

THE
CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY
OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

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PART I.

1705 TO 1741.

PHILADELPHIA:
WILLIAM S. MARTIEN.
1839.

Entered according to the act of Congress, in the year 1839, by WILLIAM S. MARTIN, in the clerk's office of the district court for the eastern district of Pennsylvania.

To understand fully the design of the adopting act, the overture which led to it ought to be read, and it is therefore here inserted at length.

to make sure of a work of grace and regeneration in our own hearts, so as never to be at ease and quiet without some comfortable evidence of it, in the discernible exercise of grace in our hearts, together with the suitable genuine fruits of holiness in our lives.

“4. Let us earnestly labour to get our affections weaned from the world, and all sublunary things, and to set them on things above, that our love to God and to our Lord Jesus Christ, our concern for his glory in the faithful performance of duty, and the promotion of the kingdom of grace, by the conversion and edification of souls, may so employ and take up our thoughts that all worldly interests may appear but empty trifles in comparison with these things. . . . There is a great difference between preaching the gospel that we may get a living, and to desire a living that we may be enabled to preach the gospel. And happy is that minister who is enabled cheerfully and resolutely to do the latter, and truly and effectually to avoid the former.

“5. Another thing to be endeavoured by us, is to strive to suit our gospel ministrations, not so much to the relish and taste as to the necessities of our people; and in order thereunto to endeavour, by all proper means, to be acquainted with their spiritual state, as far as practicable by us; that knowing their diseases and wants we may know how to suit our doctrine thereunto.—And particularly we should endeavour to bend our forces and to use our best skill, to suit the prevalent distemper of this carnal and secure age, striving with all our might to rouse secure simmers and awaken them out of their sleep, and drowsy saints from their slumber and carnal security.—For this purpose we should not only assert and maintain the necessity of regeneration and converting grace, and of a righteous and godly walk, and of increase and advancement therein, but also endeavour to press the same home upon their consciences with all earnestness, as if we saw them perishing and would gladly be the means of their deliverance.

“6. It would also contribute not a little to promote and revive a work of grace, if we could effectually revive congregational discipline, in order to convince sinners and make them ashamed of their scandalous outbursts. For I am afraid that most of us are too lax and remiss in this matter, so that the highest privileges of Christ’s church, I mean external privileges, are too often given to such whose conversation is very unsuitable unto them.”

These few extracts will show the spirit of the work, and the manner in which “the notorious” Thompson thought and wrote on these subjects. Such a man does not deserve to have his name cast out as evil.

“ An overture humbly offered to the consideration of the reverend synod; wherein is proposed an expedient for preventing the ingress and spreading of dangerous errors, among either ourselves or the flocks committed to our care.

“ Reverend Fathers and Brethren: ”

“ I would be heartily grieved if the following overture, or any thing in it, should, in the event, prove the occasion of any heat or contention among us. Sure I am that every thing of this kind is far from my intention, and I hope all my brethren will not only be persuaded of the peaceableness and sincerity of my intentions, but also to judge for the necessity of such an expedient, when they seriously ponder and consider these few particulars. First, that it is the unquestionable duty of every Christian, according to his station and talent, to maintain and defend the truths of the gospel against all opposition. Secondly, that this work or duty is in an especial manner incumbent on the ministers of the gospel in virtue of their office. Thirdly, that not only every Christian and minister, but also every church, as an organized body politic, methodised by order and government, is also obliged to act with Christian vigilance and sagacity in maintaining and defending gospel truth. Fourthly, that the parties aforesaid are not only obliged to maintain and defend the truth for themselves, but also to endeavour to perpetuate and propagate it unto posterity pure and uncorrupt. Fifthly, as the light of nature teaches all kingdoms, commonwealths, cities, &c., even in time of peace to prepare for war, so a principle of spiritual wisdom should direct the church of Christ to fortify itself against all the assaults and invasions that may be made upon the doctrine it professes, according to the word of God. Sixthly, that secret bosom enemies of the truth, (I mean

those who being visible members of a church do not openly and violently oppose the truth professed therein, but in a secret covert way endeavour to undermine it,) are as dangerous as any whatever; and, therefore, the church should exercise her vigilance in a special manner against such, by searching them out, discovering them, and setting a mark upon them whereby they may be known, and so not have it in their power to deceive. The churches of Ephesus and Smyrna are commended for this, but Pergamos and Thyatira are reprov'd for the neglect of it. Seventhly, that we, the members of this synod, together with the particular congregations of professors under our care, are a church which is one entire organized body or society of Christians united together by order and government, according to the institution of the word, and therefore ought (especially when apparent dangers call for it,) to exert ourselves and the authority with which we are invested, in vindication and defence of the truths which we profess, and for preventing the ingress and spreading of error. Eighthly, that we are so a particular church as not to be a part of any particular church in the world, with which we are united by the joint exercise of church government, and therefore we are not accountable to the judicial inquiry of any superior ecclesiastical judicature upon earth, and therefore if we do not exert the authority inherent in us for maintaining the purity of gospel truth, it is not in the power of any superior ecclesiastical judicature to call us in question for our neglect, or for our errors or heresies should we be corrupted with them. Ninthly, although, I hope, there are as yet few or none among us (especially of the ministers) who are infected with any gross errors or heresies in doctrine, yet I think I may say we are in no small danger of being corrupted in doctrinals, and that even as to

fundamentals, which to me seems evident from the consideration of these few particulars of our present circumstances.

“First, it seems to me that we are too much like the people of Laish, in a careless defenceless condition, as a city without walls; (or perhaps my unacquaintedness with our records may cause me to mistake.) For as far as I know, though we be an entire particular church, as has been observed, and not a part of a particular church, yet we have not any particular system of doctrines, composed by ourselves, or others, which we, by any judicial act of our church, have adopted to be the articles or confession of our faith, &c. Now a church without a confession, what is it like? It is true, as I take it, we all generally acknowledge and look upon the Westminster Confession and Catechisms to be our confession, or what we own for such; but the most that can be said is, that the Westminster Confession of Faith is the confession of the faith of the generality of our members, ministers and people; but that it is our confession, as we are a united body politic, I cannot see, unless, First, it hath been received by a conjunct act of the representatives of our church; I mean by the synod, either before or since it hath been *sub forma synodi*. Secondly, unless due care be, and hath been taken that all intrants into the ministry among us have subscribed the said confession, or by some equivalent solemn act, *coram auctoritate ecclesiastica*, testified their owning it as the confession of their faith; which how far it is observed within the bounds of our synod, I am ignorant. Now, if this be so, (for upon this supposition I speak,) I think we are in a very defenceless condition. For if we have no confession which is ours by synodical act, or if any among us have not subscribed or acknowledged the confession.

ut supra, then—First, there is no bar provided to keep out of the ministry those who are corrupt in doctrinals; they may be received into the ministry without renouncing their corrupt doctrines. Secondly, those that are in the ministry among us may propagate gross errors and corrupt many thereby without being discovered to preach any thing against the received truth, because (*supposito ut supra*) the truth was never publicly received among us.

“Secondly, another of our present circumstances is, that we are surrounded by so many pernicious and dangerous corruptions in doctrine, and these grown so much in vogue and fashion, even among those whose ancestors, at the beginning of the reformation, would have sealed the now despised truth with their blood. When Arminianism, Socinianism, Deism, Freethinking, &c., do like a deluge overflow even the reformed churches, both established and dissenting, to such a degree, have we not reason to consult our own safety?

Tum tua res agitur paries cum proximus ardet.

“Thirdly, a third circumstance we are in, which increaseth our danger of infection by error, is partly the infancy, and partly the poverty, of our circumstances, which render us unable to plant a seminary of learning among ourselves, and so to see to the education of our young candidates for the ministry, and therefore are under the necessity of depending upon other places for men to supply our vacancies in the church, and so are in danger of having our ministry corrupted by such as are leavened with false doctrine before they come among us.

“Fourthly, I am afraid there are too many among ourselves, who, though they may be sound in the faith themselves, yet have the edge of their zeal against the prevailing errors of the times very much blunted, partly by their

being dispirited, and so by a kind of cowardice are afraid, boldly, openly, and zealously to appear against those errors that show themselves in the world under the patronage and protection of so many persons of note and figure; partly by a kind of indifferency and mistaken charity, whereby they think they ought to bear with others, though differing from them in opinion about points which are mysterious and sublime, but not practical nor fundamental, such as predestination. Now, although I would grant that the precise point of election and reprobation be neither fundamental nor immediately practical, yet take predestination completely, as it takes in the other disputed points between Calvinists and Arminians, such as universal grace, the non-perseverance of the saints, foreseen faith, and good works, &c., and I think it such an article in my creed, such a fundamental of my faith, that I know not what any other articles would avail, that could be retained without it.

“Now the expedient which I would humbly propose you may take is as follows: First, that our synod, as an ecclesiastical judicature of Christ, clothed with ministerial authority to act in concert in behalf of truth and opposition to error, would do something of this kind at such a juncture, when error seems to grow so fast, that unless we be well fortified, it is like to swallow us up. Secondly, that in pursuance hereof, the synod would, by an act of its own, publicly and authoritatively adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith, Catechisms, &c., for the public confession of our faith, as we are a particular organized church. Thirdly, that further, the synod would make an act to oblige every presbytery within their bounds, to oblige every candidate for the ministry, to subscribe, or otherwise acknowledge, *coram presbyterio*, the said con-

fession of theirs, &c. and to promise not to preach or teach contrary to it. Fourthly, to oblige every actual minister coming among us to do the like. Fifthly, to enact, that if any minister within our bounds shall take upon him to teach or preach any thing contrary to any of the said articles, unless, first, he propose the said point to the presbytery or synod to be by them discussed, he shall be censured so and so. Sixthly, let the synod recommend it to all their members, and members to their flocks, to entertain the truth in love, to be zealous and fruitful, and to be earnest with God by prayer, to preserve their vine from being spoiled by those deluding foxes; which if the synod shall see cause to do, I hope it may, through the divine blessing, prevent in a great measure, if not altogether, our being deluded with the damnable errors of our times; but if not, I am afraid we may be at last infected with the errors which so much prevail elsewhere.

“I will only add one argument to press this, viz: It is to be feared if such an expedient be neglected, (now I hope it is in our power) ere many years pass over our heads, those, who now discern not the necessity thereof, may see it when it will be too late; when perhaps the number of truth’s friends may be too few to carry such a point in the synod. Thus, brethren, I have offered to your consideration some serious thoughts, in a coarse dress. May it please the Master of assemblies to preside among us, and direct and influence us in all things, for his glory and the edification of his church. So prays your unworthy fellow labourer in Christ’s vineyard.”¹

The wisdom of this proposal to adopt the Westminster Confession, has received the sanction of the church for

¹ This overture, though not inserted in the minutes of the synod, was printed. The above transcript is taken from Mr. Hazard’s MSS.