

THE ONE HUNDRED AND THIRD GENERAL ASSEMBLY.

THE very notable One Hundred and Second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, has been followed by an equally notable One Hundred and Third General Assembly. At the outset, Dr. William Henry Green was chosen Moderator by a unanimous rising vote. And perhaps nothing was more notable about this Assembly than that it thus obtained the honor which more than one of its predecessors has craved, of honoring with the gift of its highest office a scholar whose single-hearted devotion to truth is evidenced not more by the greatness of his attainments than by his rare modesty. The enthusiastic choice of the greatest Hebraist and Old Testament critic of the Church to the Moderator's chair, was an indication of the deep and unfeigned love for sacred learning which pervades the Church and which ruled in this Assembly; while the spontaneous unanimity with which the office was tendered to one whose reluctance was overcome only by the heartiness of the proffer, was a striking indication of the value which the Church places upon the modesty of true scholarship. Another thing which rendered this Assembly notable was that the great Disposer of events chose it as the stage from which to call one of His saints to heaven. There was no one in the Church whom it more delighted to honor than the Hon. Samuel M. Breckinridge, as there was no one who repaid the honor conferred upon him with more loyal service. And having faithfully served her through more than three-score years, it was not unfitting that the summons to an even higher service should have come to him, not before, not in the midst of, but only after he had completed for her a service of unusual delicacy with unusual tact, kindness and faithfulness. As he died with the words on his lips, "I feel that I have discharged my duty faithfully, and I ask you to excuse me from further service"—the scene, the words, the example could not fail to bear their fruit. Shortly before, the almost equally sudden death of another servant of Christ whom Presbyterians have loved and honored—Dr. Henry J. Van Dyke, of Brooklyn—was announced to the house. In the solemnity begot by such circumstances, with the veil rent between earth and heaven, and as "seeing the invisible," the court took up the great problems that came before it.

Among these problems, issued in this spirit, the one which occupied the attention and tried the heart of the Assembly longest and most intensely, was the disposition to be made of the appointment of Prof. Charles A. Briggs, D.D., to the recently established chair of Biblical Theology in Union Seminary. This disposition was not made in a spirit of irritation towards Dr. Briggs; but in that same spirit of patient forbearance with which the Church has for so long borne with what it deems his unfortunate manner. Still less was it made in a spirit of indifference to the interests of Union Seminary; but rather with the deepest concern and the most careful consideration for

the interests of that great school whose past is a portion of the cherished heritage of the whole Church, in whose present greatness she rejoices, and for whose future, as part of her own life, she wishes nothing but growth and prosperity and good. Still less was it made in a spirit of opposition to the science of Biblical Criticism; but rather in the name of sound Biblical learning, which the Assembly was at that moment honoring in the person of its greatest American representative by placing him in the Moderator's chair. It was made calmly and dispassionately, and under the pressure only of a high and instructed sense of duty. The Committee to whom was entrusted the presentation of the matter to the Assembly was conspicuous no less for its judicial spirit and its fine restraint than for its ability. Its report to the Assembly was as remarkable for its generous fairness as for its faithfulness. The ear of the Assembly was given with equal readiness to the presentation of every phase of opinion, and its patience knew no bounds, so that every one was heard at length who had a suggestion to make or a plea to offer. The resolutions which were adopted after this extended debate are a model of extreme kindness and delicacy in the performance of a difficult duty.

1. *Resolved*, That, in the exercise of its right to veto the appointment of professors in the Union Theological Seminary, the General Assembly hereby disapproves of the appointment of the Rev. Charles A. Briggs, D.D., to the Edward Robinson Professorship of Biblical Theology in that seminary, by transfer from another chair in the same seminary.

2. *Resolved*, That a Committee, consisting of eight ministers and seven ruling elders, be appointed by this Assembly to confer with the Directors of the Union Theological Seminary in regard to the relations of the said seminary to the General Assembly, and to report to the next General Assembly.

By their adoption by the decisive vote of 448 to 60, the formal disapproval of the whole Church, assembled in its lawful representatives, was pronounced upon Dr. Briggs's appointment.

Among the other matters of importance disposed of, a very high place must be accorded to the report of the adoption by the Presbyteries, by an almost unanimous vote (190 Presbyteries), of the new chapter prepared by the last Assembly for the Form of Government, defining methods for effecting amendments in the several Standards of the Church. This chapter now becomes part of the Constitution and practically settles many long-standing disputes and gives certitude to future procedure. This is a great gain.

The most important matter sent down to the Presbyteries by this Assembly was the transmission to them, for their criticism and suggestions, of the report of the Committee on the Revision of the Confession of Faith, appointed by the last Assembly. The Assembly only carried out the desire of the Committee in accepting their report as a report of progress and ordering it printed and sent down to the Presbyteries for their "consideration, criticism and amendment." It is unfortunate that so short a time is allowed for this consideration;

the intervening summer vacation and the heavy labor of the opening autumn will leave scant time and opportunity for the careful study which so important a document demands for its amendment, before the 1st of December, when the answers of the Presbyteries must be forwarded to the Secretary of the Revision Committee. That the shortness of time allowed may not measurably defeat the end sought in submitting the report to the examination of the Presbyteries, the greatest diligence in the business will be requisite. That there is room for criticism of the report follows from the very nature of the case; and is given more importance by the fact that the Committee was not itself unanimous in all its recommendations. The Chairman in his report dutifully informs the Church, "that as to some of the most important changes, such as those in the third and tenth chapters, there were decided differences of judgment in the Committee, some members being opposed to the changes therein recommended and voting against them." In the presence of this fact, faithful criticisms by the Presbyteries become not only a privilege but a duty; and we trust the Committee will be led by them to give us next year an even more excellent piece of work than it has presented to us now. For the report that is now presented, is an excellent piece of work. The Committee has obviously expended much time and earnest study upon the grave task entrusted to it; and the results of its labor will increase the confidence which the Church reposes in its ability, skill and soundness. Not that all these results are acceptable. In the course of his most interesting speech on the report, Dr. Patton classified the varying attitudes which he was constrained to take towards its several portions. He said:

With regard to some of the changes proposed by the Committee I say, speaking simply for myself, that I assent to them *con amore*, and believe, seeing revision is demanded by the Church, that the changes we propose are the changes that ought to be made. I say that with respect to some. And then with respect to some other changes I say that I do not regard them as called for, as needed by the theological exigency of our day; but at the same time, they are not so objectionable as to call forth, from me at least, any comment, or criticism, or objection, and although they are not what I would have proposed, they are not what I object to. And then with respect to another class of changes, there are those which ought to be made, but which ought not to be made in the way that this Committee proposes to make them. . . . And then I believe with regard to still another class of changes, that the proposed changes are not needed, and that change of any kind is unnecessary. . . . We believe a great deal will stand, and I, for one, hope that some of it will not stand.

This passage expresses fairly our own position with regard to the proposed amendments to the Confession. Speaking simply for ourselves, we find some things among them which we think improvements, others concerning which we are indifferent, others to which we mildly and still others to which we strongly object.

For one thing we hope, for example, that the proposed radical revision of the third chapter will not stand. We gladly recognize

that the proposed revision leaves that chapter Calvinistic. But it proceeds on the principle of lowering and lessening the expression of one of the essentially involved doctrines of Calvinism until it is all but expunged. Now we are Calvinists *con amore*. We believe every doctrine that enters as a constituent part into the Calvinistic system, to be the truth of God. We are not ashamed of any one of them. And we very strenuously object to reducing the expression of one of them to its lowest terms, and then hiding it away in a corner, as if we blushed to own what the God who has so loved us as to give His Son for us, has revealed to us as to His dealing with the children of men. If the very stringent dealing of the proposed revision with the Confessional statement of the doctrine of sovereign preterition, does not in any way encroach upon "the integrity of the Reformed or Calvinistic system of doctrine taught in the Confession of Faith," it certainly advances somewhat in the direction of so doing. There is a passage in the report of the Chairman of the Committee, to the curiously guarded wording of which the careful attention of the Presbyteries should be called in this connection :

It will be seen that Chapter iii, which has been regarded by many as the pivot around which revision revolves, has been altered more than any other portion of the Confession. It has not, however, been completely rewritten, as some Presbyteries have asked, but so recast that the expressions most objected to have entirely disappeared. It was thought that further alterations in the same direction would, in the opinion of some, impair the integrity of our Reformed or Calvinistic system.

An old negro on being accused of lying, replied, "No, master, that is not a lie; but it is in the direction of one." And Dr. Roberts tells us that the alterations proposed for the third chapter do not impair the integrity of the Calvinistic system, but that "it was thought that further alteration in the same direction would, in the opinion of some, impair the integrity of our Reformed or Calvinistic system." We do not desire to advance so far in this direction that another little step would be fatal. And we trust that the Presbyteries will insist on continuing to confess the truth of God in this great matter as fully, as explicitly, and as undoubtingly as heretofore and as it is declared in the Word. For our part we believe that the third section should be restored (either as it stands or with some such well-guarded addition as the phrase in the Larger Catechism: "to be for their sins inflicted"), and that the useless and misleading additions to the seventh section should be stricken out.

For another thing, we hope that the proposed reconstruction of the section on infant salvation (Chap. x, 3) will not stand. Although we all cherish as a blessed hope, and some of us feel that there is sufficient Scriptural basis to enable us to hold as a personal conviction, what is here stated, surely there is no such clear and direct Scripture for it as will justify its dogmatic assertion as a Confessional doctrine. Nor can it be too often or too emphatically repeated that no state-

ment of infant salvation can be satisfactory which does not lay stress on the two chief elements which require emphasizing—that infants need salvation, and that they owe their salvation to the electing love of God. Once more we hope that the confusing phraseology concerning the work of the Holy Ghost introduced into the proposed revision, by which the distinction between the operations of common and of efficacious grace suffers obscuration, will not stand without correction or guarding. The insertion of what Dr. Roberts calls “the ‘means’ through which the Lord offers unto sinners life and salvation” into vii, 3 already is open to this objection, in its connection; and thus what is probably the most exact statement of the Covenant of Grace ever framed is sadly marred. And the language of the two new chapters—which, finely conceived and expressed as they are, we cannot think worthy of a place in the noble context of the Confession—errs more than once in this direction. We cannot, however, enter here into a detailed criticism of the document; enough has doubtless been said to serve our purpose of indicating to the Presbyteries that a grave as well as a pressing task has been entrusted to them, when they are asked to advise the Committee with reference to its proposed revision of the Confession of Faith. May the spirit of truth “give efficacy to the Word” during the coming months, keep the Church from error, and “enable it to bear effectual testimony to the truth.”

The detailed reports of the work of the Assembly, published in the weekly papers, supersede the necessity of a further account here. We ought to mention, however, that the Overture on Deaconesses was declared by the Assembly to be lost—a decision which was certainly wise in view of the need in which the second paragraph stood of the first, in order to define and limit the position and functions of Deaconesses. Nor ought we to omit to express the satisfaction which all must feel with the admirable exhibit made by the evangelizing agencies of the Church, despite the great debt that still hangs over the Home Board; and with the successful and grandly attended meetings held in their interest, arguing an enthusiasm for the proper work of the Church, which promises great things.

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PRINCETON.