

THE PRESBYTERIAN QUARTERLY.

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I.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF FAITH.

EVERY intelligent reader of the Scriptures has observed how much they have to say about faith; how prominent a place they give it amongst the other graces of the Spirit. They say we are united to Christ by faith; that we are justified by faith; that we live by faith; that we walk by faith; that we are sanctified by faith; that we are saved by faith. They thus give to faith a prominence and ascribe to it an efficiency such as are asserted of no other grace in the long catalogue of the graces. As grand summaries of their teaching on this subject, they say, "According to your faith be it unto you;" "without faith it is impossible to please him;" "he that believeth shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."

There are many, however, who do not understand why it is that so much is thus said about this grace, and why there is ascribed to it so much importance in the plan of salvation. They think there is something strange about it; something arbitrary; something that needs explanation; something that very much needs explanation; something that is derogatory to religion in the view of the intelligent; for, as they suppose, the faith so much insisted on is, to some extent at least, a blind faith, an unintelligent faith, an unreasoning, and therefore an unreasonable, faith; and so a faith that inevitably brings about a conflict between itself and reason, and thus forces the intelligent into the dilemma of choosing in religion whether they will be controlled by knowledge or by ignorance; by reason or by mere credulity. There can be no doubt that there are many who

in these matters does not necessarily imply, as some would have us believe, that spiritual life is dying, and that faith in Christ will soon cease to exist. Spiritual life in this respect, like ungodliness, manifests itself in new forms, and if out of the whole body of Christians a greater number are careless in family religion and Sabbath observance than formerly, it is also true that a greater number than formerly are engaged in active Christian work, there are more intelligent students of the Scriptures, there are more consecrated liberal givers, and there is a far more wide-spread interest than ever before in the evangelization of the world. Modern Christianity, while it has modified some of its old-time characteristics, yet has assumed many new phases which are obviously in the nature of a proper scriptural development, and it is certainly unwise and short-sighted in God's people in lamenting over our losses to forget our gains. We walk by faith, and not by sight, and, on the whole, the outlook is cheering.

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THE NORTHERN ASSEMBLY.

THE Assembly which met in Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, on the 15th of May, 1902, was a meeting of unusual historic importance.

It was noted for the prominence which it gave to the subject of Home Missions. This great cause was lifted into the place of preëminence by an elaborate celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the organization of this branch of the church's work. The occasion gave birth to several addresses of lofty and inspiring eloquence, and to some papers of permanent historical value. The review of the century's achievements in Home Missions necessarily pointed attention to the marvellous expansion of our national life. It showed how the church had ever before it the worthy task of keeping step with the hardy pioneers who followed the star of empire as westward it took its course. "The Winning of the West" is a thrilling story, filled with deeds of daring, and the pathos of patient suffering. Those who bore a worthy part in the conquest did not wear soft clothing, nor dwell in king's houses; they were toil-stained and weather-beaten, rugged heroes, filled fresh from nature's fountain with the great elemental forces of life. They were in advance of the deteriorating influence of a luxurious and pampered civilization. Among these worthies, standing in the very front rank, and

nobly baring their breasts to the brunt of the battle, were the home missionaries. With Bible and hymn-book, with horse and saddle-bags for equipment, they were bravely flying the colors of the Great King, and claiming for him the virgin soil as fast as it was won.

The able speakers in the recent Assembly marshaled the facts of the hundred years' history with great skill; they set them in different relations, and turned on the light at different angles, and made the mighty host of events march before the audience in grand panoramic array. All that charm of diction and force of utterance could do was done to make them stir the heart and kindle the imagination. The occasion was a splendid success. The Assembly was fired with a fresh enthusiasm, and every member girded himself for a more strenuous part in this triumphing warfare. If we mistake not, the impetus imparted to Home Missions by this celebration will sweep across decades of future years.

A matter exciting more temporary interest, but perhaps of less permanent importance, was the revision of the Confession of Faith, and the adoption of a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith. Without any disposition to belittle the work of the Assembly, in the matter of revising the Confession, we venture to say that never has there been a more striking illustration of *parturiunt montes*, etc. Do we in this statement disparage the work of the able committee? Far from it. Their consummate ability was demonstrated in securing that the mountain should be delivered of nothing more formidable than a mouse. In this we rejoice. All lovers of the old standards had been looking on the agitation with trembling hearts. For years the rumblings of the threatened catastrophe had been growing more alarming, and the fumes of sulphur were in the air. Lo, when the explosion is over, and the atmosphere cleared, we find that "since the fathers fell asleep all things continue as they were from the beginning" of the reformation. The old Confession came through without the smell of fire on its garments. Every doctrine remains intact, and remains without any change in form of statement. The famous Chap. III., "Of God's Eternal Decrees," remains just as it came from the hands of the Westminster Assembly. Its relentless precision, its mathematical exactitude, the impassable boundary lines which it fixes, in dealing with the subject of election, are all there. Nothing, even to the dotting of an "i" or the crossing of a "t," has been added to or subtracted from any of the doctrinal statements that make up the Calvinism of the Confession. The actual work of revision was confined to three subordinate matters lying entirely

outside of the doctrinal system. All told, it does not compare in importance with the revision made by the Southern Church, a few years ago, of Sec. 4, Chap XXIV.

In addition to the work of actual revision, two Declaratory Statements were adopted, one touching the doctrine of God's eternal decree, and the other touching "elect infants dying in infancy." If these declaratory statements shall be adopted by the Presbyteries, and appended to Chaps. III. and X., they will be nothing more than official interpretations—they will not modify, but only explain. The standard of doctrine, the test of orthodoxy, will be the same after the adoption of the declaratory statements that it was before.

It remains to be noted that the Confession of Faith was enlarged by the addition of two chapters—one on the Holy Spirit, and the other on the Love of God and Missions. We shall not pronounce on the merits of these chapters further than to say that they contain nothing, perhaps, to which all evangelical churches would not assent. If one were disposed to be critical, he might take exception to the massing of all the broad universal statements of the gospel, and the keeping out of the way of all qualifying statements, as is done in the chapter on the Love of God and Missions. It is in vain for those who are flying the banner of Calvinism to try to escape from the charge of believing that God is discriminating in the exercise of his saving grace.

What interests us most in these two new chapters is the simple fact that they make a long creed longer. If we have followed intelligently the agitation for revision, there has been an insistent demand on the part of the most earnest agitators for a shorter creed. Some have taught that the Apostles' Creed would be sufficient; others that the Shorter Catechism would answer all practical purposes. "Let us have a short, workable creed, something that everybody can understand, and that busy people will have time to get acquainted with." It seems that the outcome of the agitation will be to fasten on the church the same old burden with six per cent. additional matter.

The Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith is a fine piece of work. It consists of sixteen articles, embracing all the fundamental doctrines of evangelical Christendom, together with the distinctive doctrines essential to the Calvinistic system. Its phraseology is borrowed very largely from the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms; but it was selected under the guidance of an irenic, rather than a polemic spirit, and for a conciliative, rather than a defensive purpose. The phraseology has been carefully winnowed of those

somewhat forbidding terms which were used by the Westminster divines to draw the boundary line between truth and opposing error. The Brief Statement gives us a fairly good map of the territory covered by the great doctrines of our faith, but around the frontiers of this territory no fortresses have been erected, nor loud-mouthed cannon placed. Nothing is suffered to appear suggestive of enemies to be repelled. It assumes that there are no enemies, and that the way to prevent hostility is to uncover no weapons of warfare.

It is a fine piece of work, but confessedly a compromise, which means, we suppose, that it is not as clear-cut as some would have preferred, nor as vague as others wished. It commits itself to a definite Calvinism, but it leaves the limits hazy. In Art. X., for example, it comes perilously near to expressing the doctrine of "common sufficient grace," and this may account for the refusal of Dr. De Witt to give that the sanction of his name.

It was not our purpose to indulge in unfriendly criticism of the work done by the able committee on revision. We do not see how they could have done better, and they are entitled to the gratitude of the lovers of truth for having done so well. If their work shall be approved by the Presbyteries, and shall serve to put a quietus on the doctrinal ferment in the church, we shall greatly rejoice. We shall indulge in no prophecies, but try to hope for the best.

The Northern Assembly is an impressive body, and its methods contrast most favorably, in some respects, with the Southern Assembly. There is very little discussion of subordinate matters, and ample time is given to all the causes of Christian beneficence. The Boards which have the administration of these causes in their hands are ably represented, and the Assembly accords them not merely a patient, but a sympathetic hearing. Few points of order are raised, no red tape is permitted to tangle and obstruct the business. Discussion and deliberation are the work of committees, and all matters worthy of attention are, by these, faithfully and fully considered. When they make their report, the house assumes that little, if any, more light can be thrown on the subject, and is impatient of debate. To one accustomed to the almost interminable wrangles over little technicalities of law, or points of order, which so often lock the wheels of progress in the business of the Southern Assembly, the more expeditious methods of the Northern Assembly are a matter of admiration and delight. The Assembly gave a good part of two days to the special celebration of Home Missions; it gave unlimited time to the other Boards for the presentation of the interests with

which they were entrusted; it accepted six invitations to receptions, social functions and excursions; it accorded a decent hearing to a long list of delegates from other churches; it wrestled with, and disposed of, the great matter of confessional revision; transacted without undue haste all the ordinary routine business, and could have finished up and adjourned on Saturday night, at the end of the ninth day. It held over till Monday because it had arranged for an excursion up the Hudson on Monday afternoon, and had to have an excuse for remaining over that long. As an interested, but impartial spectator of their proceedings, we had the conviction borne in on us that the Northern General Assembly represents as large an aggregate of brain power, of scholarship, of effective oratory, and of aggressive piety as can be brought together by any branch of Christ's church on the American continent.

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R. C. REED.