

THE Union Seminary Magazine.

Vol. XL

OCTOBER—NOVEMBER, 1899.

No. 1.

I. Literary.

ICONOCLASTS.

BY J. W. LAPSLEY.

“YE shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves.” This was the divine command to Israel as they invaded Canaan. Policy as well as reverence for the divine authority demanded strict obedience to the command. But it was not so obeyed as to put out of sight the temptations to idolatry; and again and again Israel sinned after the example of the heathen they had supplanted, became image worshippers, and suffered grievously for their apostasy. Hence image breaking was accounted a sign of devotion to Jehovah. Jehu said, “Come with me and see my zeal for the Lord,” and he went and broke down the image of Baal, and the house of Baal, burnt his images with fire, and slew his priests and votaries with the sword. But this was as far as Jehu’s zeal for the Lord carried him. While he had no real devotion to God, and, in fact, renewed the idol worship at Dan and Bethel, he made the divine commission an excuse for pursuing with lavish bloodshed his own schemes of worldly ambition. And there have been others besides Jehu in other ages who have trod in his steps. “Mohammed,” says Dr. Schaff, “started as a religious reformer fired by the great idea of the unity of the Godhead, and filled with horror of idolatry.” And he and his Caliphs, long after they became world-wide conquerors, full of ambition and given up to every cruel and sensual passion, continued to proclaim, “There is but one God,” and continued to the last their warfare on image and image worship. They made their professed zeal for the one God a cover and ex-

HAS THE ASSEMBLY A RIGHT TO VETO A CHANGE IN OUR BOOK OF CHURCH ORDER, EVEN AFTER A MAJORITY OF THE PRESBYTERIES HAVE VOTED FOR THE CHANGE ?

BY REV. THOMAS C. JOHNSON, D. D., UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

I. THE VIEW OF THE MAJOR PART OF THE CHURCH.

It is believed that the major part of the ministers and elders in our Southern Presbyterian Church holds that the Assembly has the right to veto such a proposed and approved change. Some of our more influential editors of church papers and writers have, within the last six months, maintained this view. The Moderator of the last Assembly declared, *ex cathedra*, that the Assembly had the right. Nor was his ruling formally contested. The members of the body who differed in opinion in regard to the matter failed to join issue with the chair by appealing to the house, either because they felt that they were in a *small minority*, or for some other reason.

II. THE VIEW OF THE MINORITY.

Nevertheless, a minority in the church, and a respectable minority, denies that the Assembly has the right to veto a change proposed by a previous Assembly and approved by a majority of the presbyteries. In our religious press, both before the meeting of the last Assembly and since, advocates of this view have appeared. And during the sessions of the Assembly several of the members, some of them on the floor at the time, were heard asserting their convictions that they must vote, regardless of their own individual views as to the propriety of the proposed change, in accord with the expressed wishes of the majority of the presbyteries. They seemed to feel that while the Assembly, which had sent down the proposed change, might have deliberated over it and have sent it down or not, as it saw fit; and that while it was pertinent to the presbyteries to deliberate over and approve the change or not, as seemed good to them, the subsequent Assembly could do nothing but carry out the will of the majority of the presbyteries so ascertained. Some of them seemed to feel

that the Assembly derived its authority from the presbyteries, and must bow, therefore, to their will. Others seemed to feel that paragraph 142 of the Book of Church Order *required* of the Assembly handling a change so proposed by a previous Assembly and approved by the presbyteries *the enactment of the proposed change as law*; that the Assembly was shut up to action in accord with the expressed will of the majority of the presbyteries by this paragraph. Others of this minority have seemed to feel that the commissioner from any Presbytery was bound to vote in accord with the expressed will of his Presbytery. On the floor of one of our presbyteries a brother, honored and loved by all who knew him, has been heard to say that he believed that he himself had erred in voting in the Assembly on one question contrary to the expressed will of the Presbytery. He said that his own view differed from that of his Presbytery when the time came to vote in the Assembly, and that he had voted according to his own view of what was right; that he had felt at that time that he was right in doing so; but that on reflection he had come to the conclusion that "as the representative of his Presbytery" he "ought to have voted in accord with the known views of his Presbytery."

III. NOW, WHAT IS THE TRUTH ON THE SUBJECT?

Has the Assembly the right of veto in such a case? Has it the right to condemn the action of the preceding Assembly, if condemnation be involved in the veto; and the right to contravene the will of a majority of the presbyteries?

We answer with unhesitating confidence, Yes; the Assembly has such a right, if the change proposed is one which ought not to be made, if it is one which is inexpedient and without Biblical warrant. That Assembly is unworthy of the name that resolves itself into a mere committee to execute the will of the presbyteries. Of course, the Assembly has the right of veto in the case considered; and the obligations on it to veto some of the changes that are approved by the presbyteries is imperative. Yes, even though it seem to reflect somewhat on the act of a preceding Assembly.

We are glad to think that a majority of our rulers entertained this view. But we ought all to hold it. The case is not one that admits of dubiety.

IV. REASONS WHY WE KNOW THAT THE ASSEMBLY HAS THE RIGHT TO SUCH VETO POWER.

1st. The government of the Presbyterian Church is representative government. It is not monarchical. It is not democratic. It is republican, in the old classic signification of the term.

In a government where the governing power is exercised by representatives, the people elect those whom they will have to exercise this power. Those elected do in governing *that which they think they ought*, under their constitution. For instance, the communicants in good and regular standing in one of our congregations, when about to elect elders, if they have been well instructed and are faithful, look out certain men whom they believe to be fitter, owing to their capacities, acquirements and gifts of grace, to rule the church than the members voting are themselves. They elect them to exercise the powers of government. They expect these men, when once elected and inaugurated into office, to rule as they think they ought, and shall be willing to answer to the Head of the Church and in accord with our interpretation of the word of God set forth in the constitutional standards of our church. They do not expect to instruct these elders how to act on the questions which shall come before them. Their theory is that a few men of larger gifts and powers will know better what ought to be done than the body of the communicants in mass. They expect these men of larger light and more sanctified hearts to use all the light they have or can get, as occasion shall demand. Similarly, when the sessions send their representatives to the presbyteries and synods, the theory of our Presbyterian polity, the theory of representative government, demands that they send the best men to do the work; and this theory demands that these representatives, once convened as presbyteries or synods, shall do about every matter *what they think they ought in the light of the requirements of God's word as interpreted by the constitution of the church*. The session cannot instruct its representative in a higher court. The representative is one who, using all the light he can command, does for his people *what he thinks they ought* to do if it were theirs to wield the functions of government—*what he thinks he ought for them under the constitution under which he acts*. The session that instructs its representative therein

tramples on the fundamental principle of representative government; and the representative who suffers himself to be instructed tolerates, from whatever cause, the infraction of the same principles. The same thing is true of the "commissioners" sent by our presbyteries to the General Assembly. Theoretically, our government is representative from top to bottom and from bottom to top. No Presbytery may, without a violation of a basal principle of Presbyterianism, instruct one of its commissioners to the General Assembly. Every commissioner whom a Presbytery attempts to instruct ought to ask the Presbytery to send some one else whom it can send as a representative.

There is not much danger of the monarchical form of government being confused with the republican; but there is frequent confusion of democratic government with republican; or, to use ecclesiastical phraseology, there are frequent confusions of Presbyterianism with Congregationalism. The people of an ancient Greek democracy, and the members of a Congregational church, rule either in a mass or by instructed deputies or delegates. The Congregational local church may instruct its delegate to a Council how to vote or otherwise act in regard to a given question. One body of the democracy may instruct its delegates how to behave in a more inclusive convention. This is consistent. The theory of Congregationalism is that the functions of government should be exercised by all the members acting equally, either *in propria persona*, or by proxy, instructed delegate. This is the theory of democracy of the old classic type. Presbyterians do not, however, in theory regard this as the best type of government; nor do they believe it to be the Scriptural form. They believe that some members are more fit to rule than others; and that the Scriptures both enjoin the election of such for the purpose, and put the exercise of government into their hands. Their theory, partially stated, is, "Send your best men to the General Assembly. Expect them to get all the light they can on the subjects to be considered there, and to do what *they* think they ought in accord with the word of God." Let the presbyteries impeach them if they transgress the word of God as interpreted by the constitution; but regard them as answerable to God only, unless they do trample on that constitution."

Mr. John Bright showed on one occasion during his parliamentary career his sense of the dignity of a representative in the

civil sphere. His constituents had attempted to instruct him as to how he should behave in regard to some matters before the House. Mr. Bright, with as much point as eloquence, replied that he was no deputy, but a representative, chosen on the ground of supposed superior civic intelligence and character, and bound to do what he, with his larger light, saw he ought to do—bound by the constitution under which he had been inaugurated into office. Mr. Justice Lamar, lately of the Supreme bench of the United States, while a member of our national Congress vindicated in an equally noble manner the character of a representative in our government. He would not suffer himself to be instructed. Shall the representative in a court of the church of Christ be slower to maintain the honor and dignity of his office ordained by God in heaven?

Now, it is clear that if a fundamental principle of our Form of Government forbids a Presbytery's instructing a commissioner to the Assembly, then the Presbytery's vote cannot bind him to vote similarly in the Assembly. Nor can the vote of the majority of the presbyteries determine the vote of the commissioners generally. These commissioners should pay all due respect to the voices of the presbyteries. They should go with the presbyteries so far as they have the truth; but they are under solemn obligations to God and to the church to do the thing they think they ought to do in accord with God's truth and the constitution of the church. The theory is that they have been solemnly chosen because of special fitness to do the work. They have opportunities during the deliberations of the court to acquire more light. They are morally obliged to use that larger light and their supposed superior powers. There can be no question to one who understands the nature of Presbyterian government. No matter how the majority of the presbyteries think and vote, their *representatives*, if they understand their relations, must vote as *they themselves believe right* under this constitution. If they regard themselves as incompetent to think and act uninstructed, they should refuse to go to the courts, and vote for those whom they do esteem fit. Such a course might keep some of us from trips to see the country, to visit our wife's kin, or our forty-second cousins, on occasion of the sessions of the General Assembly; but we are not sure that the cause of God would suffer. On the contrary, we believe that God would honor the church that

would honor him by thus having regard to the interests of his work instead of allowing those interests to be overridden by the desire to give one another outings in turn and, according to the relative strength of our desires, to take a trip and to see friends, connections and kinfolks. But this by the way.

The present point is that for members of the General Assembly to talk of being obliged to vote a certain way because their Presbytery has voted in that way, or because the majority of the presbyteries have voted in that way, is for them to forget their character as representatives and to regard themselves as Congregationalists. It is for them to trample upon the principle of *representative* and to turn themselves into deputies. If our Book of Church Order provided for such an Assembly, the provision would be a monstrosity, for it would provide for the introduction of a purely and distinctively democratic principle into a *representative* form of government; it would rob our standards of all consistency, and would make us hybrids in polity. If a paragraph in our Book of Church Order virtually introduced a foreign principle, that paragraph, as an error, ought to be rooted out, not made the occasion of trampling on fundamental principles.

But, say some of our brethren, "Is not paragraph 142 of the Book of Church Order against you?" This brings us to the second reason in support of the position of the majority.

2d. The most natural interpretation of paragraph 142 and the history of this paragraph show the position of the majority to be the correct one.

Paragraph 142 reads: "The Book of Church Order may be amended on the recommendation of our General Assembly, when a majority of the presbyteries advise and consent thereunto, and a succeeding General Assembly shall enact the same." Now, the intention of this paragraph is to set forth, *not* how a General Assembly shall behave with reference to proposed amendments of the Book, *but* how the Book may be amended. It asserts that the Book may be amended by the doing of three things: (1), One General Assembly's recommending the proposed change; (2), a majority of the presbyteries advising and consenting thereto; (3), a succeeding General Assembly's enacting the same. This is the correct interpretation, for: 1, There is no sign in the paragraph that any one of the courts shall take one position rather

than another, on any question, out of deference to the views of the other courts. It is purely gratuitous to assume this. 2, Such a view reduces the *enacting* Assembly from the status of a court of representatives to a committee—set of instructed deputies. Our assemblies are not constituted of deputies from the presbyteries, but of representatives. And our Assembly does not get its power from the presbyteries. The presbyteries can no more dictate to the Assembly than the Assembly to the presbyteries. The rights and prerogatives of all our courts are carefully defined. Their power, though ultimately from God, is, under him, equally from that body made up of all the members of our communion. The presbyteries are not to turn the General Assembly into anything else than a body of representatives. The General Assembly “succeeding” “shall enact the same” only when *it thinks it ought*.

In 1884 the General Assembly was overtured to recommend to the presbyteries that this paragraph be amended so as to read: “The Book of Church Order may be amended by the following process: (1), The General Assembly may, at its discretion, *transmit* the proposed amendment to the presbyteries. (2), If a majority of the presbyteries shall enact it. (3), The succeeding General Assembly shall announce it to be the law of the church.” To this overture the General Assembly, we suppose, out of deference to the very honored man from whom it came, said, “As no sufficient reason is apparent for making the change proposed, the General Assembly declines to recommend it to the presbyteries.”

If this overture had been turned into law, it would have given the minority such poor ground to stand upon as such an anti-Presbyterian principle—principle foreign to and annihilative of representative government—could give. However, we are happy to say they have not even such ground as this. They have no ground.