

The Truth About The Presbyterian Church

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I. MODERNISM IN THE JUDICIAL COMMISSION

IN 1923 and 1924 the battle between Christianity and Modernism entered upon its last and most acute phase in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The Christian position was represented by the evangelical pronouncement of the 1923 General Assembly; the Modernist position was represented by the "Auburn Affirmation."

The General Assembly's pronouncement declared that the full truthfulness of Scripture, the virgin birth, the substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection, and the miracles of our Lord are essential doctrines of the Word of God and our Standards; the Auburn Affirmation attacked that pronouncement, and declared that not a single one of these great verities is essential even for the ministry.

The issue cannot be evaded by any plea that the Affirmation attacked the General Assembly's pronouncement merely on technical grounds. The Affirmation does, indeed, raise the technical point that the General Assembly had no right to issue such a pronouncement. But it proceeds at once to something far more fundamental. It attacks the *content* of the pronouncement. It declares that not a single one of the great verities mentioned by the General Assembly is essential; and it declares that all of the five verities are merely "theories" (among other possible theories) which some may and some may not hold to be satisfactory explanations of something else. Thus it excludes all of these verities from the essential message of the Church, and in so doing it strikes a blow against the very inmost heart of the Christian religion.

In the battle between the General Assembly's pronouncement and the Auburn Affirmation, between Christianity and Modernism, the Modernist contention has in the main won the victory, and now dominates the machinery of the Presbyterian Church.

There are many indications of that fact; but one indication is so unmistakable that it might almost suffice if it stood alone. It is found in the composition of the "Permanent Judicial Commission," which was entirely reconstituted in 1931 with largely increased powers, and is now practically the supreme doctrinal as well as disciplinary authority in the Church. In the composition of such a court, we may discover, if anywhere, what the true temper of the Church is. Who, then, are members of this all-important court?

The Commission consists of fifteen members, chosen by the General Assembly, eight being ministers and seven being elders. Whatever may be said about the elders, it is perfectly easy to tell where the ministers stand in the great issue of the day.

The plain fact is that of the eight ministerial members four are actually signers of the Auburn Affirmation, and one of the four is Rev. Robert Hastings Nichols, Ph.D., D.D., of Auburn, Secretary of the committee that issued the document. Elders were not invited to sign the Affirmation, so that the signers have been given exactly one half of the total number of places available to them in the Commission. That is, one half of the ministerial members of a commission which is practically the supreme guardian of doctrine in the Presbyterian Church are signers of a public and formal document which, beside being directly polemic against the doctrine of the full truthfulness of Scripture, declares that that doctrine and the virgin birth and three other great verities of the Faith are non-essential even for the ministry.

The point is not merely that these four gentlemen have shown by their signing of the Affirmation that they are incompetent persons to sit upon the supreme judicial body of an evangelical Christian church. That point would certainly be

well taken. But the real point is far more definite than that. It is that by their signing of the Affirmation these gentlemen have already expressed themselves upon the most important question that has come or is likely to come before the Judicial Commission upon which they sit, and expressed themselves in a way derogatory to the central verities of the Christian Faith.

In the presence of that fact, it will at once be seen that all the optimistic talk about the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. as being "essentially sound" must surely cease.

But how about the other eleven members of the Commission? May there not be found among them such representation of the evangelical position as shall offset the Modernism of the Affirmation which the four members have signed?

Unfortunately, that possibility is, to say the least, very slight. There have been other tests beside the Auburn Affirmation to determine whether a man does or does not stand for the Bible and the Christian Faith in the councils of the Presbyterian Church.

In 1928, for example, there was presented to the General Assembly a petition of which the ultimate purpose was defence of the doctrine of the virgin birth—defence, that is, of one of the five doctrines attacked as non-essential by the Auburn Affirmation.

The "Virgin Birth Petition" was signed by about seventeen hundred ministers as over against the thirteen hundred who signed the Auburn Affirmation. Not a single one of these seventeen hundred was placed upon the Permanent Judicial Commission, though no less than four of the thirteen hundred signers of the Auburn Affirmation were placed there.

The Virgin Birth Petition was also signed by over four thousand elders.

Not a single one of these was given a place on the Commission.

In the same year, moreover, another evangelical memorial was presented to the General Assembly. It was the "Princeton Petition" directed against the reorganization of Princeton Theological Seminary. We shall not stop here to ask whether the signers of the Princeton Petition were or were not justified in thinking that the proposed reorganization of the Seminary was inimical to the evangelical cause. As a matter of fact, we think that they were fully justified, and that a very early official pronouncement of the new Board of control about its own membership demonstrated the fact beyond peradventure. But whether they were justified or not in the specific request that they made of the General Assembly, it is perfectly evident that they were animated in making that request by an evangelical motive and that they represented the evangelical party in the Presbyterian Church.

We do not mean that all the signers of the Princeton Petition represented the evangelical party in any very consistent or vigorous way. The Petition was a very mild document, and many of its signers have been anything but thoroughgoing in their championing of the evangelical cause. But though some of the signers of the Petition may not have been very consistent or vigorous in their evangelicalism, we do deliberately make bold to say, conversely, that a very great block of the evangelical ministers and elders in the Church—perhaps the great majority of them—were among the signers.

Yet not a single one of the twenty-five hundred or three thousand ministers, and apparently only one of the seven thousand or so elders, who signed the Princeton Petition has been given a place on the Permanent Judicial Commission.

Could there possibly be a clearer example of a partisan court? Half of the available ministerial positions have been given to signers of a radical Modernist document that attacks the message of the Church at its very root; and not a single ministerial position has been given to the far greater number who signed the mildest possible petitions looking to

the defence of God's Word. At most the Commission seems to include only one man (an elder) who by signing one of these two petitions has given public indication of zeal for the historic witness of the Church.

The ecclesiastical machinery seems to have done its work well. There may, indeed, be gentlemen on the Commission, in addition to the one signer of the Princeton Petition, who are opposed to the Auburn Affirmation and in favor of maintaining the Church's historic message; but if there are such they seem to have given as yet no very clear public indication of their stand.⁽¹⁾ So far as public utterances could lead the General Assembly to judge, the composition of the Commission, as the Assembly constituted it in May, 1931, is such as to give assurance not merely that a real believer in the Bible and in the Confession of Faith shall have no sympathetic hearing from a majority of the

⁽¹⁾ One of the ministers on the Commission, not counted here among the four signers of the Auburn Affirmation, first signed the Affirmation, but then—we cannot now say for what reason—withdraw his name before the Affirmation was printed in its final form.

Court, but also that he shall not "disturb the peace of the Church" by receiving even any considerable minority opinion in his favor or in favor of the Bible in which he believes.

It is evident that any consistent Christian man will count it a disgrace to be acquitted, on any doctrinal issue, by such a court, and an honor to be condemned. But the composition of the Court shows that the corporate life of the Presbyterian Church is corrupt at the very core; and that until the sin of the Church is honestly faced and removed, all the great swelling words about the Church's work, and all the bustle of its organizational activities, can avail but little in the sight of God.

NOTE:—In the next number of CHRISTIANITY TODAY, the present writer hopes to deal with the centralization of power and the attack upon Christian liberty which is involved in measures now before the presbyteries (particularly the dangerous Overture D), and with the secrecy and discouragement of free discussion by means of which the undermining of the Church's witness has been carried on.

Questions from the General Council

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JUST before last Easter the General Council addressed a letter to the pastors and churches of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. that deserved more consideration than it received. Though it should have had the careful attention of each and every Presbyterian, probably not one in fifty so much as knew that the General Council had spoken—a fact that is eloquent of widespread indifference to existing denominational leadership on the part of the rank and file of the Church. In that letter the General Council asked four trenchant questions which will live until answered. As yet they have received practically no attention. Our efficient denominational press scarcely noticed them! Despite the lapse of months these questions are

as insistent as when stated in the Council's letter. Let us look at them.

The first question is about money. Quoting, "Our people do not lack money. We have more money at our command than ever before. *Why do we withhold our money from Christ and the Church?*" In this connection we are reminded that money selfishly gained and selfishly spent turns to dust in our hands. But there are reasons other than selfishness for our failure to support the denominational budget.

Our national poverty is at the most but a contributing reason, even within the last two years. The last available figures show that as a nation we have a gain in purchasing power of 59.2% since 1913. Presbyterians have doubtless