



THE OLDEST PRESBYTERIAN COMMUNION SERVICE.

JOURNAL

OF THE

Presbyterian Historical Society

VOL. VII.

MARCH, 1913.

No. 1.

OUR HERITAGE OF HISTORY AND OUR DUTY AS TRUSTEES OF THE PAST.

A PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE ANNUAL MEETING
OF THE PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY, PHILADEL-
PHIA, JANUARY 9, 1913.

BY REV. HENRY VAN DYKE, D.D., LL.D.

The honor of being the President of The Presbyterian Historical Society is one so far beyond my deserts that when it was first proposed I earnestly declined it. But the gentlemen who had the matter in charge (being of Scotch Irish descent, and therefore gifted, at least on the Irish side, with the famous Hibernian power of persuasion), presented their case with such gentle urgency and made so winning a picture of the service which might be rendered in this office by a person of small abilities, that I recognized the identifying finger of predestination and accepted the office for an appointed time—that is, until the really right man for the place is found.

It is a cause of great regret to me that the pressure of my work in other lines leaves me unable to give more time and strength to the service of the Society. Even the pleasure of meeting its friends and supporters at a public reception, which was planned for last year, has been deferred, by a most sorrowful domestic bereavement, until the present

time. I am glad to have the privilege now, and to express to you all my earnest and warm desire for the prosperity of The Presbyterian Historical Society.

You will understand that I am on this ship in the conspicuous but unimportant position of a figure-head. This term is chosen not by way of claiming any ornamental personal qualities, but simply to describe that part of a vessel which is at the front in location and at the rear in usefulness. Now imagine such a figure-head called upon to speak and able to reply, and you will have some idea of the kind of address which ought to be made now. First, the figure-head should say something about the good ship, and the voyage that she has already made, and the faithful work of the officers, engineers, steersmen, and able-bodied seamen, who have kept her afloat and going. Then, the figure-head, pointing forward, should speak of the direction and the course, the present needs and the future hopes of the vessel. Such, in fact, is the outline of what I wish to say to you to-night. Abandoning the nautical figure, I shall speak, first, of what this Society has done already to conserve our Heritage of History, and second, of the work which lies before it as a responsible Trustee of the Past and of our duty to give it a hearty and steady support.

1. The Heritage of History made by those bodies of Christians in America which have Presbyterian rules of government and Reformed standards of faith, is one of the most precious assets of the nation and of the church. Their work in making the gospel known, the Bible honored, the Sabbath respected, and the commandments of God revered, in the early period of American history, was among the most potent factors in giving the United States from the beginning the character of a Christian country. Their republican and representative institutions, based upon democratic sovereignty and entrusting the guidance of affairs to men chosen by the people, undoubtedly influenced the forms chosen for our state and national government. They were steadfast and active in the defense of the rights of the people and in the struggle for American freedom. Their protests and resolu-

tions, like the Abingdon Address and the Mecklenburg Declaration in 1775, were preludes of the Declaration of Independence. In the actual conflict, which was not really a revolution, but a war of resistance to oppressive innovations, they played a leading part. They exhorted, they prayed, they fought, for the conservation of rightful liberties. "I do not know one of them," complained the rector of Trinity Church in New York in 1776, "nor have I been able to hear of any who did not, by every effort in their power promote all the measures of Congress however extravagant." The complaint was just, though it went a hair's breadth beyond the fact. There were two Presbyterian ministers in New England who went over to the Tories. But one of these was deposed, and the other was suspended.

In the history of the development of our country the people of these Reformed and Presbyterian Churches have been no less patriotic, no less influential. Their families, brought up in serious thought and sober ways, have always helped to maintain the important elements of common-sense, gravity, regularity and reverence in the population, and so to preserve the stability and self-control of the nation. They have furnished good men for positions of the highest authority and trust—for the Supreme Court, for Congress, for the Governorship and Legislature of states, for the bench, for the diplomatic service, for the Cabinet, and for the Presidency. Yet they have never put forward or pressed a candidate on the ground of his Presbyterianism. They have never sought to obtain any advantage or predominance over other churches. They have never even whispered to themselves a claim to be "The American Church," content rather to show that their way is a good way, though not the only way, of maintaining religion, and to prove by their works that the gospel of Christ makes useful citizens.

They have been leaders in the evangelization of our great, new land, carrying light and order far out upon the prairie and deep into the forest. They have been faithful advocates of education for all the people, not only founding institutions of the higher learning, but supporting the great

idea of the nation-wide public school—the most important and creative of all our distinctly American ideas. They have been liberal to a degree far beyond their numerical proportion in gifts and benefactions for the welfare of the poor and the distressed. If I mistake not, an investigation would show the members of the Presbyterian family in the front rank, if not foremost, in support of hospitals, asylums, and other institutions of benevolence and unselfish help for humanity.

Now the history of the churches which have borne such fruits, which have nourished and inspired and moulded such useful and honorable human lives for the service of America, is of immense interest and value. Without a knowledge of it we cannot really understand the founding and development of the United States. To study the origin of these churches and their early struggles for existence; to note the type of teaching which made them schools of liberty and nurseries of strong men; to follow the labors and sacrifices by which they were built up and extended; to come into touch with men like Francis Makemie and Ebenezer Pemberton, and the Tennents, and Jonathan Edwards, and John Dickinson, and John Witherspoon and John Rodgers; to observe even their strenuous conflicts among themselves for conscience' sake—in which both sides were often right—and to trace the influences of Christian love and unity which have slowly taught divided friends to understand each other better, and often brought them together again, and prepared the way for larger family reunions and greater Christian alliances; all this, I say, helps us to comprehend the marvelous making of America. What treasures of blood and brawn, of mind and spirit, were poured out for her cause by the Reformed churches! What heroic and high-mettled souls, ready to risk all in defense of God-given rights, were inspired and trained for her service by the strict and virile teachings of evangelical religion! What searchings of heart and conscience, what consecrations of life and property, what long labors and silent, splendid sacrifices, have come from the moral discipline of the Calvinistic faith to enrich, defend, and uphold our common country!

I tell you a true *Historia Mundi* is impossible without church history. Nor can there be in America a real church history which does not include among its major parts a full record and estimate of the character, action and influence of the churches of the Presbyterian order.

It was the recognition of this important truth that led to the foundation of this Presbyterian Historical Society in 1852. Its object was to collect and preserve the materials, and to promote the knowledge, of that particular part of our national religious history which is the heritage of the Reformed churches. The men who have been interested in the Society, from the beginning to the present time, are a noteworthy line—honorable men of whom I may mention only a few by name. Cortlandt Van Rensselaer, James Hoge, Charles Hodge, Thomas H. Skinner, John Forsyth, William B. Sprague, Albert Barnes, William C. Cattell and Henry C. McCook were among the presidents. In other positions of labor and trust there have been men of no less ability and devotion: as chairmen of the Executive Council, such men as William P. Breed and William H. Scott; as librarians and custodians, Samuel Agnew, William L. Ledwith, Alfred Percival Smith, Louis F. Benson; as secretaries and treasurers, John B. Dales, Samuel T. Lowrie, James G. Craighead, D. K. Turner, DeB. K. Ludwig, and Joseph Brown Turner. It is to these men and others of like character that the Society owes its continuance in well-doing and its remarkable success.

For it has succeeded to a degree that would have surprised and delighted its founders, though it does not yet satisfy the enlarged desires of their followers. In spite of many obstacles, such as the general difficulty of securing popular attention for a cause which demands thought to perceive its importance; and the peculiar perversity of Presbyterians in ignoring the real treasures of their inheritance while clinging obstinately to trifles and insignificant habits; and the continual disparity between the pressing needs of the Society and the pitiful smallness of its exchequer, which has been often low, sometimes empty, and never so full that the

treasurer could have an easy mind—in spite of all this, the Society has already accomplished a wonderful work.

It has provided in its rooms a secure and not unworthy place for the gathering, storage and exhibition of historical materials. It has built up a rare and valuable library—beginning with about a thousand volumes in 1856, and rising now to twenty thousand volumes and fifty thousand pamphlets. It is the possessor or the custodian of many priceless manuscripts, including sermons and diaries of the fathers of the church in America, and records of early congregations and presbyteries. It has brought together a most interesting collection of portraits and prints and relics which illustrate in a vivid way the infancy of the churches in the new world. Here is the staff on which that famous evangelist William Tennent leaned as he trod the rough roads of the wilderness, on his gospel journeys, and here the conch-shell on which John Brainerd blew his trumpet-call for the Indians to come to their log church, and here the largest exhibit ever made of those curious old “tokens,” or tickets, which our forefathers used for the purpose of “fencing” the communion table from the approach of unbidden guests.

Many of these things, books, pamphlets, manuscripts, relics have considerable intrinsic value, but this is multiplied a hundred, nay a thousand times, when they are assembled and classified and brought into relation one with another. This is the significant point, this is the inestimable worth of the work done by such a society. All these historical materials and illustrations have a vital connection, they come out of a common life. Centralize them, protect them, arrange them, as this Society has done, and you have as a result, not only an interesting library and museum, but also a place where the life of the Presbyterian churches in America can be studied to better advantage than anywhere else in the world. In addition to doing this the Society, by the publication of its JOURNAL has promoted the writing of historical monographs of permanent value, and the preservation in print of many records and traditions which might otherwise have perished. For all of those who are attached by ties of gratitude and

loyalty to the churches of the Presbyterian family, nay, for all patriotic and thoughtful Americans, the Society has performed an inestimable service in helping to conserve the heritage of the past.

But when I think of how much has been saved, I am overwhelmed with the contrary thought of how much has been lost. What if that first resolution of the church fathers at the General Assembly in 1791, to collect, preserve and utilize the materials of a history of American Presbyterianism had not hung fire for more than sixty years? What if the sincere but scattered, and therefore feeble, efforts in that direction had been combined and organized? What if many of the most important archives of the first churches and the early Presbyteries and Synods had not perished in fires and been lost in waste-baskets and dust-heaps? What if the invaluable diaries and private letters which were written by those voluminous correspondents of the olden time had not been used for kindlings and curl-papers, or sold to the ragman by ignorant inheritors? What if the rare little books and pamphlets which were tucked away in the corners of commonplace working libraries of theology, had not been sold by the pound to second-hand dealers and disappeared forever? What if the futile attempts to write the history of Presbyterianism from a narrow viewpoint and with insufficient equipment, had been supplemented by something larger and stronger, in which the resources of all the kindred churches of the Reformed faith were brought together and the whole subject was studied with a broader and a more accurate scholarship? Such questions as these suggest lost opportunities, and neglected privileges, and an inheritance wasted and diminished by the heedlessness of the heirs.

It was a friend, I think, who spoke of the Presbyterians as "God's silly people." You can see that he was friendly, because he called them "God's people." You can see that he was honest, because he admitted that they were "silly." Nowhere does this quality appear more clearly than in two things which have hitherto characterized them: first, their propensity to quarrel among themselves and divide their

forces on minor issues; second, their almost incredible indifference to the real significance of their own history, and their conservative reluctance to wake up and do what is needed for its conservation. Everywhere else in the world people are alive to the necessity of taking care of the records and relics of the past. The treasures of art and literature are reverently guarded. The documents of the state and the genealogies of private families are preserved with pious care. Surely religion may claim an equal service of piety from her followers. It is time for the members of the churches of the Presbyterian family in America to recognize and to perform their duty as Trustees of the Past.

2. We come, then, to the second part of our subject: a brief consideration of some of the things which need to be done just now in order to secure, safeguard and utilize the materials of our common history, and a brief statement of what this Historical Society is ready to do for that purpose, if it is properly supported.

First, there is need of a much more complete collection of records and relics, books, manuscripts and pamphlets, than has yet been made. Particularly is this true of written archives, documents, diaries and letters. Every year precious things of this kind are burned up by accident, or lost through carelessness. For example, the minutes of the Presbytery of New Castle from 1731 to 1758 were lost long ago. But the minutes of the same Presbytery from 1717 to 1731 were in existence as late as 1888. The early history of Presbyterianism in Virginia and the whole Province of Pennsylvania, except Philadelphia and the northwest corner, is in that book. And now, within the last twenty-four years it has absolutely disappeared, no trace of it can be found. All such records should be deposited with the Historical Society, not only for safekeeping, but also that they may be accessible to historical scholars. The Church of Scotland has long followed such a plan, requiring the deposit of church records, more than fifty years old, in a central office, and the civil law enforces the wise demand.

Our Society has already urged upon the Presbyteries and

Classes the organization of special committees within their own bounds to gather local materials for history, and an encouraging response has been made in many regions. The effect of this movement must be the awakening of a widespread interest in the subject. But the collections made will not have one tenth part of their full value and usefulness unless they are centralized. I hope, therefore, that the General Assemblies will be led to follow the prudent Scotch plan, and enjoin all bodies under their direction to make the Historical Society the depository of their older records, and that the General Synods will do the same.

I hope also that the private gifts of valuable manuscripts, letters, books and pamphlets, by which the Society has been so much enriched, will continue and increase. The old hair-trunk in the garret was never a safe place to keep such things, and now even that frail refuge is disappearing. Bring the relics of the past into security. They will need to be sifted, winnowed, arranged and classified, of course. For the purposes of this library are not general, but historical. Those purposes, however, would be greatly helped if it could obtain more of the good things which are now lying forgotten and unused.

The second need, which is less immediate and important, is a natural outgrowth of the first. If the library and historical collections of the Society are increased, it must have more room for storage and exhibition and study than its present delightful quarters can afford. It should have a home of its own, designed and fitted for its special use. In my judgment the best place for such a Presbyterian House of History is in Philadelphia. The historical associations of the city, its accessibility, its location in the general region whence the Reformed and Presbyterian churches have drawn their main strength, its comparative reasonableness in the cost of land and building, and finally the well-known tranquil atmosphere of the town which is not in a hurry—all combine to commend Philadelphia. I can see, as it were in a devout dream, a quiet edifice, standing on some tranquil square or carless street, built in the simple and sedate colonial style

rather than in pseudo-gothic, fire-proof, commodious, dignified, ready to welcome all visitors and guests who have an interest in the precious memorials and relics treasured within its walls. Such a house would surely become a shrine for pilgrims from many parts of the world, a meeting-place for people of good will and loyal memories who do not forget the faith and the deeds of their forefathers, and above all it would become the central fountain of enlightenment for all who wished to study the origin and influence of those great churches of America which have held the Reformed faith and the Presbyterian order. May the day soon come, when some Christian man or woman, looking for a worthy object for a pious and useful memorial gift, may dream this same dream and make it true.

The third need of the Society is really the most pressing of all. It is the need of money. Dependent almost entirely upon annual gifts and subscriptions for its support, it has been kept up and enabled to do its remarkable work by the unselfish devotion and generosity of a comparatively small group of loyal friends. This company deserves to be increased, for it is a good company, and the cause which it serves, though quiet, is of large and high importance. I wish that I could persuade more people to believe in it. It does not lend itself to noisy advertisement, but it appeals to the thoughtful mind and the remembering heart.

One reason why our churches have suffered a comparative loss in power and influence is because our Presbyterian people have failed in that form of self-respect which preserves and cherishes the heritage of the past, and draws courage and inspiration for the present from the records of the forefathers.

This Society, dedicated to such a purpose, deserves to have thousands in its membership instead of about two hundred and forty. It deserves, and it needs urgently to-day for the carrying on of its enlarged work, an endowment of at least a \$100,000 instead of its present poor little fund of about \$11,000. No more serviceable benefaction could be made to the combined cause of religion and patriotism than the

foundation of such an endowment, whether by a single gift or by many.

The support of the Society should not be confined to a single section of the country. It should have friends and contributors in all parts of the United States. Every Synod and Presbytery and Classis should have a share in its work, as all will benefit by its results. It makes an honorable claim upon the intelligence and loyalty of all the people of the Presbyterian and Reformed churches. It is the only Society that exists to preserve from oblivion the record of what those churches have done to make America a Christian republic, and so to build up the kingdom of God in the modern world.