

S. Parry Wilson

MINUTES

OF

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

OF

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

IN

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA:

WITH

AN APPENDIX.

A. D. 1838.

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APPENDIX.

PASTORAL LETTER.

DEAR BRETHREN,

In the present agitated state of our beloved Zion, we think it our duty to lay our whole procedure before you, with special plainness, and serious admonition, that you as well as ourselves should look earnestly and humbly to Almighty God, for the deliverance of our Church from the troubles and temptations by which we have been and are yet surrounded. We believe that all parts of our Church have looked forward to the present meeting of the Assembly for some important events, or decisive action, which might determine our future course, and give harmony to our future operations.

The last General Assembly acted under the conviction, that the only possible way to secure peace, was by the separation of the parties in our Church, which could not agree on what were deemed important principles of doctrine and Church order; and to effect this separation, which all parties acknowledged to be necessary, the majority thought proper to exercise the right of abrogating the unconstitutional action which had brought the discordant parties into their present connexion. This procedure was indeed novel; it had never been resorted to in our Church before, and from its very novelty was calculated to startle minds not accustomed to that mode of action; it was, however, the only remedy for our case, and a remedy to which all governments, possessing a written constitution, are obliged to resort when embarrassed by unconstitutional laws.

At the first meeting of the present Assembly, the friends of the last Assembly had the pleasure of ascertaining that the action of that body had been fully sustained by a large majority of our Church. So decisive was the preponderance of numbers on this occasion, that had even the members from the four disowned Synods been admitted to their seats, there would still have been a clear and not inconsiderable majority in favour of the reform which the last Assembly had commenced. In these circumstances we thought the course of Christian duty was plain to all parties, and that if the minority could not consent to submit to our views of doctrine and Church order, it was incumbent on them to make a quiet and orderly secession. The essence of all religious liberty and ecclesiastical order is evidently involved in the principle, that when two parties in the same community cannot agree, the majority must govern; but if the minority cannot in conscience submit either to the measures, or the doctrines of the majority, it is their right and duty to separate, and form a different denomination. For such a course as this on the part of the minority, we were fully prepared; we looked forward to it with satisfaction, as the only course conducive to the peace and Christian comfort of both parties; and had this course been adopted, we were willing to concur in any reasonable plan for the adjustment of any unsettled claims which might have appertained to the case. By this exposition of our views, our friends and brethren will be prepared to conceive of our astonishment and grief at the course which was actually pursued.

When the hour for organizing the Assembly had arrived, and whilst the proper officers were engaged in that business, a number of persons belonging to the minority rose in a tumultuous manner, in the midst of the house, and offered some propositions and motions, which evidently could not be entertained at the time, and which were declared to be out of order, subsequently proceeded with a confused clamour, in which something like nominations and voting could be heard, to what they called an organization of the Assembly; and then made the announcement, that that body would hold its future sessions in the First Presbyterian Church; all this was done in defiance of the authority of the Moderator of the Assembly, who was constituting the body, and who repeatedly called to order whilst this scene of confusion was in progress.

What could have led the minority to this extraordinary course is not for us to explain. It has been suggested that they considered this as the best way for securing their legal rights, and indeed it has since appeared, that they not only meant to secure their own rights, but to assume to themselves all the legal rights and claims of the whole Presbyterian Church. In this view, however, the very injustice of their plan would seem sufficient to condemn it in the estimation of all good men, not influenced by prejudice. That a minority, by such a movement, could take to themselves the whole property of the

Church, and strip the majority of all their rights, would certainly be an unjust procedure, and if even all this were practicable in point of law, yet in the court of conscience, we believe there are but few men who would be willing to sanction it. But can it be supposed that such a course could be supported in a court of law? The legal decision which would sustain such a course, would establish a principle destructive of the rights of every ecclesiastical organization throughout the world; for it is abundantly plain that in any church organization which could be formed, a minority might arise, no matter how small that minority, which would be able, on the plan practised in this case, to divest the majority of all its power and its property, and ruin the Church. Surely the members of the minority could not mean to establish a principle of law, by which indeed they might be able to ruin the Presbyterian Church this year, but by which a portion, however small, might be able the next year to ruin them, and strip them of all their vested rights—a principle, in fact, which a disorderly minority in any Church might at any time employ for the subversion of that Church. We find it therefore difficult to believe, that the minority could have expected to obtain the property and the power of the Presbyterian Church by the movement in question, and what they did expect or intend by it, we must leave to themselves, or to future circumstances to explain.

Had the minority exercised a little more confidence in the majority, we think all the points of separation might have been adjusted in a manner more advantageous to themselves, and certainly in a manner more consistent with that Christian deportment which all professors of religion are bound to exhibit before the world. When the General Assembly of 1837, determined that a separation of the parties in the Presbyterian Church was necessary to its peace, and appointed a joint committee to adjust the terms of separation, the mode of dividing the property was agreed upon to the satisfaction of both parties. We have never heard that plan of division objected to since that time, by any of the minority, and we have no doubt the majority would at this day have consented to it; here, then, was an obvious mode of settling all questions of property, which we think would have given general satisfaction to the members of both parties, and which ought to have been adopted. Perhaps the minority will say that their reason for acting as they did, was that they had proposed a negotiation just before the organization of the Assembly, which was rejected. It is true they did propose a negotiation, and the proposition was rejected; but the reason for that rejection was, that the proposition assumed as the ground of the whole negotiation, that the action of the last Assembly in disowning the four Synods of Western Reserve, Utica, Geneva, and Genesee, should be considered as unconstitutional, null, and void; and as a large majority of the Presbyteries in our Church had determined that said action of the last Assembly ought now to be carried into effect, it was evident that the proposition aforesaid could not be entertained by the members of this Assembly.

Such, dear brethren, is a brief statement of the facts and circumstances forced upon our attention at the commencement of the present Assembly, and we do not deem it necessary here to dwell any longer, or give any further detail of the events of our past history, which have brought matters to their present state. Both parties in our Church have placed their views of the reforming measures of the last Assembly fully before the public; the public has deliberated on the matter; and a decided majority of our Presbyteries have exercised their right of declaring that those reforming measures ought to be sustained and carried into effect; and in consequence of this decision, the minority have departed from us, and organized a *secession*. The Church is now fairly divided into two separate and independent denominations. Of this secession we only complain as to the manner in which it was effected—for we hold it to be the unalienable right of all Christians, a right which duty requires them to exercise, to separate themselves from other Christians with whom they cannot conscientiously agree on subjects of Christian doctrine and Church order. When disagreements arise on these points, such denominational separations afford the only means of preserving the peace and purity of the Church, in its present imperfect state.

And now, beloved brethren, as the first step of this necessary separation has been taken, it is our prayer to Almighty God, that he would dispose and enable all parties concerned, to carry it out in such manner as may be most consistent with the Christian spirit, and most conducive to a speedy restoration of general peace and Christian affection between the members of the respective bodies. It will facilitate the attainment of this desirable object to keep in memory the fact, that no sentence of excommunication has ever passed between the bodies; we merely separate into different denominations, as Christians who cannot agree to live together in the same particular Church. We can assure our friends at a distance, that the blessed effects of this separation are already apparent in this General Assembly; we have now, as we trust, "the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace," as it pervaded our General Assemblies in former happy periods of our history, when we all "spake, and thought, and minded the same things."

Rejoicing as we do, that this separation is thus far effected, yet we think it important

to request our brethren and the churches under our care, to ponder in the fear of God, the events through which we have passed, and to draw from them those lessons of circumspection and humility which they are calculated to give. A few of the last years of our history have presented a mortifying spectacle, which we humbly hope never to see again, in connexion with our body. By the appointment of God, the Church ought to be "a pillar and ground of the truth—a light of the world—a candle, giving light to all that are in the house." For the last seven or eight years of our history we have been full of darkness, our Church has been occupied with strife, filled with railing accusations and misrepresentations among professed brethren, which was well calculated to harden sinners, and provoke the scoffs of the infidel.

That the Church was possessed of materials for furnishing such a spectacle as we have witnessed, affords evidence that God saw something extremely wrong in our communion, before our late troubles overtook us; the trials through which we have passed, was a dispensation of that kind Father, who holds the Church as the apple of his eye, and who never needlessly afflicts the children of men; and whether our guilt has consisted in pride, in hypocrisy, in worldliness, or in indifference to the truth, or whether it may have consisted in all these united, it is yet certain that our chastisement has not been heavier than our crimes, and that we have much cause as a Church, and as private Christians, for deep repentance, careful self-examination, and turning to God, that he may show us wherefore he has contended with us, and may purify us to himself, as a peculiar people, zealous of good works.

And as much of our late criminality may have consisted in things unobserved by ourselves, we think it of special importance, at the present time, to urge upon all our brethren the necessity of diligent and devout attention to what are called the secret means of grace. Could we know that our brethren were generally much engaged in secret reading and meditation on the Word of God, and in "praying with all prayer," "and without ceasing," we should then believe that a happy and glorious reformation of our Church would certainly be accomplished, and that Zion would soon look forth from her chambers, "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners." The promises of Scripture make it very certain that if our Church was filled with the spirit of humble and holy prayer, it would soon be filled with every blessing; God will give his Holy Spirit; he will give himself; he will give every temporal and eternal good to those who ask agreeably to his will.

We will further observe, that the duty of fasting, as united with prayer, appears to be too much disregarded, if not entirely neglected by many Christians of the present day. We agree with our fathers of the Reformation, that the appointment of annual or stated fasts are not authorized under the gospel dispensation; but occasional fasting, both public and private, such as is called for by peculiar circumstances, or by the dispensations of Heaven, are still among the appointed means of grace, and form an important part of Christian duty. Our Saviour said, the children of the bride-chamber would fast when the bridegroom was taken from them; surely such a dispensation as we have lately witnessed, should lead those children to fast.

As our work at this time is a work of reformation, we believe the present is a proper period for correcting any deviations from Presbyterian usage, or from the old commendable practices of our Church, which may have crept in among us. It is important to every community of Christians, that the youth of that community, should as far as practicable, be indoctrinated in its principles. We fear, however, that in the important work of bringing up the children of the Church, "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," both parents and pastors have too much neglected our larger and shorter catechisms, and especially our larger catechism. Whilst we rejoice in the additional means, which the publications and institutions of the present day have furnished for the assistance of family and juvenile instruction, yet we do not believe that any thing has been furnished, which could at all justify the laying aside of our excellent catechisms. We believe that no uninspired men have ever been able to exhibit in as short a compass, safer and sounder views of the doctrines of salvation, than is contained in those catechisms, and we should rejoice to see our larger catechism brought back to its former place in the system of both family and pastoral instruction, and as extensively as practicable committed to memory. We are persuaded that the dear youth under our care would lose neither time nor labour, by making their minds as familiar as possible with that excellent summary of the doctrines of Christ.

And among other things, beloved brethren, we esteem it our duty to recommend to your patronage and perusal, suitable religious periodicals. We know it has been made a question by some, whether the Church would not be better without those papers and periodicals which are called religious, than with them. This is a question we shall not discuss in the abstract; such papers have been, and will continue to be circulated, and the only antidote for those that do evil, is to circulate those which do good. We should sup-

pose that intelligent Christians would not find it difficult to determine what papers or periodicals they ought to sustain; they may try such papers by the Bible; they may try them by the standards of the Church, or, according to our Saviour's rule, they may try them by their fruits. "Men do not gather grapes of thorns, nor figs of thistles;" publications filled with railings and misrepresentations, cannot produce the peaceable fruits of righteousness.

And now, brethren, we would say in conclusion, let us with cheerful and Christian confidence, as well as with true humility, put our trust in the living God. We believe the work in which we are engaged is the work of God. If we know ourselves, and we have prayed that we might know ourselves in the present case—our great and only motive has been, to maintain the truth as it is in Jesus. We believe that the interests of truth are at stake—we believe that our standards contain that revealed system of truth, which God has ordained for extending his glory and his salvation over the whole earth; and although we have nothing to do in judging those that are without, yet we cannot suffer this system to be mutilated or perverted by those who teach in our communion, and are professedly under our authority. With brethren of other communions, who honestly differ from us on some points, we have no contest; we leave the questions between them and us, to the judgment of our common Master; but as to persons in our own communion, we must contend earnestly for what we believe to be the *faith*, and whilst we ascribe no infallibility to our own judgments, or even to our own standards, yet the opinions we have formed from the Word of God, must to us be the rule of our faith and practice; and whilst engaged, as we humbly trust, in maintaining the truth and the cause of our Saviour, we look to the living God for the success of our efforts. We also believe that the hand of God has been visible in leading us, and conducting our cause to the present issue, and we hope the same Almighty power will guide us and you in all our future operations.

As reformation has been frequently mentioned in the preceding remarks, we trust it will be understood by our churches, that no new doctrine or practice is to be introduced. The Assembly merely intends that there should be a return to the faith and practice of our Church, as heretofore inculcated in our standards, wherever there may have been a departure. We would further recommend that in view of the events through which we have passed, and the deliverance which we hope Almighty God has bestowed upon our Church, that the second Thursday of December next be solemnly observed by all the members of our communion, as a day of solemn humiliation, thanksgiving, and prayer, and that the churches and congregations in our connexion meet on that day for the purpose of public worship.

WILLIAM S. PLUMER, *Moderator.*
JOHN M. KREBS, *Permanent Clerk.*

Philadelphia, May 31, 1838.

PASTORAL LETTER TO FOREIGN MISSIONARIES.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, to the Missionaries under the care of their Board of Foreign Missions, wish grace, mercy and peace.

VERY DEAR BRETHREN,

Assembled as usual, as the representatives of the whole Church with which we are connected, to deliberate on its affairs, and to devise measures for extending the Redeemer's Kingdom, we cannot forbear to pour out the fulness of our hearts to those beloved brethren who have gone forth from our bosom to carry the glorious gospel to the benighted heathen.

Not that our confidence in either the wisdom or fidelity of the Board which we have appointed, or of their Executive Committee, is in the least impaired. On the contrary, their annual report, recently received, has our entire approbation, and furnishes new evidence both of their competency and faithfulness. And we trust that all the instructions and communications of the Executive Committee, who are more immediately charged with the supervision of your labours, will be received with all that respect and docility to which they are so well entitled. But as it is our firm belief that the Church, in her ecclesiastical capacity, is bound to superintend and direct, as far as practicable, the missions which she authorizes, we cannot deny ourselves the pleasure of directly addressing you on several subjects which we deem important, and in regard to which we are desirous of stirring up your minds by way of remembrance. The solemnity and responsibility of your situation, as bearers of the Word of Life to those who are sitting in darkness and