

THE

Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter.

VOL. II.

DECEMBER, 1864.

No. 12.

SHALL WE HAVE A CHRISTIAN CONSTITUTION?

THAT we will have such a Constitution in time, is beyond question. The kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. The heathen may rage, and say, Let us break asunder the bands of the Lord and his Anointed, and cast their cords away from us; but it will all be in vain. The Lord, who is mightier than the mighty waves of the sea, sits in heaven, and regards with scorn all the puny efforts of these rebels against his government and his power. Christ Jesus, our Lord, and the Lord of all, "*must* reign (1 Cor. 15: 25,) till he hath put all enemies under his feet." The truth of God is thus pledged to the fact, yet future, that the United States, or at least a people occupying its territory, shall at last acknowledge the Incarnate Son of God as its Lord and Governor, and shall submit to and obey his law. It is a mere question of time. No power on earth, in church or in state, can prevent it. But how shall it be brought about? Will we move on quietly, but powerfully, by the diffusion of light, by the efforts of good men and of the Church, by the effusion of the Spirit wide and copious, advancing rapidly in the ways of evangelical knowledge and holiness, until we attain the high and happy position of a thoroughly reformed nation? Or, shall we be scourged by the rod of God's wrath, with stripes mightier far than any that we have as yet experienced, and so "learn righteousness?" We have had some hopes that the former course is allotted for us; that our present trials would be attended and immediately succeeded by a general turning of our countrymen to God—that as a nation we would "see the rod and who hath appointed it." We have cherished these hopes on various grounds. 1. The early history of the United States, founded, to a very considerable extent—the North, particularly—by Christian men. 2. The elucidation and exemplification of the principles of human liberty in this land to an extent hitherto unknown in the history of the "Gentile world." True, we never attained perfection in knowledge and its application in this department, but we have been far in advance of

the rest of the world. 3. We have seen with hope the action of the Churches, in their highest judicatories, upon the great question of amending the Constitution in the interest of Christianity. 4. There has yet been elicited very little direct opposition. 5. Some of the most influential statesmen of the country have professed themselves favorable to this effort. 6. The day appears nigh at hand when great reformatory changes may be looked for, wide in their sweep, and rapid in their progress.

On grounds such as these, we have, as we think, not unreasonably, hoped to see the Christian people of the United States come up, with considerable unanimity, to the help of the Lord—to the help of the Lord against the mighty; and that by their teachings and prayers, through God's blessing, the nation would see it to be its imperative duty and its high privilege, to surrender itself into Christ's hands—to become a Christian nation. However, we must say, that our hopes are not growing brighter. We do not depreciate the favorable aspects of the case. It is a fact of no inconsiderable moment, that the call made on this people to amend its Constitution has awakened attention in high quarters; that it has done this so soon. It appeared, indeed, to be almost as "life from the dead." But there are, also, rather unfavorable aspects of which we should not lose sight; and,

1. *There is, after all, little enthusiasm.* Great and successful movements are always conducted enthusiastically. They always have been so. They spread like a conflagration. The prime movers, especially, must be filled with zeal—burning zeal. It is in this way, largely, that the advocates of any important cause evince and demonstrate their own interest in it. And, surely, the question of Christ's claims upon this nation is among the most important of all subjects to which attention and inquiry can be directed. If it be so, that he is "our Lord, whom we are to worship" (Ps. 45: 9), our King, whom we are to own (Ps. 2: 19); if it be so, that he will "break in pieces with his iron rod" (Ps. 2), his enemies and foes; if it be in him alone that nations are blessed and saved (Ps. 72: 17); and if, with all its singular privileges, this nation has not yet acknowledged him, the matter demands *instant* attention, *earnest* attention, *universal* attention. But, instead, there are few who care anything about it, and of those few not many are earnest, and none at all earnest in proportion to the urgency and magnitude of the case.

The time, it may be said, has been short. Very true. There has yet scarcely been time to bring the fact before the nation that such a movement is on foot, much less to enunciate the arguments enforcing it. We reply, we do not refer now to the mass of the community; but to the Christian people of the country, and to those of them who have had some notice of what is going on. Even these, and of them such as are not unfavorable, in principle, to the proposed amendments, are not alive to their momentous character; not nearly so much so as they are to the question of the integrity of the country, or of human freedom. And yet, im-

portant as these are, they dwindle into insignificant proportions compared with the claims of the God of the whole earth.

This is the most unfavorable feature of the case as it stands at present. We could not expect the mass of the people, nor even of the Churches, at once to feel deeply regarding a matter to which their attention has been very cursorily, if at all, directed heretofore, by the ministry and the church judicatories. Light is wanting. They need to be kindled by contact with the burning zeal of the pioneers in the work. But of this, we repeat, there is very little. Politicians, patriots, not a few of that class of retiring and quiet citizens who rarely put their hands to the national ark, are now, in view of the great crisis in the affairs of the nation, intensely alive to public movements. We do not wonder. Great interests are at stake; not of this generation only, but of coming generations also; and not on this continent alone, but throughout the world. But admitting all this, our position is not shaken, nay, rather confirmed. Christians *should* be at least equally concerned, and as actively, in the intelligent and hearty recognition by this land, of the supremacy of Christ and of his Word. One reason why patriotic men feel so deeply in the present emergency is, that existing movements will extend, in their results, to unborn myriads. But surely our posterity are not less concerned in the question whether, as a nation, we shall seek to enjoy the blessedness of that people whose God is Jehovah, than in the questions brought this day, in this land, to the arbitrament of the sword! Whether, then, we regard the glory of our God and Saviour, or the welfare and stability of our country, or the peace and happiness of our children, and of the world, Christians should be enthusiastically interested in the success of this movement for national reformation. It is a fearful fact, that even the best of them are not; all need a fresh baptism with the Spirit and with fire.

2. There are some—we still speak of Christians—who, professing to acquiesce in the movement, *discourage it as not specially called for*. The history of the views entertained regarding the Constitution is full of interest; we mean in reference to its moral and Christian character. Some, perhaps many, at the time of its formation and adoption, opposed it because of its atheistical character, as many did on political grounds. In the progress of time this opposition subsided. It was fixed, and came to be regarded as not only above amendment, but a perfect instrument, and itself a standard of right above which there could be no "higher law." A few of the better informed and larger minded among Christians continued, however, to lament the atheism of the Constitution. All admitted it to be pro-slavery. Time went on, and some who wished to share actively in the politics of the country, started the idea that after all, everybody was in error, and that it might be possible, by very careful search, to discover some allusion, at least, to the Most High, and even to Jesus Christ, in this document. Others, who had all along entered the field of politics, on the principle of supporting any government existing in Providence

and by the will of the people, adopted the same notion. A portion of the active abolitionists of the country determined to give the Constitution an anti-slavery, or at least neutral character. These all agreed that Christians might, consistently with Christian principle, adopt the Constitution by oath as their own act. It was hard, up-hill work, however. Now came the rebellion and the war. Men began to think of these things more seriously. Many—very many—Christian men and ministers, opened their eyes wider, and saw, what they had rather tried before not to see, that the Constitution required amendment, both on God's behalf and man's.

Some of those to whom we have alluded have entered gracefully into the movement. Others have attached themselves to it: endeavoring, at the same time, to hold, as formerly, that amendment is not absolutely necessary—that Christianity is really recognized in the Constitution—and yet professing an entire readiness to have such changes as will make this recognition of the Divine Being and supremacy perfectly manifest. Of course the aid of such persons is desirable; and it is not worth while to pay much attention to their views in reference to the Constitution as it is, provided they work heartily and zealously for the proposed amendments. But we have a right to ask that they do so work; and we are happy to say that, in many cases, they do so work. There are, in fact, no more hearty and diligent workers in this movement than some of those who once esteemed, and do even yet esteem the Constitution as not justly liable to the charge of atheism, or infidelity, or pro-slavery. But it is not so in other cases. They admit that God is not manifestly in the Constitution, and are willing to see it so altered that it may not be liable to the charge of being wanting in this respect; but the whole tenor of their discourse is calculated, and, we fear, designed to “cold-water” the movement for such amendment.

We refer now to that class of which a correspondent of the *Christian Instructor*, of Philadelphia, is the best representative. He writes under the signature of “D,” with which we became familiar during the negotiations for the union which resulted in “The United Presbyterian Church;” and, we must confess, not very agreeably familiar; for, with few exceptions, we found the articles over this signature expressing views adverse, more or less, to what we regarded as God's truth on such subjects, for example, as Covenanting and Testimony-bearing. And, besides, we noticed in those articles a peculiarity, exemplified in the later articles referred to above: an apparent admission of a principle or a duty, followed by a whittling process begun and pursued for the evident purpose of reducing it to the very smallest possible dimensions. Just so about this Constitutional amendment. “D” does not oppose it! He thinks it would be well to make it! He would prevent “godless politicians,” and some others, “from saying that the Constitution is “atheistic or anti-theistic;” but it is no great matter after all. Indeed, much harm, “D” thinks, may result from saying such hard things of the Constitution, &c.! In the article before

us (of Oct. 1), this last idea is dwelt upon at length, and then an attempt is made to prove that we must not judge of the Constitution singly and alone, but must take into the account, in settling its moral character, the State Constitutions also; and all this, we infer, upon the principle that together these make up a true Constitution of Government. "D" dwells much also upon the inefficacy of a Constitution, however good, to secure religion and morals among the people. Let us look at these points separately, and, first, as to saying hard things of the Constitution, the propriety of this depends upon two things: are they true? and are they called for? Now, we have no question as to their truth. The United States Constitution is justly liable to the charge of infidelity, atheism, and pro-slavery. Nor is it any defense against these, that acknowledgments of God have been made by Congress and by Presidents. These may be available to a certain extent to free the nation from the charge of utter godlessness, but have no bearing, not the least, upon the question of the moral character of the Constitution. We have never had any doubt that the Constitution sank, from the very first, below the religious character of the country. It is not surprising that, on occasions, the more devout spirit of the nation should impress itself, extra-constitutionally, upon the national proceedings; but such acts do not change the Constitution. It is "the supreme law of the land."

We are aware that the fact that a charge is true, does not always warrant the making of it, publicly. A perfectly true statement may be slanderous, nevertheless. But in the case before us it is far otherwise. A Constitution is the most public thing in the nation. It is, in the long run, the most influential. It has a mighty power in moulding a nation into its own image. The Constitution of this country has done, in years past, this very thing. When it was formed the great majority of the people believed in some form and degree of national religion; witness the colonial institutions. Again, in 1789, the great mass of the people were sincerely anti-slavery. In a deplorably evil hour, and under more malign influences, the present Constitution was adopted, *in spite of no little opposition*, some of it arising on these very points. The consequences we have before us. At the end of three-fourths of a century the nation was re-modeled according to the likeness of a godless and oppressive Constitution. Years of controversy, succeeded by years of intestine war, have only just sufficed to restore the early anti-slavery feeling of the country; and as to a national acknowledgment of God and his Christ and his law, even the Churches are only just beginning to wake up, and some in them like "D" think we may get along well enough without them! Speak out! . Yes! denounce even, such an instrument, say we, that the nation may learn its sin and its danger, and by thorough amendment, ere it be too late, avert the consuming vengeance of God.

A full examination of the second of the above topics, the combining of the State Constitutions with that of the United States,

for the purpose of procuring a moral instrument, would occupy too much of our space. We offer but a few remarks: And, 1. The General and State Constitutions are totally different instruments. They have no direct connexion whatever. The United States guarantees to each State a "republican" government: but there it stops. 2. The government contemplated in the General Constitution is a true government; possessed of all the essential attributes of supreme and sovereign authority. The United States is a *nation*. It is not an aggregate of States, nor a confederacy; but a *nation*. "We, the people." 3. Were every State Constitution just what it ought to be in reference to the acknowledgment of God, &c., it would be no extenuation of the sinful character of the General Constitution in withholding that acknowledgment. For, admitting that God were recognized in State acts of legislation, how could such recognition make up for the want of it in Congressional legislation? May *this* be atheistic without sin, because the States—different moral persons—are fearers of God? But, 4. What is the fact regarding the States? In some of them there is an acknowledgment of God's being, and, in some form, of the duty of worshipping him; but in far the greater part, there is no recognition of God's authority, of Christ's supremacy, and of the supreme authority of the Bible. Few of them go any farther than the declaration that the State will not interfere with man's conscience on the subject of religion. Place the matter on "D's" own ground—bring in your State Constitutions, and you don't help the matter at all. There will still be found wanting the acknowledgment of God and of his Christ for which we plead.

The last thing to which we proposed to advert is the inefficacy of a merely Constitutional arrangement to secure the moral and religious interests of the community. And here, we are referred in part to the fact that the Constitution of ancient Israel, although given of God, failed to render that people either God-fearing or moral. True, to some extent. Even under the Judges, from Joshua to Samuel, they lapsed, occasionally, into idolatry; but it has been said, and truly, that with all their sins, and consequent sufferings, there was, probably, more piety and happiness during those four centuries among the twelve tribes, in proportion to their numbers, than has ever been found among any people on earth, before or since. When that Constitution was changed in a most important point by the setting up of a throne, with its essential accompaniments, troubles became chronic, as was also defection. But what, after all, has this to do with a nation's duty to own the Most High God? Is it meant that it is not required in a national Constitution that it recognize God unless the majority of the people be actual Christians? This cannot be "D's" meaning. For he maintains that counting in the State Constitutions, and even without that, the Constitution of the United States does acknowledge God, whether a majority of the people do or not! But is it so that the duty of a nation toward God depends upon the religious character of the majority? If they are Christians, the nation

should acknowledge God; if not, not? Surely none will say this—not even “D.” But again: what has this to do as a practical question in the United States? The fact is, a majority of the inhabitants of this country profess some form of Christianity; and even on the principle we combat, may be called upon imperatively to express nationally their allegiance to Jehovah.

We agree with “D” in the importance to be attached to the evangelization of the masses; but, unlike this writer, we would include in their evangelization, efforts to convince them that the Lord Christ is Governor among the nations, and should be so honored in framing Constitutions, and in enacting and administering laws. We agree with “D” that the mere formal recognition of the Divine Being and supremacy in an instrument of government will not reform a people, or keep them reformed. There will be all the need there now is of preaching and other evangelical appliances in dealing with sinners, and with saints too; but such recognition is right; it places Constitutional influences on the side of right, and as it honors God, is one means of securing the presence of his Spirit with the nation, and his blessing upon reforming and evangelical effort.

We have dwelt longer than we had intended upon this part of the subject, and close by repeating, that, while all is not favorable to the present movement for Constitutional reform, there is much that is so. The change of sentiment in the religious public has certainly been very great within the past two years; and is still progressing. The latest accounts are the most cheering. Able champions of the cause have been raised up, and, we doubt not, more will be forthcoming as the work goes on. Surveying the whole field, we “thank God; and take courage.” J. M. W.

NOTICE OF THE LETTER OF H. H. HELPER.

MESSES. EDITORS:—I have read with some surprise the letter of H. H. Helper, in the *Reformed Presbyterian* for September. Surprise that Mr. Helper should write in such a tone, greatly surprised that it should be published as indicating a course for our missionaries to pursue in dealing with the colored people.

If we were sending out *overseers*, that letter would no doubt be in place. As we are sending men and women to teach and preach the gospel to an oppressed and down-trodden people, we feel called upon to enter our protest against its spirit, and to doubt the wisdom of its suggestions, more especially as they are in the very face of all that has been said by the wisest and best men who have labored among these people since the breaking out of the war.

Mr. Helper's sneer at the women sent out by the Freedmen's Association is simply contemptible, as they were all qualified for the position they undertook, to occupy. I would not affirm, but