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WALTER L. LINGLE, D. D., *Editor-in-Chief*

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THE UNION SEMINARY REVIEW

VOL. XXIX.

JANUARY, 1918.

No. 2.

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT.

This number of the Union Seminary Review is devoted largely to the vital question of Presbyterian Union or Federation. There is no more important question before our Church at this time. The following letter which was addressed by the editor to nine Southern Presbyterian ministers in nine capital cities will explain the way in which the thoughtful articles which go to make up this issue of the Review were secured:

"Last May the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., appointed a committee to confer with our Church on organic union and requested our Assembly to appoint a similar committee to confer with their committee (see Minutes of our Assembly, p. 27). Our Assembly in reply appointed a committee to consider the question of the federation of all the Presbyterian bodies in the United States (see Minutes of our Assembly, p. 53). These two committees have held a joint conference in Atlantic City and will hold another meeting in Richmond on December the 18th.

It is evident that there is a great deal of unrest in both of these great Presbyterian Churches as to the present relationship existing between them and as to the relationship existing between the various Presbyterian bodies in this country. It is also evident that there are many in our own Church who feel that something ought to be done. This feeling is intensified by the reports of unrest which come from some of the border States where the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., and the

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH UNION.

BY THE REV. JAMES I. VANCE, D. D.,

Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tenn.

In considering the question of closer relations between the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (Northern), it should be borne in mind that the real issue is not what will most advantage either Church. As Southern Presbyterians, the chief thing for us to consider is not what will be for the best interest of our Church. The Church is not the goal of the gospel. It is merely a means to an end. It is simply a piece of inspired machinery to accomplish a definite result. The Church, like the doctors, will achieve success when it shall create conditions that will make its own further existence unnecessary. There is coming a day, in the development of the kingdom, when we shall see "no temple therein." The law for the Church, like the law for the individual Christian, is sacrificial service. Just as the individual Christian must set himself aside, and be ever laying down his life for the brethren, so must a Church. The Church that ends in itself and is concerned only for its own denominational welfare has lost out of its life the most distinctive thing in Christianity.

The main issue, then, in this question of union is not what will be for the best interests of the Southern Presbyterian Church, but what will be for the best interests of the Redeemer's kingdom in the earth.

With this approach, I unhesitatingly place myself on the side of the organic union of the two great Presbyterian bodies in this country. I should want it, of course, to be a real union, and not a union that will result in disunion. We do not want a "wee free" Presbyterian body left over in the South. So

long as a considerable minority of our ministers and people express themselves as irreconcilably opposed to union, I should vote against it. I could not agree with such a minority in its views on this subject, but I would respect those views, and feel that a partial union purchased at the cost of division would be inadvisable, in that it would defeat the very purpose of union.

Failing of organic union, I should favor some form of federation between the two churches, although I must confess to a lack of enthusiasm for federation. The idea seems to me to be born of a fear that one party or the other in the united body might have the upper hand. The two churches are not ready to unite until they can trust each other. The union should be a love match and not a bargain. The result of the union should be one body out of which old causes of division would disappear. Marriage is not federation, but union.

In addition to the objection based on distrust is another based on a lack of efficiency. Federation would largely increase ecclesiastical machinery. It would give us a cumbersome and costly system of Church courts. These courts would consume energy that should be spent on evangelism and the spread of the gospel. A machine is of value only as a transmitter of energy. The moment it begins to consume power, it begins to discredit itself. We have enough Church courts already. Would that we had fewer!

The only argument in favor of federation is that it may lead to organic union. It may also lead to the opposite, especially if these additional Church courts are pestered much with the presence of the ecclesiastical politician. But if federation is to be favored because it may lead to organic union, why not organic union at once? Why put up at the half-way house when home is within reach? It is not evident that until we have confidence enough to trust each other fully, it were better not to indulge in experiments to discover whether or not we can trust each other at all. Therefore, while I should vote for federation, I feel that organic union is not only to be preferred, but should obtain, and for the following reasons:

1. *It Is in Line With the Teachings of Christ.* No one, studying the New Testament with unprejudiced mind, is likely to reach the conclusion that Christ would have his visible Church torn into sectarian fragments, or even into the denominational divisions as they now exist. To be sure, the oneness he speaks of is the result of a spiritual unity rather than of a corporal union. And it is undoubtedly true that there is frequently more spiritual unity between people of different denominations than among the members of a body ecclesiastically unsplit. Nevertheless, is it not true that inward spiritual unity tends to cover itself not with divisions, but with oneness of body? If people are really one in spirit, should not that fact certify itself in their organic relations? Division has fed on bigotry. Bigotry is simply the conviction of a zealot who has lost the right perspective. It is a virtue that has tumbled down into a vice. It is the sin of good people, but one on which Christ had no mercy. It is the thing Christ rebuked in those disciples who saw one casting out devils in Christ's name, but who forbade him because he "followed not with them." Jesus said: "Forbid him not . . . for he that is not against us is on our part."

2. *It Will Be a Powerful Evidence to the World of the Reality and Sincerity of Our Christian Professions.* The divisions of the Christian Church do not make the world think more of Christ. They are not an asset, but a liability. We may try to hide the fact by specious pleading on the value of division of labor and the sanity of having a due regard to differences of training and temperament, and to the idiosyncrasies of human nature which make a split-up Church a thing to be desired. But Christ swept all such views of the question aside when in his intercessory prayer he prayed "that they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me."

Is not the effect of division on the world to be considered? If it makes it harder for men of the world to believe in Christ, is not division an unholy thing, and is it not the duty of every

loyal follower of Christ to pray and strive that Christ's people may be one?

3. *The Economic Question Is Not to Be Despised.* Divisions are costly not only in money, but in workers. We pray the Lord to thrust forth laborers into his harvest; and then we locate half a dozen ministers in a village to serve denominational interests, when the spiritual interests of that village can be adequately served by one of those six ministers, and the remaining five be released for other parts of the white ripe harvest fields. This is not a fairy story of religious waste and extravagance. It is a fact which shames the Church in many a community throughout our land. It is a situation which indicts the business sagacity of Presbyterians North and South in small towns where our denominational lines overlap. It is a situation that secular business would not submit to for a day. Should the Lord's work be conducted on a basis that cannot command the respect of the business sense of the world? We recognize the weakness this situation presents, and we try to meet it with various rules of ecclesiastical comity; but we know how prone the best of us are to mistake denomination advantage for ecclesiastical comity. The only real cure for the situation is to end our divisions and get together, to put all the Christian interests of a village into one firm, and to make common cause against the foe.

4. *Organic Union Is to Be Favored Because of the Larger Life It Would Give to the Whole Church.* Christ evidently meant for his Church to be not provincial, but cosmopolitan. His followers can be most useful as they feel the power of the big currents that are sweeping through the world. Of course no provincial ever regards himself as one. It is such an easy thing for us to imagine that all the world is to be measured by our ideas. It is such an easy thing to be a Church "with a provincial experience and a cosmic opinion."

Union will broaden both Churches. It will give the resultant Church a bigger life, for it will give it bigger sympathies, bigger duties, bigger resources, bigger fields, bigger outlook, bigger opportunities, bigger obligations. While, as I suggest-

ed above, the Church is not to determine the question of union by asking, "What will be for the best interests of the denomination?" it has certainly a right to consider the question of efficiency and ask, "What will make the Church most useful, what will enable it to do the biggest work?"

Before the Church can do, it must see. Vision precedes activity; and big vision calls for more than good eyesight; it calls for a big horizon. Who doubts but union would broaden the horizon for both Churches? The dream of a great American Presbyterian Church with a solidarity that is national, a summons that is international, and an obligation that is racial is not to be despised.

5. *The Issues Involved in the Great War Clamor for a United Church.* It is a war for democracy, for closer ranks among mankind, for the realization of racial unity and human brotherhood, for an end to divisions, for the death of strife, and the ushering in of the era of good will. Unless something of all this comes, the war will have been fought in vain. Shall the Church, which has been preaching racial unity and human brotherhood for all these centuries be the one body in the earth to cling to the merit of division? The blunt world will never be able to understand such a course. We may explain it as best we can, but the world will keep on asking of the Church: "Why not practise what you preach?"

The war has shot to pieces many of the old barriers that we have erected between one another. The ancient boundaries are gone from the map of the world's respect. He who blethers to-day about the sanctity of dogma and ritual as walls of separation between different parts of Christ's sacramental army will find himself without an audience. The war has shown that a formal religion, an ecclesiastical religion, is a rotten dam which the flood of world strife sweeps through.

The world is asking for a religion that can restrain the brutal passions of human nature, and it is finding that dogma and ritual are powerless there. It is coming to see that religion must be vitalized, that the churches must be filled with the spirit of the Son of Man, that experience must take the

place of dogma, and that intellect must sit at the feet of love, if the world is to be saved. It is finding what the cross means. It is getting a vision of Calvary that flies the pages of our theologies and can be written only on the tablets of life. It is discovering that the last shall be first, and that the only God who can save the world is he who came not to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many, and whose word to his warring disciples in all ages is: "I am among you as one that serveth."

How cheap and mean before these sublime issues seem some of the pleas by which we have sought to sanctify division! And how easy it would be for us to get together, if only these great questions of the vital presence of the serving Christ were allowed to decide us!

There were issues on which we split. There were great principles at stake. Our fathers on both sides of the line did what they thought was right. We may not approve their judgment, but we need not impugn their motives.

Those issues belong to the past. We need not fight over the old battles. New days are here, new duties, new issues. In the presence, not of a past which divided us, but of a present which may unite us, and of a future which swings wide open the door to sacrificial service, what shall we say of the relations that should exist between us but this: "A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another!"