

# THE UNION SEMINARY REVIEW

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VOL. XXIX.

JANUARY, 1918.

No. 2.

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## INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT.

This number of the Union Seminary Review is devoted largely to the vital question of Presbyterian Union or Federation. There is no more important question before our Church at this time. The following letter which was addressed by the editor to nine Southern Presbyterian ministers in nine capital cities will explain the way in which the thoughtful articles which go to make up this issue of the Review were secured:

"Last May the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., appointed a committee to confer with our Church on organic union and requested our Assembly to appoint a similar committee to confer with their committee (see Minutes of our Assembly, p. 27). Our Assembly in reply appointed a committee to consider the question of the federation of all the Presbyterian bodies in the United States (see Minutes of our Assembly, p. 53). These two committees have held a joint conference in Atlantic City and will hold another meeting in Richmond on December the 18th.

It is evident that there is a great deal of unrest in both of these great Presbyterian Churches as to the present relationship existing between them and as to the relationship existing between the various Presbyterian bodies in this country. It is also evident that there are many in our own Church who feel that something ought to be done. This feeling is intensified by the reports of unrest which come from some of the border States where the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., and the

## UNION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES.

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The question of the union of the various Presbyterian bodies in this country into one organic whole should command the earnest attention of all of our people. With open and unprejudiced minds we should approach the consideration of this question, looking only to the highest interest of the kingdom of God on earth, and to the conservation of those vital truths of Holy Scriptures which Presbyterianism represents. We should divest ourselves as far as possible of selfish and local interests, and view this matter in a large way as it enters into the development of the Church in the future. The disturbed condition of the times admonish us that the forces of religion should be organized with the supreme desire of fulfilling the commission of Christ. What policy will best promote the progress of the cause of Christ? This should be our policy, and adopted without hesitation and energetically followed. If all of the Presbyterian bodies in this country could adopt such a viewpoint the question of organic union would soon reach a solution.

Presbyterians are agreed that the essential unity of the Church is spiritual. While we all believe in a visible organization, we do not believe that the existence of the Church depends upon any particular organization. We believe that the principles of Presbyterian government are fairly deducible from the Holy Scriptures; but we do not claim that the adoption of these principles in the form in which they appear in Presbyterian organizations is absolutely essential to the existence of the true Church of Christ. The position that the organic visible Church as one undivided body is essential to its exist-

ence cannot be successfully defended from the Holy Scriptures. Our Lord prayed for the unity of the Church, but the basis of that unity was spiritual: "That they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee; that they also may be one in us." The unity of the Church according to this prayer was to be like the unity of the Father and of the Son. That, of course, is spiritual, it is a unity of all Christians in their faith in Him, and in the fact that they have all received the Holy Spirit according to the promise. If the existence of the Church depends upon its organic unity, then the prayer of our Lord has remained unanswered during all these centuries past, and the Church has not had the Spirit of God and has not been under His guidance; and yet the promise of the Master was that the Spirit would be given to the disciples, and that He would "guide them into all truth." If we insist therefore upon the visible organization as essential to a true Church we are left in the puzzling position of believing that the prayer of our Lord has remained unanswered, and that the promised Spirit has not been given to the Church, and has not guided her through her history. I, for one at least, believe in historic Christianity. Our Lord said to the Father, "I know that Thou hearest me always;" and I believe that his last prayer for the unity of the Church was heard and answered, and I believe that the Spirit of Christ has been in the Church from the beginning, directing her movements and activities. The life of the Spirit may be illustrated by animal and vegetable life. The principle of animal and vegetable life manifests itself in great variety. The varieties of animal life—birds, four-footed beasts and creeping things—are innumerable. The varieties of vegetable life in the fruits and flowers that adorn the earth are also innumerable. All these forms of animals and vegetables are but manifestation of the principle of life. It is a fair analogy to say that the varieties of Church organizations are manifestations of the life of the Spirit. Life of any kind as we know it in this world cannot be confined to one form, it expresses itself in infinite variety. This great truth of the essential life of the

Church must not be forgotten. It should not, however, be pleaded in justification of useless divisions in the Church. The one thing of supreme importance is for us to understand and believe that the Spirit of Christ is abroad in the world, that his Spirit is manifesting his presence in a great variety of ways and in a great variety of organizations. It is preposterous in a day like this, and with the history of the Church in the past before us like an open book, for any one organized body of Christians to set up the claim that they only constitute the true Church of Christ.

In considering the matter of the organic union of the various Presbyterian bodies in this country regard must be had to the preservation of the reformed system of doctrine. This system of doctrine, like the life of the Spirit to which allusion has just been made, has manifested itself in a variety of creeds. It has found expression during the history of the Church in different statements of doctrinal belief. This system of doctrine must be thoroughly safeguarded. In my judgment it is more nearly essential to the existence of the true Church than any particular organization. The Reformed system is an expression of the teachings of the Holy Scriptures on all the vital truths of the Gospel. It is not tied to any one of the Reformed creeds. It is not found alone in the Westminster symbols, and therefore we should not take the position that these symbols are divinely inspired and can never be changed or improved. It is quite possible that a new creed might be written for the Presbyterian churches equal in all respects to those we now have, and in some respects superior. The creed we have necessarily reflects the times in which it was prepared. The Church has grown away from those times, and certainly should be able to furnish the consecrated intelligence and loyalty to truth which would be necessary in the formulation of a new statement of doctrine. If all the Presbyterian bodies in this country should come together in organic union it would not, in my judgment, be unwise or dangerous for them to appoint a committee to write a new creed for the Church, giving expression to the Reformed system of doctrine.

While we do not insist upon the Presbyterian form of government as essential to the existence of the Church of Christ, we do believe that the Presbyterian polity is scriptural. It is the best expression of the principles of Church Government as taught in the Scriptures, and it has vindicated itself in the history of the Church. It is democratic in form, and preserves the rights of the individual better than any other; and it is perfectly adaptable to any state of Christian society in any part of the habitable globe. If all the Presbyterian bodies in this country should unite this polity should be preserved. Some modifications of it are possible, and perhaps would be wise. The series of Church courts could be preserved; and yet there might be fewer of them. If the Synods were larger it would not be necessary for the General Assembly to meet oftener than once in three or five years. There is no reason why the policy of the Church at one meeting of the General Assembly could not be determined upon for a series of years; and the execution of this policy left to the Executive Committees or Boards. The churches might be represented in the Presbyteries, the Presbyteries in the Synods, and the Synods in the General Assembly. According to the principle of representation which now prevails the churches are represented both in Presbyteries and Synods. This is unnecessary and expensive. It is becoming a difficult matter to find entertainment for all of our Church courts; and this whole policy of representation might be greatly simplified and improved. We may surely trust to the guidance of the Spirit in this matter as in the matter of doctrine.

The advantages of such consolidation of Presbyterian bodies as we are considering are obvious. There is strength in union and co-operation which cannot be secured by the great division of forces which now obtains. The Methodist bodies are convinced of this truth, and are making heroic efforts to unite. The same question is being agitated among the Baptists and the Lutherans. Why should not all Presbyterian communions come together in one harmonious body? It would certainly make us much stronger in fulfilling our mission in the world.

We believe that the Presbyterians have a special mission to perform, or they would not have been permitted to come into existence, and have persevered in their work during all these centuries. Since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation Presbyterianism certainly has occupied a large place in the development of the religious thought and activity of the Church. Some small bodies of Presbyterians retain the polity of the Church who are not truly loyal to the Reformed doctrine; but the great majority of them have stood for the same system of truth. If all such could unite their forces it would certainly add to their strength.

It would do away with much overlapping of Synods and Presbyteries, and the multiplication of Presbyterian churches in small towns. It certainly ought to be possible for all the Presbyterians in one district to belong to the same body, and to work together for the furtherance of the same ends. Something would have to be allowed for racial differences and peculiarities; but the adjustments of these matters could be effected perhaps without serious trouble. It is quite conceivable to me that it would be possible to have all bodies of Presbyterians who hold the same system of doctrine represented in one General Assembly; and in this way the advantages of a united effort could be secured. The duplication of churches in small towns and communities is the most important aspect of the question. It is a well-known fact that in some parts of the country there are small towns of a few hundred people struggling to maintain several Presbyterian churches, instead of uniting their members and their forces into one body. Surely no one can reasonably claim that this multiplication of small churches in small towns is a desirable condition. The truth is, it cannot be justified before the bar of reason and common sense. While I believe that the Spirit of God guides His people when they honestly seek His guidance in spiritual matters, I do not believe that He leads them to the expression of their selfish interests and unreasonable prejudices in the useless multiplication of Church organizations and edifices in small communities.

The matter of economy in administration should be considered. Why should not all the Executive Committees and Boards be merged into a few central bodies well manned and thoroughly equipped for the work for which they are designed? Too many of our preachers have been called from the pulpit into administrative positions. They are needed in the pulpit and in the missionary work. Instead of a dozen independent agencies in the conduct of Foreign Missions, Home Missions, Education and Ministerial Relief, Publication and Sunday-school work, there should be only one organized agency in each department, representing all the Presbyterian bodies in this country; and all the work of that department should be administered from one center. It would effect a great economy in both men and means. The money now expended in the maintenance of all these agencies would add immensely to the strength of the missionary work both at home and abroad. A conscientious use of the Lord's money should impel the leaders of the Church to consider more economy in the organization of the Church's work.

The consolidation we are advocating should prevent friction, especially in the promotion of missions both at home and abroad. If, for example, an evangelist should enter a community to establish a Presbyterian church in the home field, it would certainly be very helpful to him to be able to call on all varieties of Presbyterians to unite in the organization with the assurance that no other body of the same faith would ever enter the field. In foreign missionary fields it would also be of great advantage to the missionary not to come into conflict with other missionaries of the same faith and order. As it now is, the foreign missionaries have come to an understanding in this matter, which should be an example to those of us who still remain in the home land. The Presbyterians in foreign fields are uniting their forces in the same Presbyteries, Synods and Assemblies; and if that can be done abroad why should it not be done at home?

In the Department of Publication the advantages of consolidation would perhaps be most apparent. If we had in this

country one Presbyterian Publication House, from which all of our Sunday-school literature and all of our Presbyterian books were issued, it would be a great power in the land. The very best ability could be secured in the preparation of lesson helps and of scholarly books for the instruction of the people. As it is now our most accomplished men have little encouragement to devote themselves to questions of scholarly exposition of the Scriptures, and to the discussion of Christian theology and philosophy, for the simple reason that they are offered nothing for their labor and the constituency is so limited. A constituency, however, of over two million of people, which would be secured by consolidation, would alter the situation, and afford a large field for any man who had the scholarship and ability to devote himself to the work of research. Such a Publication House as might be maintained would also be able to compensate authors for their work.

If a convention consisting of representatives of all the Presbyterian bodies in the United States was called and the matter of consolidation thoroughly considered something practical might be effected. It would of course take time and patience; but if the will to unite were present, the ways and means could doubtless be agreed upon. It would perhaps be a wise move on the part of the two committees appointed by the General Assemblies of the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches on the subject of union, which are to hold a joint meeting in Richmond in December, to recommend to their Assemblies to call such a convention, and to ask all the Presbyterian bodies in the country to send accredited representatives.