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CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

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Editorial Notes and Comments

THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY SUSTAINS DR. MACHEN



IN stating his opposition to the "Plan of Union," in the January issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY, DR. MACHEN expressed the opinion that its proposed "Formula of Subscription" "obscures what is really quite central in the present formula of creed subscription in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A.—namely, that there is only one system of doctrine taught in the Bible and that system is the Reformed or 'Calvinistic' system of doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith and the Catechism of the Church."

In its issue of March 14th *The Christian Century* says editorially: "Professor MACHEN is, we think, right in so interpreting the new formula. His keen, incisive mind,

Skilled to divide
A hair 'twixt south and southwest side,

did not overlook, as a less meticulous critic or a more careless theologian might have done, the significant difference between the system and a system of truths drawn from the Bible." *The Christian Century* then adds: "If he has called attention to a point which might otherwise have escaped attention, he deserves the gratitude of all schools of Presbyterian opinion. He has helped them to take this step, if they take it, with their eyes open to its meaning."

The Christian Century does not, of course, share Dr. Machen's opinion that the system of doctrine expressed in the Westminster Standards is the one and only system of doctrine contained in the Bible. It maintains, in fact, that there are other systems of doctrine that have as good a right to maintain that they have been derived from the Bible as the system set forth in the Confession of Faith and Catechism of the Presbyterian Church. Such an opinion is, it is almost needless to say, in flat opposition to the conviction that the Bible is the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. It is inconceivable that God Himself should be the author of mutually opposed systems of doctrine. That, of course, does not worry *The Christian Century* as its view of the Bible is thoroughly modernistic. Those, however, who believe not only that the Bible is the Word of God but that the one and only system of doctrine that it teaches is that set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms will appraise the matter quite differently. They will agree with *The Christian Century* that "for those who have hitherto held the Westminster doctrines as the system of truth taught in the Scriptures to hold them still but only as one of

the systems which men have devised out of materials drawn from that source is a step so long that it may fairly be called a stride." But they will hold that it is a stride—a long stride—not in the right but in the wrong direction.

We are grateful to *The Christian Century* for what it has done toward clarifying the doctrinal significance of the "Plan of Union."

A FRIENDLY WARNING



THE editor of this paper is well disposed toward the United Presbyterians. A large part of his early education was received at Tarkio College where he had as his classmates such well-known United Presbyterians as H. H. MARLIN and WILLIAM MURCHIE. He owes a special indebtedness to Dr. J. A. THOMPSON, president-emeritus of Tarkio College, whom he acknowledges as one of the major influences in his life. His own father was reared in the United Presbyterian Church (N. Y.) so that he himself was doubtless saved from being a United Presbyterian only by reason of the fact that there was no United Presbyterian church in that part of the Middle West to which his father went as a young man.

In view of what has been related, it might be expected that the writer would be heartily in favor of the proposed merger of the United Presbyterian Church with the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., with which he is connected. As a matter of fact, however, he is opposed to it, and that because, in his judgment, the consummation of this merger would not be for the best interests of either of these churches.

He does not think it would be for the best interest of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. because, as he pointed out in the last issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY, he believes that the terms of union not only involve a serious lowering of the doctrinal standards of the Church, but that they would be creative of a situation in which it would be relatively easy further to amend them in the direction of Modernism. Doubtless some of his United Presbyterian friends will not admit that the terms of union involve any lowering of the doctrinal standards of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. Even DR. GORDON MACLENNAN, whose view of what the consummation of this merger would mean for the United Presbyterians is very much in accord with the writer's, does not seem to agree with him at this point (see *The Presbyterian* for Feb. 8th and *The Christian Union Herald* for March 17th). He can only say that in his judgment Professor JOHN MURRAY and DR. MACHEN, among others, has made this clear—a judgment in which even *The Christian Century* concurs as may be learned from an adjoining editorial.

The writer is more particularly concerned to point out, how-

STOP, LOOK, LISTEN

Why the Plan of Organic Union Should be Opposed

By J. Gresham Machen

The most important piece of business before the 1934 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. is the question whether a Plan of Union providing for the Organic Union of that church with the United Presbyterian Church of North America should be sent down immediately to the presbyteries for approval or disapproval.

Bible-believing commissioners will, no doubt, be asking what they ought to do about it. We shall try here to tell them, just as briefly as we can, what we think and why. If what we have to say is common sense, and above all if it is in accordance with the Word of God, then it ought to be heeded quite regardless of the question who it is that says it.

I. *WHAT SHOULD BE DONE AT THE ASSEMBLY?*

1. Study the Plan of Organic Union for yourself.

Do not take anything for granted. You ought not to trust any committee whatever to do your thinking for you about such an extremely important question as this. Certainly you ought not to trust the particular committee that is recommending this Plan of Union; for the part of it representing our church has not among its members—at least not among its ministerial members—a single representative of that party in the Church which has its eyes really open to the great issue between Modernism and Christianity in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. and which has shown itself determined to stand against Modernism in the actual situations as they arise.

2. Insist that the question be fully and freely discussed on the floor of the Assembly.

Almost at the very beginning of the first business session of the Assembly the docket will be presented for approval. If the docket as so presented does not provide at the very least for one full forenoon of discussion on this all-important matter, you should move that it be amended to that effect; and then, when the appointed time comes, you should oppose with all your might any undue limitation of debate, and should favor all reasonable extension of time in order that commissioners on the floor, as distinguished from appointed speakers, may be freely heard.

It has come to be the custom to send down overtures to the presbyteries without prior discussion on the floor of the Assembly. That is a thoroughly bad custom. Now is the time to see that it is abandoned. Discussion of these tremendously important constitutional questions in the presbyteries is not enough. There should also be an opportunity, as can be provided only at the Assembly, for a man from California to exchange views with a man from Maine.

It has further become the custom to fill the docket of the Assembly with interminable reports, some of which are already, in substance, in print in the hands of the commissioners. That custom also should be abandoned. It is a waste of the time and money of the Church. It should not be allowed any longer to crowd out the proper business

of the Assembly, which is full deliberation on the great doctrinal and administrative questions.

3. If full time is not allowed for debate on this question, oppose the sending down of the Plan of Union quite regardless of the merits of the Plan.

If the Assembly cannot find time this year for debate upon this momentous change in the Constitution of the Church, then the consideration of the Plan should be postponed to some year when time *can* be found.

4. Vote in any case against the sending down of the Plan.

The Plan undermines the authority of the Bible; it undermines the great system of revealed truth contained in our Confession of Faith; it is opposed to Presbyterian liberty.

Our reasons for saying so are set forth in summary below. They have been set forth more fully in various issues of CHRISTIANITY TODAY (especially in the articles by Mr. John Murray in the January, 1932, and February, 1932, issues).

5. If, despite your negative vote, the Plan is sent down to the Presbyteries, prepare and sign a formal protest setting forth briefly your reasons for opposing the action of the Assembly.

Such a protest will serve to indicate to the presbyteries that the Plan of Organic Union is opposed by Bible-believing commissioners and should not be adopted by the presbyteries without careful scrutiny.

6. Prepare yourself, before you leave Cleveland, to contend in the presbyteries with all your might against this great attack upon the faith and witness of our Church.

In 1920-1921 a destructive Plan of Organic Union was defeated in the presbyteries after having been sent down by the Assembly. This present Plan can be defeated if those who truly love the Word of God will contend earnestly against it.

7. Take preliminary steps looking to the continuance of a real Presbyterian Church in case this destructive Plan of Union is adopted by the presbyteries.

Our Presbyterian heritage is too precious a thing to be abandoned. If we seek to retain it, we shall have to

make sacrifices; but no sacrifice is too great if in making it we have the favor of God.

II. WHY THE PLAN OF UNION IS BAD

1. We are not opposing any conceivable union with the United Presbyterian Church, but only this particular Union.

There is no real reason why an acceptable form of union should not be proposed. If the United Presbyterian Church is a real Presbyterian Church, it should be willing to stand clearly for the Bible and the great historic Westminster Confession of Faith without qualification.

2. The benefits to be obtained from the Union are at best not worth the price that must be paid.

The Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. has 1,968,788 communicant members; the United Presbyterian Church has within the United States 177,265 communicant members. In order to effect a union with a church less than one-tenth its size, the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. is being asked to abandon its historic formula of creed subscription, to load itself up with a miserable hasty creed as an "historical interpretative statement," and to make radical changes in its form of government. Such a union will show the usual results of forced unions—division in the existing communions, heartburnings, bitterness and, in general, a serious setback to real Christian unity. Is the end to be attained worth the payment of so great a price?

3. The Plan of Union makes no provision for permitting retention of property by congregations that are conscientiously unable to enter into the union church.

Until such provision is made, the Plan of Union is opposed to Christian ethics just as much, perhaps, as it is opposed to Christian doctrine. Whatever the civil law may say about the matter, it is, from the Christian point of view, a ruthless and wicked thing to seize for a new union church the property of congregations which have been supported by men and women who regard the union as hostile to that for which the money has been given.

4. According to the Plan of Union, the 1925 "Confessional Statement" of the United Presbyterian Church and the 1902 "Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith" (the latter merely approved by our General Assembly in 1902) become parts of the Constitution of the proposed union church.

These two "Statements" are "embodied in the Plan of Union as historical interpretative statements of the United Church, as aids to the faith and witness of the United Church."¹

The Plan says, indeed, that "in all questions of doctrine, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms shall be the final authority, subject

¹ See Pamphlet on "The Plan of Union" issued by the Joint Committee, January 1, 1934, p. 25. Copies of this pamphlet may be obtained at the price of twenty-five cents from the Secretary of the Joint Committee on Organic Union, 514 Witherspoon Building, Philadelphia, Pa.

to the Holy Scriptures."² But there are two ways of destroying a Confession of Faith. One way is to abrogate it or add to it something that contradicts it. The other way is to "interpret" it to mean something quite different from that which it originally meant. This latter way is followed by the Plan of Union when it adopts that 1925 Confessional Statement and the 1902 Brief Statement as "historical interpretative statements of the United Church" and "as aids to the faith and witness of the United Church."

It is no wonder that Dr. John McNaugher, Chairman of the United Presbyterian part of the Joint Committee, says, in a press release, regarding the place of the 1925 Confessional Statement in the present form of the Plan of Union, as compared with its place in the form originally proposed, that the "clear recognition" of the 1925 Confessional Statement "as having interpretative character scarcely lessens its influential value as an exponent of Reformed theology," and that "with its exaltation of the Psalms it will remain permanently in the foreground as a teaching symbol." If a man thinks, with Dr. McNaugher and the rest of his Committee, that the 1925 Confessional Statement is really an "aid to the faith and witness of the United Church," he may favor the Plan of Union; but if he thinks, as we do, that the 1925 Confessional Statement is an attack upon the faith and witness of the Church and an offense to Christ's little ones, then he will oppose the Plan of Union with all his might.

5. The 1925 Confessional Statement, thus included in the Plan of Union, undermines the authority of the Bible.

The article in the Confessional Statement on "The Holy Scriptures" states that the Scriptures are "an infallible rule of faith and practice and the supreme source of authority in spiritual truth."³

The latter part of this statement practically nullifies the former part. It gives comfort to the great central error of the present day, which is that there is such a thing as "spiritual truth," distinguished from historical truth or scientific truth. A real believer in the Bible, in sharp distinction from this error, holds that the Bible is true throughout; and in particular he holds that the Bible is true when it speaks of events in the external world like the resurrection of the body of our Lord from the tomb on the third day.

The same article in the 1925 Confessional Statement says that the writers of the Bible, "though moved by the Holy Spirit, wrought in accordance with the laws of the human mind."

That sentence denies the supernaturalness of the Bible. What is in accordance with the laws of the human mind or with any others of the laws of nature is natural; what is not in accordance with the laws of the human mind or any of the others of the laws of nature is supernatural. We believe that the inspiration of the Bible is in the latter category. We believe that the Bible is a supernatural

² *Plan of Union*, p. 9.

³ *Plan of Union*, p. 28.

Book. Hence we are opposed to the 1925 Confessional Statement.

The true doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible does not, indeed, involve a "dictation theory." It does not deny to the writers of the Bible the use of ordinary means of obtaining information and the pursuance of their own individual habits of style. But in addition to this use of ordinary means of obtaining information and in addition to the pursuance of their ordinary habits of style, the Biblical writers were supernaturally preserved from error. Such preservation from error, of course—being supernatural—was beyond the laws of the human mind. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that the writers of the Bible were not merely inspired recorders of historical facts and of supernatural revelation already given, but were also, in countless instances, themselves organs of new revelation. To say, therefore, sweepingly, as this 1925 Confessional Statement does, that they "wrought in accordance with the laws of the human mind" is not only to deny the doctrine of plenary inspiration, but also to deny by implication the presence of supernatural revelation in the Bible. Was Paul working in accordance with the laws of the human mind when he said: "Behold, I show you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump?" Or was he telling the mysteries of God as God revealed them to him? We may thank God that the answer is plain; we may thank God that the Confessional Statement is wrong.

6. The 1925 Confessional Statement and the 1902 Brief Statement are objectionable and faulty in other respects.

Lack of space prevents our going into details. But certainly a Confessional Statement which undermines the authority of the Bible undermines the very foundations. Even if the superstructure were less faulty than it is, the attack upon the foundation is sufficient to condemn this Statement.

It should be observed that the (also very faulty) 1902 Brief Statement is now no part of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. It has not been approved by the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., as the Plan of Union misleadingly states, but has merely been approved by the General Assembly of that Church. The Plan of Union, on the contrary, makes it, with the 1925 Confessional Statement, a part of the Constitution of the Church.

7. The proposed new formula of creed-subscription attacks the faith of the Church at the most vital point.

The present formula of creed-subscription of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. reads as follows:

"Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?"

The proposed new formula of creed-subscription reads as follows:

"Do you believe and acknowledge the system of doctrine professed by this Church as contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as taught in the Word of God, and do you engage to adhere to and maintain its truths?"

According to the present formula of creed-subscription the Bible teaches one system of revealed truth and that system is the system set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith; according to the proposed new formula of creed-subscription the Bible may teach any number of systems and the system contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith may be held to be only one of them.

Such at least will unquestionably be a very common and very plausible interpretation of the new formula.

So interpreted, the new formula degrades, of course, the Presbyterian or "Reformed" system of doctrine. But it does a great deal more than that. It also degrades the Bible. If the Bible contains various contradictory systems of doctrine, then the "infallibility" of the Bible spoken of in the first question of the formula of creed-subscription can mean very little; and certainly it is little short of blasphemous to call such a self-contradictory book the "Word of God."

In pronouncing this view of the new formula very plausible, we cannot be charged with "hair-splitting," because we have the support of clear-sighted Modernists. The Modernists like the new formula; we dislike it: but they agree with us perfectly as to what it may plausibly be held to mean.

To show that that is the case one needs only to turn to what we suppose is perhaps the ablest Modernist journal dealing with American ecclesiastical affairs. Here is what *The Christian Century* (March 14, 1934, p. 353) says about the new formula of creed-subscription:

"The old formula required acceptance of the confession of faith 'as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.' The new one demands only acceptance of it 'as taught in the Word of God.' . . . One is not, then, required to affirm that there can be no other system of doctrine whose component parts are not also drawn from the teachings of the Bible. The Bible is a large and varied body of literature. . . . John's idea of God was not David's, and Paul had concepts of the means of grace other than those of James. Let us say, as the candidate for Presbyterian ordination is to be required to say under the new formula, that the system of doctrine set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith contains nothing which is not drawn from Holy Writ. Still, there may be other systems of doctrine which are equally taught in the Word of God."

We agree with *The Christian Century* in holding that

Plan of Union, p. 13.

if Presbyterians take this "step," which, as *The Christian Century* rightly says, "is a step so long that it may fairly be called a stride," they ought to take it "with their eyes open to its meaning."

8. The proposed formula of subscription is almost ridiculously long, enters into detail in oppressive fashion, and is in part extremely infelicitous and obscure.

The last named defects appear particularly in Question 2, with which we have been dealing above. A man has to read that question over a number of times before he can untangle the coil of "as's" sufficiently to get at the meaning. It seems almost unthinkable that a great Church should place at the centre of a solemn service a question couched in such atrocious English.

The rest of the formula of subscription enters into such a detail as a promise to attend the judicatories of the Church. To require of candidates for the ministry such detailed promises is a serious burden to really conscientious men, however lightly it may be taken by others.

9. The proposed Form of Government practically destroys all rights of the local church.

Chapter XVII of the proposed Form of Government permits a presbytery, at any time, for as long a time as it may desire, without any judicial process and without any hearing of the parties concerned, to take over the affairs of a local church by the appointment of a provisional session.⁵ Thus according to this law a presbytery may use the name and resources of a local church in complete contradiction to the desires of that church. It is really to be wondered whether, if Presbyterian elders really had the slightest inkling of the presence of this abominable provision in the proposed Plan of Union, they would favor the plan for a moment.

10. The Plan of Union makes support of the Church and of its agencies no longer a matter of free-will giving but a tax enforced by penalties.

This revolutionary and destructive provision is found, not in any proper place, but tucked away in the Directory for Worship! It reads as follows (Chapter V, Article 5, of the proposed Directory for Worship):

"If any person of known pecuniary ability fails in giving of his substance, the session should point out his obligation as revealed in the Word of God and the blessing attending its faithful discharge. If he still withholds from the treasury of the Lord, the session may deal with him as an offender."⁶

That is what the Plan of Union says. Very different is what the Bible says:

"Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver" (II Cor. 9:7).

⁵ *Plan of Union*, p. 66.

⁶ *Plan of Union*, p. 165.

The conflict here between the Plan of Union and the Bible is a very old conflict. It is the conflict between man's wisdom and the Spirit of God, between the world's methods on the one hand and real obedience to Jesus Christ on the other.

Let it be observed that this section does not merely vitiate part of the support of the proposed union church. No, it vitiates all of it. Every gift to the Church and its benevolences is made, according to this section, under threat of ecclesiastical censure. That means that real free-will giving is altogether eliminated.

Can we really hope that an ecclesiastical organization supported by methods such as these will ever be owned as His by the One who said: "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth"?

11. There are other defects in the proposed Form of Government, which lack of space forbids us to mention.

The general effect of the changes as over against our present Form of Government is to strengthen the hold of the central ecclesiastical machinery and weaken the rights of the plain man in the Church. At any rate, this new Form of Government should not be voted for by anyone who has not studied it in all its details for himself.

12. The proposed new method of amending the Constitution of the Church removes safeguards and makes it increasingly easy for the General Council or other central agencies to rush amendments through without real scrutiny.

In other words, it increases the efficiency of what has been called the great "overture-factory." At present, that overture-factory rushes the proposed amendments through the General Assembly without debate. But then it meets one check. The check is found in the provision of the present Constitution that a proposed change in the Constitution must be voted on affirmatively by a majority of *all the presbyteries* (two-thirds of all the presbyteries in the case of amendments to the Confession of Faith). This check is removed by the new Plan of Union, which provides that a majority of the individual votes actually cast (two-thirds in the case of amendments to the Confession of Faith) shall be sufficient to effect changes in the Constitution, provided these votes represent not less than two-thirds of the presbyteries. That puts the power much more largely in the hands of the large city presbyteries. Moreover, the General Assembly is permitted to determine the time when the presbyteries shall act, so that the present right of the Presbyteries to allow real time for deliberation on these overtures, in accordance with local conditions, is impaired. The real effect of all this is perfectly plain. The little group of men running the machinery of the Church will be able to rush amendments through very much as it pleases. Real safeguards will have been very largely removed.