

UNION SEMINARY REVIEW

A Presbyterian Quarterly

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THE UNION SEMINARY REVIEW

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ORGANIC UNION AMONG PRESBYTERIANS.

BY REV. JAMES I. VANCE, D. D., LL. D.,
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"Do not hurry, we have no time to lose," a great surgeon said to his assistant as he was starting to perform a major operation.

Two things are vastly important in approaching the consideration of organic union among Presbyterians. They are prayer and patience. Two classes of people are not disposed to give either. They are those who have made up their minds not to have union under any conditions, and those who have made up their minds to have it at any price. To pray and to wait with a closed mind is to find ourselves where we were.

If anything deserves earnest prayer in connection with the interests of the church, the consideration of organic union would seem to deserve it. But there can be no prayer that does not first say to God: "Thy will be done." Some have been praying for light on this subject. How much longer is the waiting attitude to be maintained? Organic union was an acute question, as I well remember, when Dr. A. W. Pitzer, of Washington City, some forty years ago published his series of articles in the church papers advocating union, and brought down upon his head the lasting condemnation of some of the brethren. They said he was in advance of the times.

How much longer are we to wait for the times to catch up? Certainly until union, if it comes at all, shall come as a love

match. For one, I should not be willing to promote division in order to produce union.

Organic union, if it be Christian union, is not a species of ecclesiastical barter. It is not certain churches dickering with each other for the best terms and jockeying for the best position. It is a sorry marriage where husband and wife approach the altar in such a mood, and it would be a calamitous union for churches to strike hands for Christ on a commercial basis. If the union is to be a blessed and a happy union, there will be no bargain driving, no fencing for self-protection, no wondering and worry as to which party or clique is to run the church.

There will be profound concern to exalt Christ. Unless we can cement union in such a mood, we would best wait and watch a while longer. This does not mean that an irreconcilable minority should rule or ruin, whether the issue of events pitch victory toward or against union. Ours is a constitutional church, and loyal Presbyterians, when they have enjoyed their constitutional rights, do not pout and peter out into wee frees. They go on doing team work.

There are two main questions to be considered at some length. The first has to do with doctrine, and the second with administration. Neither of these will be easy to work out, and the best brains and experience and leadership of all the churches involved should be set to work and given all the time needed to arrive at proper solutions of the problems involved.

Doctrine.

At the Pittsburgh conference, the conferring committees unanimously decided to recommend to the interested churches that organic union be effected as early as possible on the basis of their existing standards. What is meant by "existing standards"? The statement would seem to assume a harmony between these standards sufficient to constitute them a common basis for organic union. If this be the case, it is a happy condition.

There will no doubt be some to question the fact that the various branches of the Presbyterian church are in entire agreement, or even substantial agreement, in their existing standards. On the other hand, very many would have no hesitation whatever in affirming the existence of such substantial agreement. Is such substantial agreement sufficient to satisfy the situation?

It is doubtful if the ministers of the Southern Presbyterian Church who already subscribe to the same doctrinal standards are in absolute accord on all questions of doctrine. They are, however, in substantial accord, sufficiently so for them to be organized loyally together in one denomination.

Can we hope for any closer doctrinal accord than this in a church of three million or more members? In the very nature of the case must not there be some spaciousness, some freedom of interpretation, some variety of views, in a church that is to function widely and with vigor for the kingdom? Is it not possible to choke life with airtight compartments? May we not fetter activities with a straight-jacket creed? Just what is the truth to be most carefully guarded in a doctrinal statement? It is undoubtedly the Godhead of Jesus. There can be no union on any basis that plays false to the Deity of Christ. If Jesus is not very God, we have no Gospel, and the church sags to nothing but a humanitarian society. But suppose the doctrinal basis safeguards beyond all question the Godhead of our Lord. Then we have the Deity of Christ plus all that the Deity of Christ safeguards. Need orthodoxy be scared standing on such a basis?

It is no easy quest to search to-day for a theological platform that will satisfy world Presbyterianism. We have not attempted so much even in the smaller bodies into which Presbyterianism has been broken. About as far as we have sought to go has been to pledge to an acceptance of our historic standard in the sense of containing the system of doctrine taught in the Bible.

The Westminster Confession of Faith was itself a compromise. The members of that famous assembly were many men

of many minds on many points. They were far from being at one in all their theological views. They had to give and take. Some wanted more, some wanted less. Those who subscribe to these standards to-day represent different schools of Calvinistic thought. Some give and take will still be necessary, but never enough to jeopardize the supernatural element in Christianity or question the Godhood of Jesus.

Is there an idea abroad that these churches before they can unite must produce a new confession of faith? It is the last thing to be considered. We are not living in an age greatly gifted for such an endeavor. He is more than sanguine who hopes there may be produced a twentieth century confession of faith to which no Presbyterians will object. A declaration that will fly the flag of loyalty to Christ and the sacred Scriptures is something within the realm of the possible, but not a new confession of faith, not new Larger and Shorter Catechisms.

Then what becomes of their "existing standards"? Inasmuch as the writer phrased the language of the resolution adopted at Pittsburgh, perhaps he may be allowed to state what was in his own mind. It was this: Our "existing standards" would be enshrined as the historical symbols of the Presbyterian faith. They would hand on in a great way the doctrines we have cherished, the truths for which we have contended. The church would cherish them not so much for controversy or even propaganda, but somewhat as America cherishes the Declaration of Independence.

On the basis of these existing standards the divided members of the Presbyterian faith would unite, and please God, would become one church! Then in addition to these existing standards, there would be framed a fighting symbol in the form of a brief declaratory statement to which all ministers and church officers must pledge their loyal allegiance and support.

Such is the custom of the Presbyterians of Scotland. Could American Presbyterians do better than follow their example? Indeed, could we do better than adopt the Scottish declaration? It would give the pulse beat of a world fellowship to Presby-

terianism. It would make the test for ordination the same on both sides of the ocean.

The statement for the ordination and induction of ministers under the Scottish declaration is as follows:

Questions and Formula.

The moderator addressing the ordinand or minister to be inducted who is to stand and make answer to the questions put to him shall say:

I—Do you believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and do you confess anew the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord?

II—Do you believe and will you faithfully proclaim the Gospel of the love and grace of God, wherein through Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord He freely offers to all men forgiveness and eternal life, and calls them into the fellowship and service of His kingdom?

III—Do you believe the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the supreme rule of faith and life?

IV—Do you acknowledge the Westminster Confession of Faith as the subordinate standard of this church, and do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained therein?

V—Do you believe as this church in her historic testimony has constantly affirmed that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only King and Head of the church, that the church derives from Him a government distinct from civil government, and that civil rulers possess no jurisdiction in her spiritual affairs?

VI—Do you acknowledge the Presbyterian government and discipline as authorized in this church to be agreeable to the Word of God? Do you promise to be subject in the Lord to this Presbytery, and to the superior courts of this church, and to take your due part in the administration of her affairs? Do you engage to seek the purity, growth, and peace of this church, and to cherish a spirit of brotherhood toward all the faithful followers of Christ?

VII—Are not zeal for the glory of God, love to the Lord Jesus Christ, and a desire for the salvation of men so far as you know your own heart your chief motives for entering into the office of the holy ministry?

The congregation will now stand.

VIII—Do you, the members of this congregation, receive M. N. to be your minister, with all gladness, and promise him all due respect, encouragement, and support as his fellow-workers in the Lord, and will you give of your means as the Lord shall prosper you for the maintenance of the Christian ministry and the furtherance of the Gospel?

Will you signify your assent by holding up your hands?

Again addressing the ordinand, or minister to be inducted, the moderator shall say:

IX—Do you engage in the strength of the Lord Jesus Christ to walk worthy of your calling to discharge faithfully the duties of the ministry among this people, and to seek the furtherance of the kingdom of God?

X—And all these things you profess, and promise through grace, as you would answer to your Lord and enter into His eternal joy?

Declaration of Ordination or Induction.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the King and Head of the church, we do hereby declare you to be ordained to the office of the holy ministry, and induct you into the pastoral charge of this congregation, and we commend you to the grace of God in the discharge of all your duties as a minister of the Gospel.

There are additional questions and formula for the licensing of probationers, the ordination of a missionary, a professor, and the ordination and induction of elders and deacons.

Administration.

The other matter, which will call for serious and careful and patient study and planning is that which has to do with

orders and organization and the administration of the benevolent work of the church at home and abroad.

These problems must be worked out in such a way as to meet and solve the difficult questions which at once suggest themselves.

The size of the united church will demand that some changes be made. There are two weak spots in the Presbyterian system. One lodges in the General Assembly. The Assembly is our most dangerous court, for the reason that business of the largest importance and often of the most delicate nature frequently must be handled by men who have had little opportunity to learn through experience much that is involved. It is possible for a new General Assembly to wreck the machinery of the church without realizing the issues at stake. A little reflection will show the importance of a longer term of service, a more careful selection of commissioners, and perhaps a reduction in the representation sent to this highest court of the church. In making changes, however, the utmost care must be exercised to maintain Presbyterian tradition. Democracy must be maintained without weakening organization, and unity effected without producing the evils of centralization.

The other weak spot reveals itself in the placing of preachers and the supplying of churches. The heart-breaking experiences of both should stir the church to some adequate method of relief.

When an important church becomes vacant, often a year elapses ere the right man is found. When not so important a preacher is thrown out without charge, as long a period or longer is spent in the humiliating effort to find a field. We need better machinery to bring pastorless churches and churchless pastors together.

In meeting the first difficulty, which arises from the peril of being swamped by numbers, is it possible to rearrange the church courts somewhat and at the same time shift responsibility and scatter representation? It might create evils either to reduce or proscribe representation, but not to shift responsibility. Might not the present General Assembly be consti-

tuted of commissioners elected by the Synod, the Assembly meetings to be held tri-ennially, and the commissioners to be divided into three classes, each of which shall hold office for two terms in succession?

Might not a new church court to be known as the General Synod including a number of Synods and composed of delegates elected by Presbytery and meeting annually be created to handle and issue certain matters now handled and issued by the General Assembly? For instance, matters of doctrine might be issued in the General Synods, while the administration of the benevolent causes could remain as at present in the hands of the General Assembly and of its boards and committees.

With regard to the placing of ministers and the supplying of churches, we might be helped by a study of the methods of the United Church of Canada. The old plan of the call, induction, and dissolution of pastoral relations still holds, but on this plan has been built something that is half Presbyterian and half Episcopal, without its being either. Each Synod has a placing committee. At the meetings of Synod should a pastor desire to change his charge or a church desire to change its pastor, the desire is referred to the placing committee, and the adjustment is made with the Synod's approval and authority. Should there be pastors unsought and churches unsupplied, these also are referred to the placing committee, that every endeavor be made to place all ministers and to supply all churches. Whatever is done, if anything, in these questions which have to do with doctrine and administration in the United Church, the approach should be made with the psychology of churches organically united, and not from that of churches which are merely solicitous to maintain an identity in a loose federation.

They must be handled, too, so as to avoid any alienation or lack of cooperation between causes and constituencies. There must be care exercised lest spirituality be choked with the cancer of too much government.

Of course the discussion of these things at this stage of

procedure may turn out to be only so much breath wasted. The next Assembly may swing from pro-union to contra-union. It may abolish all the committees it has appointed. It may scrap all the machinery its predecessors have set in motion. This is a way General Assemblies have of doing, and in doing so, they are entirely within their rights.

Having marched up the hill and once more marched down again, there will be nothing left us but to follow the example of the Chinese Christians at the Jerusalem Conference who, failing to devise a basis satisfactory to all, came to this conclusion: "Agreed to differ, but resolved to love and unite to serve."

THE INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE.

BY REV. FRANCIS L. PATTON, D. D., LL. D.,
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A threefold cord is not easily broken. In support of our Christian faith we have the indubitable testimony of history. That is to say we have the trustworthiness of the Bible. We have the conviction of its truth in our own subjective states produced in us, as we feel and the Scriptures assert, by the witness of the Spirit. In other words, we have the testimony of history confirmed by subjective inspiration. And in addition we have the objective inspiration of the Scriptures themselves. But just as the meaning of the witness of the Spirit needs careful interpretation, and the lack of it may be used to the disadvantage of Christianity, so the inspiration of the