

# The Truth About The Presbyterian Church

By the Rev. J. Gresham Machen, D. D., Litt. D.,  
Professor of New Testament in Westminster Theological Seminary

## III. THE PRESENT SITUATION

### The Proposed Plan of Union

SINCE the appearance of the last number of CHRISTIANITY TODAY, a great attack has been launched against the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. by the Joint Committee on Organic Union.

We do not at all impugn the motives of the Committee. We acknowledge gratefully, moreover, the fact that the proposal is tentative merely, and is submitted to open examination by the Church at large before the General Assembly meets next May. Nevertheless, however laudable may be the motives of the Committee, the proposal which it has made does constitute, in fact though not in intention, an attack upon the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church.

The last attack was made in 1920, by a plan which sought to unite many ecclesiastical bodies on the basis of a Preamble couched in the vague language so dear to the popular Modernism of our day. That attack was defeated in the presbyteries. Since then, the destructive tendency has continued its undermining work for eleven years. It now comes forward with another public proposal.

The present Plan of Union involves the virtual abandonment of the Westminster Standards and the substitution for them of the creed which the United Presbyterian Church adopted in 1925. In form, indeed, the Westminster Standards are retained together with that United Presbyterian creed. But since the Preamble of that creed, which is to be adopted with the rest, states that where that creed differs from the Westminster Standards its declarations are to prevail, what we really have here is the substitution of a new doctrinal standard for our historic Confession of Faith.

That new doctrinal standard is vague and unsatisfactory, as are most creeds

produced in this unbelieving age; it contradicts important elements in the Reformed system of doctrine, and is ambiguous, if not definitely destructive, with regard to the authority of the Bible. It contains, indeed, many things that are true. If it had been produced on the way upward to some better presentation of Bible teaching, there is much that might have been said in favor of it. But the important question about any step that is being taken is the question whether it is a step up or a step down. And certainly, from the Christian point of view, this step is a step down. To abandon the Westminster Standards for this vague and unsatisfactory statement is to make vast concessions to unbelief. It is the very opposite of the true creed-making function of the Christian Church.

But whatever measure of good there may be in the body of the United Presbyterian creed, the Preamble, which is the most important thing in it, is almost wholly evil. It begins indeed, with apparent adherence to the authority of the Bible as the only infallible rule of faith and practice. But that is apparently contradicted in the very next sentence, which seems to make the "living Church" an authority. No one reading these two sentences consecutively can be quite sure whether the author of the creed holds to the Christian or to the Modernist view as to the seat of authority in religion.

Then the Preamble proceeds, in the second paragraph, to indicate that subscription to the Standards means nothing in particular; since "forbearance in love" is to be exercised toward those who are not able fully to subscribe to the Standards but merely do not determinedly oppose them. So a minister does not need to believe in the Standards after all. He can keep silent about the truth that they contain. Nay, he can

even oppose them! Only, he must not *determinedly* oppose them. Can anyone imagine a statement more diametrically opposite to the whole letter and spirit of the New Testament, or more utterly abhorrent to a man who is on fire with a zeal to proclaim the gospel of Christ?

What we have in this Preamble—at least when its language is taken in the light of the present condition of the Church, which it is evidently intended to condone—is Modernism. Only, there are different forms of Modernism; and this is Modernism in a particularly confused and shallow form.

We cannot believe that the consistently evangelical part of the United Presbyterian Church would be very sorry to desert this unsatisfactory modern creed, and return to the great historic standards of the Reformed Faith, which belong to them just as much as they belong to us.

### The Policy of Secrecy

Returning now to our presentation of the state of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., we ask our readers to remember what we have said in the first two articles of the series. We have observed that the entire machinery of the Church is dominated by a Modernist-indifferentist tendency which is in striking contradiction both to the Bible and to the Church's Confession of Faith. Of the ministerial members of the Permanent Judicial Commission, which is practically the supreme court of the Church, exactly one half (four out of eight) are signers of a Modernist document, the Auburn Affirmation, which attacks directly the full truthfulness of Scripture and declares that that doctrine, with four other central verities of the Christian faith, is non-essential even for the ministry; and evidences of any consistent or vigorous evangelicalism in the other members of the Commission are, to say the most, very slight. Similar is the

condition in the other agencies of the Church. Signers of the Auburn Affirmation are prominent in those agencies, and men who have taken any vigorous stand against the point of view of the Affirmation are given scarcely any representation at all. It is not too much to say, therefore, that unless the mission boards are radically reformed, the organization of new boards that can honestly appeal for the support of Bible-believing Christians is one of the crying needs of the hour.

The present anomalous condition of the Church has been brought about, we observed further, by a policy of concealment in councils and courts. If the destructive forces had been exhibited in their true light, they might have been checked long ago; but as it is they have carried on their undermining labors in the dark.

This policy of secrecy is particularly disgraceful in cases of judicial process, where it runs counter to all the fair and honorable traditions of the Anglo-Saxon race, to say nothing of the teachings of the Word of God. In that field, the evil is actually being practiced today; a secret trial has just been completed in the Synod of Pennsylvania. Such procedure is an offence to fair-minded people everywhere, and it is a disgrace to a church bearing the name of Christ. Yet if the proposed new Book of Discipline goes into effect, the evil will be made universal and obligatory; and a secret inquisition will thus be set up in the Presbyterian Church. The same outrageous provision is found in the Book of Discipline of the proposed united Church.

But the tendency to check open discussion has also proved to be disastrous when applied to the legislative and administrative functions of the Church. We traced a few of its workings in the last number of CHRISTIANITY TODAY. We pointed out how it was operative in the destruction of the old Princeton Seminary—the last important stronghold of a genuine and vigorous evangelicalism among the theological seminaries controlled by the Church—and how in general it was made to operate against any fair hearing for the rank and file.

### The Anti-Publicity Action

The same tendency—to come to the more immediate subject of the present article—has found special expression in an action of the last General Assembly, meeting in May, 1931. At that Assembly, a resolution was passed directing the Stated Clerk to the effect that he devise means by which “the injudicious or premature publication of matters subject to serious difference of opinion or matters subject to sensational or misleading interpretations may be prevented,” and that “Standing Rule No. 29 . . . shall be so interpreted as to carry out the spirit” of this resolution (“Minutes,” pp. 84, 85).

Standing Rule No. 29 provides that “all reports of Special and other Committees shall be delivered to the Stated Clerk on or before April 1, in each year,” that they shall be printed by him, that copies shall be sent in bound form to commissioners, and that “*all reports included in the above bound form are thereby released for public comment or quotation*” (italics ours. See “Minutes,” p. 372<sup>74</sup>). It is especially this last provision of the Standing Rule which, apparently, is to be interpreted in a way to prevent premature publication.

Now in a day when even the Word of God is so frequently “interpreted” to mean its exact opposite, we need not be surprised that a mere standing rule of the General Assembly should meet a like fate. But when that excellent standing rule does meet a like fate, when it is “interpreted” so as to defeat its purpose, the result is that any really free and effective discussion of measures proposed for adoption by the Presbyterian Church is either definitely checked or at least committed to the discretion of an administrative officer.

The purpose of that standing rule was that measures proposed to the General Assembly by various committees shall be discussed not merely by commissioners but by the Church at large. One medium by which they become known to the Church at large is provided by whatever independent church papers there may be. An even more effective and far-reaching medium is provided by the secular daily press. The use of these two media of communication is checked

by the present action of the General Assembly.

Just how far it is to be checked, and in what way, is left to the discretion of the Stated Clerk. We do not know how he will employ the arbitrary power which has been placed in his hands. He may do what I believe was suggested tentatively at the General Assembly—copyright the “Blue Book”—so as to be able to prevent the reports from being copied in any papers except those that are favored by the ecclesiastical machinery. It is almost unthinkable, indeed, that he should venture upon anything quite so outrageous and tyrannical as that. But even if he uses his power in some less tyrannical way, the granting of that power does involve an attack upon the very vitals of Presbyterian liberty.

### Autocracy vs. Democracy

What we have in this action of the 1931 Assembly, as over against the Standing Rule which it nullifies, is a conflict between two widely differing notions of the government of the Presbyterian Church.

The notion which underlies the Standing Rule is a democratic notion. According to that notion, the Church—so far as human instrumentalities are concerned—is governed by its entire membership; its presbyters, officers, commissioners to the General Assembly are servants of the people, and the people have a right to know exactly what its servants plan to do. According to the present action of the General Assembly, the real business of the Church should be conducted in committee rooms or around board tables, and the people are to have very little real power.

What this action of the General Assembly really means by “premature” publication of reports, or what it will be understood by many persons connected with the ecclesiastical machinery as meaning, is, we fear, publication at such time as to jeopardize the customary process of rushing through the General Assembly the measures favored by the agencies, committees and boards.

A case in point is provided by the report of the Special Commission on Marriage, Divorce and Re-Marriage to

the General Assembly of 1931, a report which, we surmise, occasioned the anti-publicity action with which we are now concerned. Publication of that report so aroused the opposition of the Church at large that the report was modified before it was presented to the Assembly.

Was the publication "premature"? The answer all depends upon the point of view. It was premature from the point of view of those who *avored* the proposed action; but from the point of view of those who were *opposed* to the action it was altogether timely; it prevented the Assembly from following its custom of passing Committee measures down to the presbyteries without any general discussion.

We do not at all impugn the motives of the Stated Clerk in welcoming the passage of this anti-publicity resolution; and we hope that he may use wisely the power that has been granted to him. But however wisely or unwisely the authority granted to the Stated Clerk may be used, the granting of the authority is a very serious sign of the times. The resolution speaks of the "spirit" of the action. Well, it is the "spirit" of the action to which we object. The spirit of the standing rule nullified by this action was a spirit of fairness and openness and liberty; it was the fine old spirit of the Reformed Faith: the action nullifying the standing rule will, we fear, with however good intentions on the part of the Stated Clerk, encourage that spirit of concealment and ecclesiastical expediency and tyranny which is becoming increasingly dominant in the Church.

### Monopoly in Church Papers

This latter spirit was manifested also in another report that was made to the last General Assembly—the report of the General Council's Committee on Program and Field Activities. That committee presented as part of the "ideal solution" of the problem of publicity for church causes the following:

"(b) To secure the consolidation of weekly church papers so that there should not be more than two in the field, and that such papers should be assisted to become vital and adequate, although not official organs of the

work of the entire Church. Such a result to be achieved both by mutual cooperation in the furnishing and publishing of suitable material and also by the furnishing of financial assistance by the General Council and the Boards in the form of paid advertising, the amount and character of such advertising to be determined in the light of the number of subscriptions to such papers, further and active assistance to be afforded by the General Council in the promotion of the circulation and use of such papers" (*Minutes*, p. 224).

What is the meaning of this extraordinary proposal? The answer is only too plain. The proposal means that if this policy is carried out a monopoly of subsidized church papers is to be established in the Presbyterian Church, such papers to publish what the official boards and agencies regard as "suitable material." The consolidation of existing weekly church papers is to be secured so that there shall "*not be more than two in the field*" (italics ours). Thus the "ideal solution" of the problem of publicity, as the Committee sees it, is that *all* the church papers are to be controlled by, or complacent towards, the ecclesiastical machinery.

It is true, the subsidized church papers are not, according to the proposal, to be official organs of the entire Church; but any thought of real editorial independence on the part of such subsidized church papers is of course quite out of the question. What we have here is an attempt at monopoly in its most oppressive form.

The time is particularly favorable for such a proposal. There are now only three weekly church papers of general circulation in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. One, *The Presbyterian Advance*, is under the editorship of a signer of the Auburn Affirmation; another, *The Presbyterian Banner*, has for many years been opposed to the ecclesiastical contention of the evangelical part of the Church; the third, *The Presbyterian*, was formerly the evangelical organ, but in 1930 removed forcibly the editor, Dr. Samuel G. Craig, and adopted the customary attitude of subservience or complacency

toward the present condition of the Church.

These are just the sort of papers that will serve the ends of the gentlemen now controlling the ecclesiastical machinery; and if any one of them can be merged with either of the others, the two remaining papers, after being subsidized and made monopolistic, will provide just the kind of "publicity" to prevent any disturbing objection to the prevailing Modernist-indifferentist drift. It is no wonder that the General Council's Committee thinks that if such a condition can be secured, *The Presbyterian Magazine* (now under the editorship of a signer of the Auburn Affirmation) can be dispensed with. If papers like *The* (new) *Presbyterian*, *The Banner*, and *The Presbyterian Advance* can be made monopolistic, there will be no danger lest the real condition of the Church become known.

### The Despised Evangelicals

At first sight, it might look as though the Modernist-indifferentist control of the Church were impregnable. It could be shaken only by a true enlightenment of the rank and file; and to prevent that enlightenment an increasing efficiency is being attained by the ecclesiastical machinery. Measures of the most far-reaching importance are being sent down to the presbyteries without debate; in the presbyteries no general, but merely a local, discussion is possible. Objection to the wasting of the Church's heritage is discouraged on the absurd ground that it should be made, if at all, only by way of formal judicial process. Judicial process is made worthless as a means of establishing truth not only by the partisanship of the highest Judicial Commission, but more particularly by the secrecy of the Church courts. Such secrecy will be made universal and obligatory if the new Book of Discipline goes into effect; men who hold to the unpopular and disturbing evangelical position will be dealt with in a secret inquisition and deprived even of the right of an open trial. The one official journal, *The Presbyterian Magazine*, is edited by a signer of the Modernist Auburn Affirmation; so is one of the

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three weekly church papers, *The Presbyterian Advance*. The other two weekly papers are either subservient or complacent toward the drift of the Church; and it is proposed that the total number of weekly church papers shall be reduced to two, which shall be subsidized and promoted in a monopolistic way. Presentation of ecclesiastical issues by independent papers can be hindered at any time by an arbitrary power given to the Stated Clerk.

Under such a régime, what chance is there for the despised evangelical party in the Church even to obtain a hearing? Be it remembered that the ecclesiastical pressure against it, of which we have been speaking, is reinforced by the vast pressure of the world at large. Adherents of the gospel of Christ—and we mean whole-hearted adherents of it, not those who give it lip-service, or are willing only to propagate it and not to defend it, or do not believe in controversy, or make their preaching "positive and not negative," or use any of the other miserable phrases by which men seek to conceal from themselves and others the real feebleness of their faith and coldness of their love—whole-hearted adherents of the gospel of Christ, we say, are faced today by an overwhelming weight of public opinion. The daily press, though by no means so unfair as the ecclesiastical papers, is for the most part hostile or at least devoid of understanding; it reflects naturally the prevailing popular attitude; it is usually willing to believe the worst of the adherents of an unpopular cause. The secular magazines present for the most part only the opposing view; the schools and colleges have become agencies of propaganda against this unpopular faith. With this vast opposition of the world the machinery of our Church is making common cause. It too uses the current phrases of modern unbelief; it too discourages "controversy"; it too belittles what it regards as divisive contentions; it too, at least in many of its prominent representatives, represents the blessed facts of the Gospel as merely "theories," among

other possible theories, to explain the vague generalities that are so dear to an unbelieving world.

Under such conditions, faced as they are by the opposition of the world, faced by the opposition more bitter still of an increasingly apostate Church, misrepresented, despised, ridiculed, tried in secret courts so that the ridiculousness of the charges against them cannot become generally known, silenced in church assemblies—under such conditions, we say, what help is there for the adherents of a gospel which now as always is diametrically opposed to the thoughts and aspirations and purposes of the generality of mankind?

The answer to that question is perfectly plain. There is no help for believers in the gospel save one, but that help is sure. It is found at the mercy-seat of God.

When shall that help be used, my brethren? When shall we cease numbing ourselves with a baseless optimism; when shall we cease saying that the Presbyterian Church is "essentially sound"; when shall we be willing to face the facts before God?

### Facing the Facts Before God

The facts, alas, are perfectly plain to the man who is not afraid to see. Two mighty forces have been contending for the control of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. One is the religion of supernatural redemption that is presented in the Bible and in the Confession of Faith; the other is the naturalistic or indifferentist Modernism that finds expression in the Auburn Affirmation. Between these two forces, there are many attempts at compromise. We do not presume to look into the hearts of men; we do not presume to say just who in the Church is a Christian and who is not; we do not presume to say how far a man can mistakenly serve the cause of unbelief and yet be united to Christ by faith. But whatever may be said about individual *men*, it is perfectly clear that the two *forces* are diametrically opposed; it is perfectly clear that between the Bible and the Auburn Affirmation there can be no peace but only deadly war.

It is perfectly clear, moreover, that in this warfare the anti-evangelical contention has so far won the victory. Of what avail is it to point to general professions of adherence to the faith of the Church by this ecclesiastical official or that? The simple fact is that the *policy* of the church organization as a whole is exactly that which so effectively serves the purposes of unbelief in all the churches of the world—discouragement of controversy, tolerance of anti-Christian propaganda, bitter intolerance of any effort to make the true condition of the Church known, emphasis on organization at the expense of doctrine, neglect of the deep things of the Word of God. Let us not deceive ourselves, my friends. The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. includes, indeed, many true Christian men and women; but in its corporate capacity, through its central organization, it has ceased to witness, in any clear and true sense, to the Lord Jesus Christ.

With this drift away from the Faith, there has gone a lamentable moral decline. Life and doctrine, here as always, have been shown to be closely connected. When Christian doctrine is neglected or denied, Christian living sooner or later is abandoned too.

We are not referring to the sins of human weakness to which all Christians are subject. Those sins, alas, are always with us; and with regard to them it must ever be said: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." But we refer to the blatant and settled sins of our ecclesiastical habits—not the sins of this individual or that, but the sins that seem to be inherent in the entire corporate life of the Church.

### Loving Words or Loving Deeds

At this point, two errors need to be rooted out of our minds and hearts and lives.

The first error is the ancient error which applies a laxer standard of morality to the Church than the standard that is applied to the world. Unfairness and oppression and dishonesty

are somehow thought to become virtues when they serve ecclesiastical ends; an odour of sanctity in the Church is thought to take the place of humble moral considerations which prevail generally between man and man.

That error must be rooted out of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. if it is to be a Christian church in fact as well as in name. Secret courts, depriving a man of his right to an open trial, are disgraceful and outrageous in the world at large; they are even more disgraceful and outrageous in a church that bears the name of Christ. Wrong does not become right merely by being within ecclesiastical walls.

The second error which needs to be rooted out of our minds and hearts is the error that makes loving words a substitute for loving deeds. We hear much about love in the Church today; but is it really love? Oh, no, my friends. If a man really loved the Church of Jesus Christ, if he really loved with his whole heart the little ones for whom Christ died, he would never repeat the vain swelling words of a foolish optimism; he would never cry "Peace, peace," when there is no peace; he would never conceal from the Church its deadly peril; he would never exalt the smooth working of ecclesiastical machinery above the simple principles of openness and fair play; he would never cherish the wicked and heartless dream of a monopolistic church union; he would never consent to force a single congregation into a church union against its conscience or seek to take its property from it if it declined to conform; he would never deprive any man of his right to an open trial. Instead, he would present the real facts without fear or favor; he would love with a love like that of the Apostle Paul, who wrote to the Corinthian Christians a truthful letter that cost him many tears. Above all, in this crisis of the Church's life he would come before God in a very agony of prayer—not the prayer that is an evasion of witness-bearing but the prayer that makes even weak men brave. He would pray that those who are leading the Church astray may be convicted of their deadly error; he would pray that the great attack just launched in the name of church union

against the Faith of our Church may by God's grace be brought to naught; he would pray that the coldness and indifference of us who hold to the old gospel might be burned away in the flame of the divine love; he would pray that such a thing as secret courts may hardly so much as be named among us; he would pray that the Church may renounce the things of darkness and may return to the light and openness and liberty of the gospel of Christ.

Who, in this time of crisis, will engage, very earnestly and very humbly, in such a prayer?

### The Confessional Statement of the U. P. Church—Continued

from all eternity elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer."<sup>3</sup>

The consequence of this defect appears later on in the same article in the obscurity and ambiguity that surround the statement that "the Son standing as the representative of sinners and their Mediator with God freely consented to secure for them a full salvation." For whom did Christ secure a full salvation? Assuredly we must always maintain, as this article very truly does, that the salvation wrought out by Christ is "sufficient for all and adapted to all"; but when we come to speak of full salvation being rendered secure, we cannot universalise this specific quality, neither can we afford to deal with it in indefinite and loose language. We cannot too carefully and unequivocally refer it to those and to those only who are actually saved. The clause at the end of the sentence, namely, "for all who believe on him," is so far removed that it is only a possible answer to the question we have asked. According to the construction of the sentence as a whole we are not shut down to that as the only possible interpretation. Consequently we hold there is obscurity and ambiguity where positive clearness and definiteness are demanded.

<sup>3</sup> Shorter Cat. Q.20.

### Art. XIV "Of the Atonement"

From what we have just said we naturally pass on to the consideration of this topic. This article defines atonement in terms of ransom, propitiatory sacrifice, substitution for sinful man, satisfaction to divine justice and holiness, and explicitly affirms that atonement thus defined is for all and made for the sin of the world. That is to say atonement defined in such terms has a wider reference with respect to mankind than the circle of those to whom as a matter of fact it is efficaciously applied; we can put no other interpretation on the words that "this atonement though made for the sin of the world, becomes efficacious to those only who are led by the Holy Spirit to believe in Christ as their Saviour." In other words the atonement as such has a universal reference, though its application is limited to those who believe. We can call it then surely with justice a doctrine of universal atonement. Probably our suspicion of the statements of article IX was not mistaken.

It becomes imperative to compare this doctrine of the atonement with that of the Westminster Confession. It runs: "The Lord Jesus by His perfect obedience and sacrifice of Himself, which He through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God hath fully satisfied the justice of His Father, and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto Him." "To all those for whom Christ hath purchased redemption He doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same," etc.<sup>4</sup>

When in a later chapter the Confession gives further definition of the nature of this satisfaction, it says, "Christ by His obedience did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real and full satisfaction to the Father's justice in their behalf."<sup>5</sup> The doctrine is plain that those for whom Christ discharged the debt and made satisfaction are those who are justified and the justified are the effectually called. "Those whom God effectually calleth, He also freely

<sup>4</sup> Conf. of Faith VIII. 5, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Conf. of Faith XI. 3.