimously agreed in the solution of those scruples, and in declaring the said Confession and Catechisms to be the confession of their faith; excepting only some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters, concerning which clauses the Synod do unanimously declare, that they do not receive those articles in any sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods, with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority; or power to persecute any for their religion; or in any sense contrary to the Protestant succession to the throne of Great Britain."

"The Synod observing that unanimity, peace and unity, which appeared in all their consultations and determinations relating to the affair of the Confession, did unanimously agree in giving thanks to God in solemn prayer and praises."

Regarding this historic document, attention needs to be called to the fact that its design was to keep "the faith once delivered to the saints pure and uncorrupt among us, and so handed down to our posterity," and that provision is made for dealing with any scruples held by a minister or candidate for the ministry with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms. According to the Adopting Act proper, it is evident that the scruples particularly in mind at that time had reference to the powers of the civil magistrate and not to the body of doctrinal truth contained in the Confession, entire loyalty to which was clearly and emphatically expressed at the time, and subsequently in repeated

deliverances. Furthermore, it is specifically stated that it is the function of the Presbytery or of the Synod to decide whether the scruple in question relates to an essential and necessary article of the faith. In other words, it is not permitted a minister or a candidate for the ministry to decide whether his personal scruples regarding doctrines taught in the Confession are incidental or essential. The Presbytery must take "his sentiments" into consideration, and if the Presbytery cannot reach a decision, an appeal is to be made to the higher court where a final verdict is to be rendered.

This is precisely what took place in 1909 and 1910. Three candidates, applying for licensure in New York Presbytery, had scruples regarding certain doctrines: the Infallibility of the Scriptures, the Virgin Birth, the Bodily Resurrection of Christ, His Atoning Work, and the Miracles which He wrought. The Presbytery, by a majority vote, decided in effect that the articles to which assent could not be given are not necessary or essential articles of the Confession. A complaint was made to the Synod of New York, and when not sustained by that body, was carried up to the General Assembly. This complaint was found in order by the Standing Judicial Committee and so referred to the Judicial Commission. This Commission, as the records were lacking in the case, could not reverse the decision of the Presbytery, though it called the decision hasty and unwise. It therefore requested the Assembly to make a declaration regarding the necessary and essential character of the doctrines to which the candidates for licensure in New York Presbytery had refused assent. This the Assembly did in a series of five propositions. Six years later, when complaint was made against the same Presbytery for licensing men who expressed doubt concerning the same five doctrines, the Assembly at the suggestion of the Commissioners from the Presbytery of New York, along with the Commissioners from the Presbyteries which had lodged the complaint against the Presbytery of New York reaffirmed the declaration made in 1910. The Assembly of

1923 was overtured to deal with the same troubles, issuing from the same source, and again the General Assembly made affirmation as to the necessary and essential character of doctrines which had been for the third time called in question.

This action, instead of controverting the principles of the Adopting Act, as the "one hundred and fifty" claim, is in direct accord with that act and carries out almost to the letter its provisions regarding scruples. And furthermore, it is based upon the specific powers granted to the Assembly by the Constitution, and as defined in Chapter XII, Section V, of the Form of Government: "To the General Assembly also belongs the power of deciding in all controversies respecting doctrine,—and of suppressing schismatical contentions and disputations."

It is true that the Adopting Act was a compromise between those who desired a literal subscription to the Standards and those who preferred some loose form of subscription or no subscription at all, but the act itself which aimed to secure "in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity," makes provision whereby in an orderly way it may be determined from time to time whether an article or articles concerning which there may be difference of opinion are essential and necessary. The statement is made for the case of liberty that in the reunion of 1870 a divided church came together "each recognizing the other as a sound and orthodox body," and that in 1906 a union was consummated with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, even though there was objection in certain quarters to such a union. It should, however, be noted that such unity was effected through the agency of the General Assembly as being the bond of union and of mutual confidence among all our churches. That is to say, the differences between the Old and New School bodies, between the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and our own, were settled not by subordinating these differences "to recognized loyalty to Jesus Christ and united work for the kingdom," but by subordinating them to a joint

acceptance of the standards of the Church including the Form of Government in which the powers of the Assembly are specifically defined.

It has been frequently asserted of late that the Presbytery is the source of authority in our Church and that the Assembly is something like a large Conference or Convention whose main function is to give "strong advice." This theory is built upon the notion that the Assembly is the creature of the Presbyteries; that just as the original States organized a Federal United States Government, so the original Presbyteries and Synods brought into being the General Assembly, which, therefore, is not authorized to act without the concurrence of its constituent parts. But in fact the process of organization was just the reverse. It was the original Presbytery which expanded and in time constituted itself a Synod, dividing itself up into a number of Presbyteries, and it was this Synod which as the result of prosperous development found it necessary to organize itself into a General Assembly. It has thus by a true Apostolic succession maintained itself as the original Presbytery, embodying in itself all the Presbyteries and "the collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church."

Therefore, the action of the Synod in 1729 when the Standards were adopted was not superseded by the organization of an Assembly in 1788 and the necessary constitutional changes that were involved. The wise and generous provisions of the original Adopting Act were at no time modified or qualified by the Synod, nor has the Assembly ever in any way revoked or reversed the action taken in 1729. It would seem then that the Assembly is fully within the scope of original powers when in response to complaints or appeals regarding erroneous teachings it declares whether the doctrines involved are necessary and essential.

No one will question the desirability and necessity of safeguarding the unity and the liberty of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., but if the experiences of two hundred years

and more of history are to teach us anything, it is surely this: a smaller part of the Church should not govern a larger part and determine matters of controversy which arise therein, but a representation of the whole "should govern and determine in regard to every part and to all the parts united."

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