

EIGHT YEARS
OF
Presbyterian Evangelistic Work
IN KENTUCKY.

BY
COL. BENNETT H. YOUNG,
LOUISVILLE, KY.

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Evangelistic Work in Kentucky

IN 1879, Dr. Stuart Robinson, the leader of Presbyterianism in Kentucky, suggested the necessity of more aggressive efforts in behalf of the church in the State. The painful fact then presented itself to every candid mind, that unless a speedy change in general church work and its methods was inaugurated, the virtual destruction of Presbyterianism in Kentucky was only a question of time.

For more than forty years there had been no territorial or numerical growth, and the church in the State was confined by narrower limits in 1880 than in 1840.

The bluegrass region, comprising about ten thousand square miles, or one-fourth of the State, was reasonably well supplied with self-sustaining congregations; but even there, immigration and local causes were decimating

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these, and in the Western, Eastern and Southeastern portions there had been a virtual extinction of Presbyterianism, and the organization of a new church was not only unusual, but practically unknown. The church in Kentucky had been blessed with great preachers and great thinkers; on all questions of doctrine it had contributed an unusual share of brains, and in every conflict for the truth the Kentucky contingent was courageous, earnest, and in the very vanguard of the contest. The earlier Presbyterian settler was an evangelist of great merit and success. From 1783 down to 1815, the church was truly militant, and the cause grew, was blessed, and Presbyterianism spread in Kentucky in proportion to the rapid increase of population.

After the divisions of 1810 and 1837, the day of conservatism came. The church surrendered all aggressive operations, and confined the labors and ministrations of its preachers within the very narrowest territorial limits, and for the succeeding forty years seemed content to possess only the land already obtained.

Looking back over this long period of church idleness, it is almost impossible to believe that

men as earnest, able and consecrated as the Kentucky Presbyterian ministry should thus settle down to a state of absolute ecclesiastical quiescence, and do nothing for the promotion or spread of the Presbyterian cause.

The war, with its changes, conflicts, divisions and troubles, consumed ten years of this period. After its close, four years were required to settle the church's status. When, in 1869, the Synod of Kentucky united with the Southern Church, the revolution had spent its force, and the State and church were prepared for aggressive operations. Twice during this long period of inaction Dr. Robinson, with his associates, sought to arouse the Synod, and in 1879 it was proposed to raise twenty-five cents per member to commence and carry on a State-mission project. This resulted in a failure, and only about \$1,200 was secured.

During this year Dr. Robinson first felt the touch of the malady which, in October, 1881, was to end his life. For nearly two years he struggled with his insidious, unknown, but ever triumphing disease—cancer of the stomach; and during this time it was his constant hope, trust and prayer that a restoration would come

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which would enable him to become a State evangelist, and devote the last years of his great life to arousing the Synod of Kentucky to zealous missionary work in its bounds.

The Master knew better than the servant. His tremendous intellect, superb attainments, and wonderful courage and persistence could not fight off the disease; and with him, apparently, died the last chance for a change in church work and church plans.

Synod met at Nicholasville a few days after his death. Nearly all of its members realized the true condition of the cause in Kentucky, and were not only saddened by personal grief at his death, but were depressed by his immense loss to the church's work in every department. During the earlier hours of the meeting, reference was made to synodical missionary efforts, but the task seemed hopeless, and the subject was tabled.

As usual, "man's extremity is God's opportunity." At the very close of the meeting, the members were startled by the reception of a telegram, addressed to Dr. E. W. Bedinger, offering, on behalf of two lay members of the

Synod,¹ to double all contributions of the entire church for evangelistic work up to \$5,000.

Some members had been praying and working. Dr. Robinson's dying prayer had been that God would open up the way to carry on this work. The entire assemblage was thrilled; joy and thanksgiving abounded. A new life was aroused, and despairing despondency was succeeded by exuberant faith. The message went back to these donors, "We gratefully accept your offer," and Synod resolved then to appeal to the churches, appointed evangelists, and entered upon what has proved the most aggressive campaign that Presbyterians have ever carried on in this country. There were then about ten thousand members in connection with the Synod, only five candidates for the ministry, and many languishing and dying churches.

Rev. Dr. E. O. Guerrant and Rev. J. M. Evans were appointed by the Synod as State evangelists; an able and representative committee was appointed, and named as the Synod's Evangelistic Committee, comprising not only ministers and elders, but laymen, thus securing

¹ The writer and R. S. Veech, Esq.

the counsel and cooperation of the entire church.

The result was amazing. The churches were aroused as never before. A new zeal and consecration was developed, and the first year more than \$11,000 was paid in and expended for this cause. In 1880 the entire Southern Church, with its 120,000 members, raised only \$15,233 for Evangelistic work, and only \$32,000 for Sustentation; and yet, in a single year, under proper impulse and direction, the 9,700 Kentucky Presbyterians raised \$11,000, and expended it for evangelism in their own bounds, besides giving to the General Assembly's Sustentation Fund \$3,200, and its full share to the Evangelistic work.

Many of the wisest men of the church outside Kentucky prophesied a falling off of these contributions and efforts. Arguing from the past, they assumed, as a self-evident proposition, that the handful of Presbyterians in Kentucky could not stand the necessary financial strain to support such an enterprise on so large a scale, and that the church could not, for any great length of time, maintain such vigorous efforts in home mission fields. One of the greatest leaders of

the church said to the writer, "It is only a spurt; it will die out in a year."

The worst feature of the prevailing situation was the growing conviction among Presbyterians in Kentucky and elsewhere, that the system of our church was not adapted to the general missionary effort, and would not and did not suit evangelistic work among the masses. Other denominations had charged that our form of doctrine and government was suited only to the rich and cultured, and failed to attract and retain the masses at large.

This flaunting lie has been silenced. In Kentucky, for the past eight years, Presbyterianism in this department has gone in advance of all others, done the heaviest and hardest pioneer work, and demonstrated that wherever the Methodist circuit rider or the Baptist exhorter can command attention or carry the word of the Lord, there Presbyterianism can find a home, gather congregations, and maintain a footing.

For eight years this great work has steadily developed and strengthened. It passed safely through the reactionary period, withstood the assaults of friends and foes, and in 1889 showed

its best results. The last year \$13,506 was paid in and distributed, in addition to the general work of the Presbytery of Louisville, where \$1,500 was expended, making a total in the State, for 1889, of \$15,000, used solely for this cause.

Within this eight years \$90,631.73 has been expended by the Kentucky Church in this department; fifty-nine new churches organized, half as many more resuscitated; forty new church buildings erected; 9,506 members received on confession of faith; the number of candidates increased from five to thirty-six, and the Presbyterian banner planted in sixteen new counties.

At the late meeting of Synod, at Henderson, Kentucky, October 9, 1889, these facts were recounted and discussed. The unanimous voice of the Synod was for still greater efforts, still larger expenditures, and still wider evangelistic enterprise. Three men,¹ two laymen and one elder, offered to give one dollar for every two that all the churches and other individuals in the State would subscribe. It was resolved at

¹ R. S. Veech, Esq., A. J. Alexander, Esq., and the writer.

once to make the sum this year \$20,000, and the amount has already been assured. The Kentucky Synod will alone, after giving its full subscription for general evangelistic support of the church at large, carry on and maintain its own work in Kentucky, and expend for this alone half as much as all the other members of the Southern Presbyterian Church give for the Assembly's Evangelistic cause.

Thirty-five ministers and elders are engaged, in whole or in part, in this behalf. So great have its needs become that a chairman or secretary has been appointed to give all his time to it, and Dr. E. W. Bedinger, the efficient chairman of the committee for 1889, has resigned his pastoral charge at Anchorage, and devotes his entire energies and talents to the supervision of this great work.

The chairman has called mass-meetings in various parts of the State, to discuss the plans and give the people full information about the operations of the committee. One has just closed its sessions in Louisville, another will assemble in February at Paducah, and still later another at Richmond. The most eloquent men of the church address these meetings. The

people listen with wonder and pleasure at how the Lord has blessed these efforts in his cause, how the Presbyterian waste places have been restored, how the church territory has been enlarged, new congregations gathered, and churches organized and built; and there are now few Presbyterians in Kentucky who do not feel that this evangelistic work is part and parcel of their Christian life and liberality, and the greatest mission of the church in Kentucky. The battle cry is, not only will we win Kentucky for Christ, but also for the Presbyterian faith.

The change in this Synod in eight years is simply a marvel. It is from death to life. At no point has the fire failed to impart heat. A new impetus has been given to the church; in every department Christian zeal has been aroused. In the same period \$200,000 has been given Central University. No cause of the church at large has suffered. The great lesson has been taught that liberality in any one department leads to renewed generosity in all, and that as men give they desire to give. Ten years more of such work in the State and the ministry of the church will be doubled and its membership quadrupled. The whole Synod

is amazed at the blessing that God has so graciously bestowed. The inaction and fear caused by the numerical predominance of other denominations is gone, never to return with the life of this generation. No Christian enterprise is too wide or too great for the Synod of Kentucky to undertake; and the spirit of church self-confidence, engendered by the inspiration of God's wonderful remembrance, is simply grand. It elevates the tone of Christian endeavor, and gives an ecclesiastical *esprit de corps*, which energizes and quickens every impulse. It has raised up, educated and prepared a class of men capable of carrying on such a work. It has organized and drawn into one channel the forces and energies of the entire Synod; and the chief and dominating idea is aggressive and persistent conquest for Christ. It has interested the entire membership in the spread of truth, and the visible results have been such as to deepen and quicken the confidence of every Christian heart in the bounty and certainty of the Lord's blessing upon those who enter upon his work and go forward in obedience to his command to "preach the gospel to every creature." The faith of the church has

been greatly enlarged; they realize that in their very midst they have the "sign from heaven," and that without God's immediate and absolute direction no such results could be obtained; and this feeling of God's nearness has given to the church a tremendous strength, together with a conception of his presence and of his readiness to hear and answer the prayers of his people for the spread of the truth.

Under this work there has been attracted into Kentucky an unusual proportion of strong, earnest, active ministers, who have given tone and power to this cause. Forty years of indifference and neglect are a sad retrospect. Next year the contributions will reach \$30,000, devoted solely to this cause, in a single State. Such a condition of aggressive Christian effort must tell. There is yet a vast missionary territory in Kentucky unoccupied by any church. There is a demand and earnest necessity to-day for thirty ministers in this Synod alone, and Kentucky can to-day offer work and support to every graduate of our Theological Seminary. Other Synods can accomplish as much, if not more, than Kentucky. What is most needed is to educate the people to a realization of their

ability to support the work, and to let them thoroughly understand that Presbyterianism meets every gospel requirement and demand for the success of home missionary effort. No peculiar conditions surround the Kentucky field. No extraordinary merit or zeal characterizes either its ministry or its membership; a few earnest, practical men felt the necessity of such a movement, and they resolved, with God's help, it should be inaugurated and should not die. Coöperation, faith, earnestness and liberality marked its commencement, and God's blessing has been as certain as his promise.

What has been done here can be done and ought to be done in every Synod in the church. A decade of such work in the whole South would give our church an increase and spirit which would form a mighty factor in the religious and moral growth of our country.