

THE UNION SEMINARY REVIEW

VOL. XXVII.

JULY, 1916.

No. 4.

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF 1916 AT ORLANDO.

By REV. ERNEST THOMPSON, D. D.

Pastor First Presbyterian Church, Charleston, West Virginia.

The writer does not know whether or not Florida had such a charm for others as it did for him. It was his first visit into the land of fruits and flowers. Everything was full of novelty and interest from the time the train left Jacksonville, the gateway, till we reached Orlando, the beautiful, set down in the midst of its lakes and orange groves and long stretching arches of moss-covered trees.

The lure of the land must have been on the Commissioners, for we were given to understand that this was the largest Assembly, in point of numbers, for many years, if not indeed in the history of our Assemblies. And while the Assembly, impatient of long speeches and prolonged discussions, concluded its business with its record breaking speed, set some two or three years ago as a seven day assembly, yet many of the Commissioners were loathe to leave and tarried over in different portions of the State.

As to the hospitality of the people of Orlando; all that the late lamented pastor, Dr. Stagg, had promised in his most felicitous invitation was fully carried out. The only feature of regret being that he was not with us with his genial humor.

The Composition of the Assembly.

In its make-up it seemed to the writer, who has attended five or six Assemblies as a Commissioner, and several others as a

NATURE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH.

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR R. C. REED, LL. D.

Columbia, S. C.

“Synods and Councils are to handle, or conclude nothing but that which is ecclesiastical; and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the Commonwealth unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or by way of advice for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.”

This stands as an official doctrine, as a creedal statement in the Confession of Faith of every Presbyterian Church in our country. But difference of interpretation has made it the battleground for many a war of angry words. The existence of our Church as a separate body is due immediately to what our fathers regarded as a violation of the principle embodied in this statement. The famous protest of Dr. Hodge against the “Spring Resolutions” was based on the ground that the Old School Assembly of 1861, by adopting those resolutions, had decided a political question, and had virtually made the acceptance of that decision a condition of membership in the Church. Forty-seven Presbyteries in the South agreed with Dr. Hodge’s view of the Assembly’s action, withdrew from the Mother Church, and organized what is now the Presbyterian Church in the United States. From that day to this our Church has avowedly stood for a strict construction of this provision of our constitution. It has tried, not with perfect success, but with a good measure of success, to exclude from its courts all discussion of political questions; it refuses alliance with any organization that aims merely at social or political reforms. Perhaps this more than any other one thing distinguishes our Church from the other Presbyterian Churches, not only of this country, but of the world. The Presbyterian Churches of Scotland, England and Ireland, bring all manner of political questions into their courts for discussion, and they

embody the results of their discussion in pointed resolutions for the benefit of the civil powers. As a rule the Presbyterian Churches of this country are somewhat more restrained, and yet with the exception our own Church, which, sad to say, is not always an exception, they put a very liberal construction on this paragraph of our Confession.

Christians owe allegiance to two distinct sovereignties. Andrew Melville, the illustrious successor of John Knox, expressed this wish in words which have grown familiar: "There are two Kings and two kingdoms in Scotland; there is King James, the head of the commonwealth, and there is King Jesus, the King of the Church, whose subject James VI is, and of whose kingdom he is not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member." Melville put this doctrine, with its necessary implications, into the Second Book of Discipline, published in 1578, and it has been proudly professed and poorly practiced by Presbyterians the world over ever since. This dual relationship, this twofold citizenship, has through all the history of the Church given rise to much strife and confusion. The Divine Head of the Church did not fail to note the distinction between the two sovereignties. On the contrary he clearly defined and strongly emphasized the distinction. But when men are entrusted with the exercise of any kind of power, it is very difficult to keep them within proper limits. No test of human nature is quite so severe. Hence it has come to pass that things spiritual and things secular, which should ever be kept separate, have been mixed and mingled to the unspeakable hurt of the Church, and of the dearest interests of man.

A fruitful source of error on this point, and one that is bearing bitter fruit down to our own day, has been the failure to apprehend the full significance of the change which took place when the Church passed from its Jewish to its Christian form. The theocratic constitution under which the Jews lived merged the two jurisdictions of Church and State into one. The same officers administered the laws of both; the same penalties attached to both tables of the decalogue; and punishments were meted out alike to sins against God and crimes

against man. But at the dawn of the Christian era, Christ annulled this old order, and drew a line broad and deep between the things which belong to Caesar and the things which belong to God. He expressly disclaimed kingship over the temporal and secular sphere. "My Kingdom is not of this world, else would my servants fight." The plain and necessary implication is that His kingdom was not established for worldly ends, however good and desirable these may be, and further that the ends for which His kingdom was established were not to be sought by worldly means. These words were spoken to a civil ruler and were meant as a distinct disclaimer of all purpose to intermeddle with the affairs of State. They were so understood by Pilate, who at once, on the basis of this understanding, declared the prisoner innocent.

The whole career of Jesus may be cited in confirmation of the correctness of Pilate's interpretation. He discharged all the duties of a good citizen, but in his Messianic role, he had absolutely nothing to do with civil affairs. He would not even consent to arbitrate a question of property right. He made no complaint against political conditions, though his fellow countrymen were writhing under them; he sought no change of a single law; he agitated for no kind of a social or political reform. So far as appears from his recorded utterances, he was perfectly content with the civil order under which he lived. Some burning invectives fell from his lips, but they were levelled not against officials of the State, but against self-righteous and hypocritical ecclesiastics.

His apostles followed His example. They submitted without a murmur to the "powers that be," and taught others so to do. They denounced no officials of government; they circulated no petitions to influence civil legislation; they did absolutely nothing, said absolutely nothing, so far as the record shows, merely for the purpose of bringing about a better social, or political condition. They were accused of "turning the world upside down," but the accusation was not brought by those who feared for the welfare of the State.

As if to make the lesson more plain, and to free the Church

from all temptation to recur to Old Testament precedents, the Providence of God, for the space of three hundred years, completely separated the Church from the State, and permitted a relation of antagonism to exist between them. During all this while the Church could not, if it would, mingle the things of Caesar and the things of God. It was constrained, willingly or unwillingly, to endure things as they were, bad as they were, and to give itself to the single task of winning individual souls to the obedience of the faith. Results proved that this single task was not only the Church's divinely appointed task but its all sufficient task. Never has the Church made a more glorious history than when it was shut up to its proper work of preaching the Gospel of Christ and administering His laws. It asked nothing of the State but the privilege of existence, and when this was denied, it proved its power to flourish and to conquer by patient suffering and heroic martyrdom. Moreover its efficiency in the transformation of civil, social, and industrial conditions was never greater than when it had no voice, and could have no voice in directly influencing the policy of the State.

After all the lesson was not thoroughly learned, or if so, it was soon forgotten. No sooner did the opportunity offer than the Church struck hands with the State. Immediately on the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, the fair bride of Christ, freed from persecution, began to listen to the wooings of imperial power, and to soil her heavenly garments with the stain of worldly politics. The emperor, still wearing the title of Pontifex Maximus, indicating his headship of the priesthood of Pagan Rome, assumed the office of "Bishop in Externals," and thus paganized the polity of the Church. His assumption, quietly acquiesced in by the Church, marked the beginning of an unhallowed alliance between those whom God put asunder, and wedded the power of the sword to the power of the keys. From that day dissent from the Church was treated as a crime against the State, and religious liberty, promised only a little while before in the famous edict of Milan, perished from the face of the earth. The Church, still bearing the marks of per-

secution, became itself a persecutor; and started on that pathway of cruelty and blood which led to St. Bartholomew, the tortures of the Inquisition, the fires of Smithfield, and the butcheries of the Duke of Alva. Christianity, wielding a power foreign to its nature, won a pre-eminence in cruelty even over Mohammedanism which from the outset had held it right to use the sword as a means of conversion. For example, the Jews, when driven out of Spain by the terrors of the Inquisition found a refuge among the followers of the Arabian prophet, after seeking it in vain among the professed followers of the Christ.

In the upheavals of the sixteenth century the nations of Western Europe broke the fetters with which the papacy had so long bound them. Rejoicing in this hardly-earned liberty they were careful in readjusting the relations of Church and State to safeguard their own rights; they would take no risks of putting their necks again under the yoke of spiritual domination. In an excess of caution they went to the other extreme and enslaved the Church. To this day the Protestant Churches of Europe, especially of continental Europe, are strangers to the spiritual and ecclesiastical independence of apostolic times, an independence which belongs to them by divine right. A relation of Church and State known as Erastianism, which means State control, is still paralyzing to a large extent the spiritual forces set free in the sixteenth century of the revolt against Rome.

When the American colonies secured their independence and came to set up a government of their own, the conditions were such as to demand a very careful scrutiny of the relation which should exist between the power of the sword and the power of the keys. The presence of several religious denominations, entitled to equal rights and privileges, precluded the possibility of an ecclesiastical establishment. The able statesmen of that day reached the conclusion that the wise thing to do was to decree a divorce absolute and permanent between the civil and the ecclesiastical powers. This was first done in the Bill of Rights framed by the Virginia Convention in May,

1776. In the sixteenth section of that bill it is declared that "religion, or the duty we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, being under the direction of reason and conviction only, and not of violence or compulsion, all men are equally entitled to the full and free exercise of it according to the dictates of conscience; and therefore that no man or class of men ought on account of religion to be vested with emoluments or privileges, or subject to disabilities or *penalties*." This doctrine has been incorporated into the constitution of every State in the Union, and was put into the Federal Constitution by the first amendment that was made to that document: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." This has been pronounced by one of our statesmen "the chief cornerstone of the great American system of government," and by another "the contribution of America to the science of government."

This American doctrine is that Church and State move in different orbits which do not intersect or overlap, and each is independent in its own sphere. Both are ordained of God, but for different ends, demanding different methods. The end of the State is social justice. It deals with men merely as moral beings and seeks its end by regulating and controlling their relations to one another. The end of the Church is spiritual regeneration. It deals with men as sinners against God, and seeks its end by bringing them to a saving knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus. The State knows nothing of religion because it has nothing to do with man's relations to God. The Church knows nothing of civil affairs because it has nothing to do with regulating or controlling the relations of those beyond its own pale. The means of the State is force and its symbol the sword; the means of the Church is truth and its symbol the keys.

It is believed that a perfect application of this theory would secure perfect civil and religious liberty. But in the actual application of the theory, serious difficulties have arisen. The question is raised, has the Church no mission to the State?

Must it not seek to guide the civil magistrate in his official duties? When any great moral question, vitally affecting the interests of society, becomes a question of civil polity, must the Church of Christ keep her lips closed? Must she sit with folded hands when the fate of great moral reforms is trembling in the balance? Many able and devout souls have answered these questions by insisting that when any political question rises into the sphere of morals, it is the solemn duty of the Church to make her voice heard. Appeal is made to the example of the stern and fearless prophets of the old dispensation. These had their commission directly from God, and they hurled their fierce denunciations into the ears of godless kings, and warned them of impending judgments. Have we not fallen heir to their mission? And shall we not emulate their noble example? It is altogether possible that this is going too far back for our precedents. Such was the mistake made by James and John who wished to imitate the fiery zeal of Elijah.

We do well to recall the fact that the worst abuses of the Church in the period of its greatest degradation were supported by appeals to Old Testament precedents. Men of keen vision, like Marsilius of Padua and William of Occam, who lived in the fourteenth century, saw that the very foundations of the papal tyranny rested on precedents drawn from the Jewish theocracy, and that the only way to escape from the tyranny was to draw a broad and impassable line between the economy of the Old Testament and that of the New. These men taught that the New Testament does not, as the Old, mix the civil and the religious, and they denounced the appeals to the precedents of the latter as an impertinence. It is certain that we shall look in vain for a precept or a precedent in the New Testament which would justify the Church in claiming a mission to the State, or in seeking to guide the civil magistrate in his official duties. Equally vain will be our search for a precept or precedent to justify the Church in allying itself with a party in the State for the purpose of securing moral reforms. As citizens of the commonwealth Christians should

seek moral reforms by political methods. Moral reforms are an appropriate end for the State to seek and political methods are an appropriate means; but neither holds good in respect to the Church. The commission of the Church is to make the inside of the cup and platter clean that the outside may be clean also; to make the tree good that the fruit may be good. Moral reforms are a by-product, an incidental result of the Church's proper activities, but always the end is spiritual regeneration and the means strictly and exclusively spiritual.

Another question has been raised bearing on this subject. The world is filled with evils which result from our present social, economic and industrial order. On every hand, in the never ending conflict of selfish interests, the weak are suffering from the encroachments of the strong, capital, it is charged, is robbing labor of its first earnings, and soulless corporations are accused of coining money out of the life-blood of their employees. Those who suffer have banded themselves together in various forms of organization with the purpose and hope of ultimately forcing a recognition of their claims. In this warfare for social justice shall the Church remain neutral? Has it no mission to society as distinct from the individual? May it not express its sympathy for the weak and oppressed by throwing the weight of its corporate influence in behalf of every movement that gives promise of bettering social conditions, that holds out the prospect of a richer, fuller, happier life for the submerged masses?

In answer, it is to be said that the mere fact that wrong is to be righted does not determine the Church's duty. The method of righting wrong must also be considered. This must ever have a decision bearing on the Church's duty. "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh; for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but mighty before God to the casting down of strongholds." The same social wrongs existed in our Master's day. His sympathy was tender and active. How did it find expression? Exclusively in ministry to the individual; never by devising any program of social reforms; never by hinting at methods of

relief involving civil legislation. He left it to those who exercise the privileges of citizenship in the commonwealth, and on whom the responsibilities of citizenship rest, to devise all such methods of reform as depend on legislative action.

The provision of our Confession is not too strict: "Synods and Councils are to handle or conclude nothing but that which is ecclesiastical." These words deserve to be taken at their face value. "Church courts are to handle nothing"—it is not added expressly or by implication—"except in cases where moral questions are involved." Make such an addition and you practically nullify the injunction, for nearly all questions pertaining to civil jurisdiction have moral quality, and the Church would forever be dabbling in politics, as indeed some branches of it are. The most rigid stickler for the absolute disjunction of Church and State could wish for no clearer, stronger statement than the one which we have. All that is needed is that those who avow it as their doctrine adhere to it in their practice.

The greatest theologian of the American Church, the scholarly and saintly Charles Hodge, was well within the limits of truth when he said, as he did say in the *Princeton Review* for July, 1862: "It is the doctrine of Scripture and of the Presbyterian Church that the kingdom of Christ is not of this world; that it is not subject as to faith, worship or discipline to the authority of the State; and that it has no right to interfere with the State, or give ecclesiastical judgment in matters pertaining to State polity." This rules the civil magistrate out of the Kingdom of Christ. He can be known there only as a sinner needing salvation. Such teaching is precisely in harmony with the doctrine already quoted from Andrew Melville. Referring to Christ's Kingdom, he says: "Of whose kingdom James VI, is not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member." James left his offices and his dignities behind him when he passed through the "straight gate," and entered the kingdom as destitute of all privileges which worldly rank confers as the humblest of his subjects. But the doctrine equally rules the authorities of the Church out of the State. They

can be known there simply as citizens of the commonwealth, entitled to no privileges, and subject to no disabilities on the ground of their spiritual relations or rank. The Church as such and the State as such stand unrelated.

It may be said that such limitation fetters the Church's energies and shuts the door of opportunity for wide and beneficent service to a needy world. The answer is that the Divine Head of the Church knew better than we know within what sphere the energies of the Church should be confined. We should not seek nor desire a larger freedom of activity than is clearly authorized by His word. The highest liberty for the Church as for the individual is slavery to Christ. This is slavery to truth unmixed with error; it is slavery to the guidance of infinite wisdom and love; it is slavery to that redemptive purpose which embraced a world in its sympathies. It is like the slavery of the planets to the central sun—a slavery which holds them in blessed relation to the fountain of light and life, and saves them from wandering away into outer darkness and utter ruin.