

THE
PRESBYTERIAL CRITIC
AND
BI-MONTHLY REVIEW.

No. 3.

MAY, 1856.

Vol. 2.

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF 1856.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS.

The number of commissioners present at the opening of the sessions of the Assembly of 1855,—one of the largest since the disruption,—was less than two hundred. The number of votes cast for Moderator of the Assembly which has just adjourned, was two hundred and thirty-two. This full attendance at the beginning was, doubtless, due to the extraordinary facilities for travel furnished by the capital and enterprise of the great commercial metropolis of the country, and to the natural curiosity felt by the more distant members, to see the city of which all the rest of the United States is a sort of suburbs.

This is the first meeting of the Assembly in the city of New York, and we doubt not, that the good Presbyterian people thereof, will not only be willing, but even anxious, to welcome it again, if we may judge by the heartiness and largeness of their hospitality to the members at this meeting. We feel assured also that good has been done by this meeting, to the churches connected with us in that city. City churches are too apt to live for themselves, to be vigilant and active in promoting their own prosperity, and to forget that a single congregation, however large or rich, is but a small fraction of the great Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. There is a tendency to isolation of effort, and consequent alienation and jealousy of feeling, in every quarter of our church, among the particular congregations; but this tendency is aggravated by many circumstances in a crowded commercial population. The absence of a vigorous social life, the very feeble play of those affections and sympathies which can only be nourished by a vigorous social life, the conventional forms which have been substituted in its stead, to some extent insincere, because conventional,—these are among the circumstances which go to increase the unhappy tendency referred to. There are gentlemen in New York, we have reason to fear, who do not know that the Presbyterian Church in the United States has its Foreign Missionary Office in that city, although they contribute to its funds. Now, if any thing can annihilate such narrowness of views, it is a

[For the Critic.]

AN ESSAY ON LIBERTY AND SLAVERY: BY ALBERT TAYLOR BLEDSOE, L. L. D., PROFESSOR OF MATHEMATICS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA. *Philadelphia*, 1856, pp. 383.

The last and only time Mr. Bledsoe was introduced into the Critic, it was in connexion with his Theodicy. This work, which was a thorough-going assertion of Pelagianism, was perhaps the most honest sophistry we have ever read. It exhibited some premises so erroneous, that conclusions drawn from them could only be false, and displayed no little theological prejudice; but still the discussion was manly and vigorous, the style both nervous and rhetorical, and the love of truth apparent even in the advocacy of error. If a strong and energetic man start from the wrong point, and take the wrong direction, he will go only the father astray, because of his vigorous exertions.

The work named above possesses the same mental traits and characteristics of style with the former, with this advantage, that the subject is one which the writer approaches without prejudice, and which the nature of his previous studies has qualified him to discuss. Born in Kentucky, where, as is well known the emancipation feeling was almost as strong until the abolition excitement began, as in any of the free States, spending the earlier years of his manhood in Ohio, and then a few years in Mississippi, and at all times disconnected with those occupations which interest themselves in slave labor, the author may be regarded fairly, as a man who has seen both sides, and who stands in an intermediate post of observation. But the Abolitionists will probably say, if he meets the usual treatment from them, that his book now speaks the language of self-interest, because he holds office under the government of a "slave-breeding commonwealth." The common utterance of such charges is as offensive to public morality as to the individuals at whom they are hurled; for they seem to take it for granted that candour, public virtue and moral courage are extinct in the South; and since the accusers cannot know a community in which they have not lived, and which they so much condemn, the inference is, that they disbelieve the existence of these qualities at the South, because they are not accustomed to meet with them at home. This is as unjust to the country at large, as it is in this case to Mr. Bledsoe, and the community in which he resides. It should not be supposed, that because the people of Virginia would deal summarily with a hypocritical incendiary from abroad, who came with insolent malignity meddling with what does not concern him, they will, therefore, refuse the privilege of free discussion to her own honourable citizens.

Mr. Bledsoe's first chapter lays down first principles for his subsequent discussion, in a discussion of "the nature of civil liberty." It may be said in brief, that the theory of society which he advocates is the Bible theory; the one which is advocated by the Biblical Repertory and by Christian philosophers generally, in opposition to that infidel theory which ignores a Creator and moral Governor of mankind, the pet system of infidel French democrats and pseudo Christian Abolitionists. The author in substance describes liberty to be a *freedom to do what a man has a right to do*; and to define the extent of those rights, he goes to the law of God. This chapter is marked most favourably with the best characteristics of the author, freedom from prescription, boldness in attacking errors sanctioned by great names and vigorous scientific inquiry. It rises, indeed, very near the highest regions of ethical speculation, in the directness, simplicity and breadth of the thinking. The remaining chapters, on the erroneous positions of Abolitionists, the Bible argument for the lawfulness of slavery, the argument from the public good, and the fugitive slave law, do not quite fulfil the promise of the first in their philosophic method. This defect, if it is one, arises obviously from the author's plan of taking up and refuting the positions of Abolitionists in detail; so that the discussion, instead of being strictly methodized on a logical plan, is rather a series of refutations, each one indeed pungent and demolishing, but yet as a whole, partaking of the confusion of the errors which they explode. The author does not condescend to meaner antagonists, but grapples only with the Ajaxes of the opposite host, Drs. Channing and Wayland, and Messrs. Barnes, Sumner and Seward. The impression which many of these special discussions leaves upon the mind of the reader is, that of a strong man tearing away the defences of his helpless adversary, rending them into almost invisible shreds, and spurning them as the driven stubble before his bow, till they can be no longer found. We were peculiarly gratified with the thorough work which he makes of the criticisms of that most glozing and treacherous of commentators, Barnes, upon the epistle to Philemon. But while we would be glad that this book should be read, yea, studied by every man in the United States who is unsatisfied on the subject of slavery, we would not be understood as commending in every case the strength of its denunciations, or as approving all its positions. Pages 151—152, the author alludes to the familiar objection by which Dr. Wayland and others attempt to break the force of the unanswerable argument from the legalizing of slavery in the law of Moses; that in like manner the sins of polygamy and divorce are there permitted. Here Mr. Bledsoe makes the admission that the fact claimed is true; but that instead of proving slavery a sin, it only proves the two other practices innocent till they were prohibited by Christ.

This would indeed be the just inference, if we were compelled to make the admission. But we would by no means make it. We are by no means willing to surrender it as a settled question, that polygamy is in any sense allowed or legalized in the Pentateuch; and the scanty *permissive* legislation about divorce, explained as it is by our Saviour, is very far from placing that sin on the same platform with the ownership of slaves, which is not only limited and restrained, (the whole of what is enacted about divorce,) but authorized. Polemically it is a bad policy to seem to permit the Abolitionist to say; "Well, after all, your notable Old Testament argument only succeeds in placing slavery in the same category with the two Mormon abominations of polygamy and divorce." There is no logical necessity on us to allow even the pretext for such a repartee.

In commending this book, with these and a few similar exceptions, to our readers, we would avail ourselves of the occasion to make two important remarks. One is, that the political troubles in our federal relations growing out of slavery at the South, can never be permanently adjusted till the abstract question, "whether the relation of master and slave is in itself an unrighteous one or not?" is fully met, discussed, and settled in the national mind. There were two courses of conduct, either of which might have been followed by the defenders of existing laws. One plan would have been to exclude the whole question of slavery persistently from the national councils, as extra-constitutional, unprofitable and dangerous, and to assert this exclusion always, and at every risk, as the essential condition of the continuance of the South in those councils. The other plan was to meet that abstract question from the first, as underlying and determining the whole subject, to debate it every where, until it was decided, and the verdict of the national mind was passed upon it. Unfortunately the Southern men did neither steadily. They permitted the debate, and then failed to argue it on fundamental principles. With the exception of Mr. Calhoun, (whom events are every year proving the most far seeing of our statesmen, notwithstanding the fashion of men to depreciate him as an "abstractionist" while he lived) Southern politicians were accustomed to say that this whole matter was one of State sovereignty, according to the constitution; that Congress had no right to legislate concerning its merits, and that, therefore, they should not seem to admit such a right, by condescending to argue the matter or its merits. The premise is true; but the inference is practically most erroneous. If Congress has no right to legislate about slavery, then Congress should not have been permitted to debate it. And Southern men, if they intended to stand on that ground, should have exacted the exclusion of all debate. But this was perhaps impossible. The debate came; and of course the inferences of the

premises agitated, ran at once back of the constitution. Southern men should have industriously followed them there; but they have not done it; and now political agitation has gone so far, and become so complicated, that we fear the time has gone by, when the country will be willing to consider calmly the fundamental question.

A moment's consideration ought to show that that question is the abstract lawfulness or unlawfulness of the relation of master and slave. The Constitution gives to the federal government no power over that relation in the slave States. True, but that Constitution is a compact between sovereign commonwealths; it certainly gives incidental protection and recognition to the relation of master and slave, and if that relation is intrinsically unrighteous, then it protects a wrong. The sovereign States of the North are found in the attitude of protecting a wrong by their voluntary compact; and, therefore, it is the duty of all the righteous citizens of those commonwealths to seek by righteous means the amendment or repeal of that compact. They are not indeed justified to claim all the benefits of the compact, and still agitate *under it*, a matter which the compact excludes. But they are more than justified, they are bound to clear their skirts of the wrong, by surrendering the compact if necessary. There is no evasion from this duty, except by proving that the Constitution does not do unrighteously in protecting the relation; in other words, that the relation is not intrinsically unrighteous. Again, on the subject of the "Higher Law," our conservative statesmen and divines have thrown out a vast amount of pious dust. This may serve to quiet the country for a time, but it will inevitably be blown away. There is a *higher law*, superior to constitution and legislative laws; not indeed the perjured and unprincipled cant which has no conscience about swearing allegiance to a constitution and a body of laws which it believes wrong, in order to grasp the emoluments and advantages of those laws, and then pleads "conscience" for disobeying what it had voluntarily sworn to obey; but the law of everlasting right in the word of God. Constitutions and laws which contravene this, ought to be lawfully amended or repealed; and it is the duty of all citizens to seek it. Let us apply this to the Fugitive Slave Law. If the bondage is intrinsically unrighteous, then the federal law which aids in remanding the fugitive to it, legalizes a wrong. It becomes, therefore, the duty of all United States officers who are required by law to execute this statute, not indeed to hold their offices and emoluments, and swear fidelity, and then plead conscientious scruples for the neglect of these sworn functions, for this is a union of theft and perjury, with hypocrisy; but to resign those offices with their emoluments. It becomes the duty of any private citizen who may be summoned by a United

States' officer to act as part of a *posse*, guard, or in any other way in enforcing this statute, to decline obedience; and then in accordance with Scripture, to submit meekly to the legal penalty of such a refusal, until the unrighteous law is repealed. But, moreover, it becomes the right and duty of these, and all other citizens to seek the repeal of that law; or if necessary, the abrogation of the compact which necessitates it. But when we have proved that the relation of master and slave is not intrinsically unrighteous, and have shown that the fugitive slave law does but carry out fairly the federal compact, in this particular it becomes the clear duty of every citizen to concur in obeying it.

Since the slavery discussion has now become inevitable in our federal politics, it is absolutely essential that the mind of the nation shall be enlightened and settled on the abstract question. The halls of Congress should ring with the arguments; the newspaper press should teem with them; and above all, with the Bible arguments; for ours is a Christian nation in the main; and the teachings of the Sacred Scriptures are, after all, the chief means for influencing the convictions of the people. It seems indeed late in the day, to begin the popular discussion of first principles afresh, when the immediate questions have almost reached their crisis; but we are convinced, that if it is too late now to get the public ear for this discussion, it is too late to save the country. It is gratifying to notice that the political newspapers are at length awakening to the necessity of this discussion. A leading journal of the South a few weeks ago noticed, and lamented the policy on which we have been remarking; and said that since Mr. Calhoun died, not a single politician had been found to argue the abstract question of right on its merits, while all that had been done for the peace of the country since in this matter, had been done by divines and scholars. The work of Mr. Bledsoe is important and timely, as making an able contribution to this fundamental discussion.

The second remark which we would urge is, that if this debate is to produce any good to the country at large, the propositions advanced, must be marked by a wiser moderation, and the arguments by more soundness than have always been exhibited at the South. The Southern cause does not demand such assertions, as that the condition of master and slave is the normal condition of human society, in such a sense as to be preferable to all others, in all time, and under all circumstances. Certain it is, that the burthen of odium which the cause will have to carry at the North, will be immeasurably increased by such positions. Why array against ourselves indomitable prejudices, by the useless assertion of a proposition which would be unnecessary to our cause, if it were true? Nor can a peaceful and salutary purpose be ever subserved, by arguing the question in a series of comparisons of the relative advantages of

slave and free labor, laudatory to the one party, and invidious to the other. There has been, on both sides of this debate, a mischievous forgetfulness of the old adage: "Comparisons are odious." When Southern men thus argue, they assume the disadvantage of appearing as the propagandists, instead of the peaceful defenders of an institution, which is, and will continue very naturally distasteful to their opponents; and they array the self-esteem of those opponents against them, by placing the discussion in an attitude, where the acknowledgement of the Southern cause must be a confession of Northern inferiority. True, our Northern neighbours have often been only too zealous to play at this invidious game, or even to begin it in advance. They should not be imitated in their mistake. It is time all parties should learn, that the lawfulness and policy of opposite or competing social systems cannot be decided by painting the special features of hardship, abuse, or mismanagement, which either of the advocates may imagine he sees in the system of his opponent. The course of this great discussion has too often been this: Each party has set up an easel, spread a canvass upon it, and proceeded to draw *the system of its adversary* in contrast with its own, in the blackest colours which a heated and angry fancy could discover amidst the evils and abuses imputed to the rival institution. The only result possible is, that each shall blacken his adversary more and more, and consequently, that both shall grow more and more enraged. And this, though all the black shades of sorrow and oppression be drawn from facts in the conditions of the rivals. For, unfortunately, the human race is a fallen race, depraved, unrighteous, and oppressive, under all institutions. Out of the best social institutions there still proceeds a hideous amount of wrong and woe; and this, not because those institutions are unrighteous, but because they are administered by depraved man. For this reason, and for another equally conclusive, we assert that the lawfulness, and even the wisdom and policy of social institutions affecting a vast population, cannot be decided by this odious contrast of their special wrong results. The other reason is, that the field of view is too immense and varied to be brought fairly into comparison under the limited eye of man. First then, if we attempt to settle the matter by trying how much wrong we can find in the working of the opposite system, there will probably be no end at all to the melancholy discoveries which we shall both make, and so, no end to the debate; for the guilty heart of man is every where a *perpetual* fountain of wrongs. And second, the comparison of results must be deceptive, because no finite mind can take in both the endless wholes.

The policy of the South then is, to take no ultra positions, and to support herself by no unnecessarily invidious comparisons. It is enough for her to place herself on this impregnable stand;

that the relation of master and slave is recognized as lawful in itself, by the infallible law of God. That truth she can triumphantly evince; and from it she can deduce all that it is right for her to claim. There is no wisdom nor use in her asserting that domestic slavery is always, and every where the best relation between labour and capital, and should therefore be every where introduced; a proposition against which, to say the least, indomitable prejudices are arrayed. It is enough for her to say, (what is true and susceptible of overwhelming demonstration,) that for the African race, *such as it is in fact*, such as Providence has placed it here, this is the best, yea, the only tolerable relation. If it is lawful in the sight of God; if the Constitution of the Union does no moral wrong in recognizing it as lawful; if it is best for the interests of the African, of the white race of the South, and of the whole Union, that the matter should be left untouched by the meddling hand of federal legislation, (a hand impotent of good to it, and only mighty for mischief,) to develop itself under the leadings of Providence, and the benign influences of Christianity, then the South has all her rights asserted. If thus much is true, then the federal constitution, and the laws carrying out its provisions, only say what the Bible says, that the holder of African slaves does not necessarily live in the commission of wrong, and is not, therefore, to be disfranchised of any right which the law allows to any other citizen.

It is because Mr. Bledsoe's work is marked by this just moderation in its positions, that we are willing to commend it to the public. We have here none of the absurdities, of which the facile exposure has given Abolitionists the pretext to sing triumphs; such as the argument that African slavery is righteous, because Noah foretold it of the descendants of Ham. The author says, for instance, (p. 140.) "In opposition to the thesis of the Abolitionist, we assert that it is not always and every where wrong." "We only contend for slavery in certain cases." And in the argument from the public good, he says: (p. 228.) "We are not called upon to decide whether slavery shall be established in our midst or not. This question has been decided for us." * * * * "The only inquiry which remains for us now is, whether the slavery which was thus forced upon our ancestors, shall be continued, or whether it shall be abolished? The question is not what Virginia or Kentucky, or any other slave State *might* have been; but, what they would be in case it were abolished. If Abolitionists would speak to the point, then let them show us some country in which slavery has been abolished, and we will abide by the experiment." True, Mr. Bledsoe does not always speak of his ultra adversaries in sugared terms. But in our disapproval of the strength of his words, let us remember the outrageous provocation which has been given.