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THE

PRESBYTERIAN QUARTERLY.

NO. 39.—JANUARY, 1897.

I. REGENERATION, REAL, NOT FIGURATIVE.

THERE are doubtless those who think that in a discussion of regeneration nothing new can be said that is true, and nothing true that is new. However this may be, it is certain that opinions differ widely, and that much confusion prevails. It is not our purpose to review the variant and widely diverse opinions which are held on this subject. That were a profitless task. We propose to study the subject anew from the standpoint of the Scriptures, and to compare the conclusion reached with the view generally accepted as orthodox. What is that view?

A very few years ago a report was made to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., by a committee appointed to revise *The Confession*. In that report the following words were found: "The act of regeneration wherein being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit he is enabled to answer God's call and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it." Had this been approved, new matter would have been added to *The Confession*. This report teaches that the act of regeneration enables the subject to believe on Christ. That this is the commonly accepted view a few citations from Doctors R. L. Dabney and A. A. Hodge may be allowed to show. Dr. Dabney in his *Syllabus and Notes* (Student's Edition, Part II., p. 85) says under the caption "Regeneration properly defined," "we prove that regeneration is not a mere change of human purpose, occurring in view of motive; but a supernatural renovation of the dispositions which determine the moral purpose and of the understanding, in the apprehension of moral and spiritual truth." Says Dr. A. A. Hodge in his *Outlines*: "In the new creation God

VIII. THE VROOMAN CASE.

ON the 6th of last April Rev. F. B. Vrooman appeared before the Presbytery of Chicago, presented credentials from the Salem-street Congregational Church, Worcester, Mass., and asked to be admitted to membership in the presbytery. His motive was not a deliberate preference of Presbyterianism over Congregationalism. He had received a call from the Kenwood Church, Chicago, and for the sake of accepting this call he was willing to change his denominational label. He evidently looked upon the step which he proposed to take as involving nothing more than a change of name.

The presbytery proceeded to the usual examination preliminary to enrolling his name. It soon became apparent that he had not thought it necessary to acquaint himself with the doctrines of the Presbyterian Church. His tastes did not lie in the direction of dogmatic theology, and a knowledge of this science was not deemed of sufficient importance to make it worth while to cross his taste. His answers to the questions put by the examining committee were of such an unusual and startling nature as to suggest that he had never had any idea of subscribing to the *Confession of Faith*. When some one asked if he had counted on subscribing to the *Confession*, he replied, "when I came here, I did not expect to find a rational being who believed in every article of the *Confession of Faith*." This terminated the examination. Mr. Vrooman was asked to retire while the presbytery considered his case. Some thought the examination was satisfactory, and were willing on the basis of it to entrust him with the honor of the Presbyterian name, and the interests of the Kenwood Church. Others thought that it would be more consistent with the traditional policy of the church to require a man seeking admission to the ranks of the Presbyterian ministry to know something about the *Confession*, and to have some respect for its teachings. In deference to their views, another meeting was appointed for April 13th,

and Mr. Vrooman was given a week in which "to read the *Confession* and see whether or not he could subscribe thereto."

At the meeting on the 13th of April the examination was resumed. It then developed that the applicant for admission to the presbytery, instead of preparing for an examination on the *Confession*, had prepared a statement of his views, which he read to presbytery. His paper was well written, contained many beautiful, and some pious sentiments, but did not reveal very clearly his attitude toward the church's historic standards. As might have been expected, the brethren who were ready to admit him on the ground that "he did not expect to find any rational being who believed in every article of the *Confession of Faith*" were in haste to admit him on this statement. But there were some brethren so unreasonable as to insist that an applicant's orthodoxy should be measured by the church's creed, and not by his own individual creed. So they asserted their right to catechise, and very easily made it appear that a week's time for deliberation had not brought Mr. Vrooman into any closer agreement with the standards than he was at first. But, despite this fact, a motion to admit him was carried by a vote of sixty-nine to twenty-nine. The minority, however, were not to be driven from the field. They rightly judged that the matter was sufficiently grave to warrant a complaint to the Synod of Illinois. They filed their complaint in due form, and assigned the following reasons:

First. That in the aforesaid examination before the said presbytery he failed to present satisfactory views concerning the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ, contrary to the teachings of the standards of the Presbyterian Church. They offer as proof of his want of harmony with the standards the following answers, which he gave in his examination:

"His offering was vicarious, but in no sense has he taken the punishment, because we bear the punishment to-day, and we always will, for our sins, and I do not believe the time will ever come in the universe when we won't be ashamed of the sin we have committed, and that will be a punishment for us." In answer to the question, "Will you explain those passages where it is declared that we have redemption through his blood, where it is declared that he is the propitiation for our sins?" he said: "I am free to say, brother, that so far as the idea of an angry God requiring blood to be satisfied, that whole idea I reject absolutely." On being further questioned touching those, and like passages of Scripture, he said: "I like the word which the Revised Version substitutes for it (atonement), reconciliation. And I have taken pains to look at every shade of meaning that I have been able

to find in the ecclesiastic, or in the New Testament Greek, to find an idea to help me in this matter, and I do not find one but will show me that reconciliation is always reconciling man to God, and not God to man."

Second. That in his statement and examination he denied in effect the justification of the believer by the imputed righteousness of Christ, thereby contravening the teaching of Scripture as interpreted in the *Confession of Faith*. To prove this second charge, an extract is submitted from Mr. Vrooman's written statement which he read before the presbytery, as follows: "To be more specific about some particular doctrinal points, I believe God is the creator of all things, and is, therefore, the universal and absolute sovereign; that he rules in wisdom, truth, justice, and love; that there is nothing good in man but what was first in God, and that all men are righteous in so far as they confess a calling from God, and yield to it; that all false religion proceeds from the notion that man is to make his way up to God by certain acts, or by a certain faith of his, instead of receiving God's witness of himself and yielding to his government." They also submitted in confirmation of this charge an extract from his examination:

QUESTION. "In what sense do you regard Christ's righteousness as instrumental in salvation?" ANSWER. "I think that he imparts it."

QUEST. "Is it imputed to man for his credit?" ANS. "Do you mean that a man—that a tag is put on a man whether he is righteous or not?"

QUEST. "I would not put it that way." ANS. "Well, that is the idea."

QUEST. "You were asked a moment ago the difference between justification and sanctification, and you began to tell us what justification was. Now, you have not answered the question as to sanctification." ANS. "I do not know the difference between the two."

Third. That in the said statement and said examination of the said Vrooman, he denied the everlasting punishment of the ungodly, thereby contravening the doctrine of Scripture as taught in the *Confession of Faith*. *Proof:* Extract from written statement, "I do not see how a man can be out of torment while in sin, for sin is hell, and hell is sin. Just how long sin will exist in a world which is God's, which he made and controls in love and wisdom, I do not pretend to know."

Extract from examination:

QUEST. "Do you believe in the possible eternity of sin?" ANS. "I do not believe in the eternity of sin. I do not know but what it might be eternal."

QUEST. "Do you believe that any are ceaselessly and endlessly punished?" ANS. "No sir; I do not."

QUEST. "Do you believe in the future repentance and restoration of the wicked after death?" ANS. "I cannot say that I do, sir. If there is anything which relieves my mind of the possibility of everlasting and endless torment, it would be that death is simply death."

QUEST. "Annihilation?" ANS. "I cannot say that I believe in that. I do not know what I believe in in that regard."

Fourth. Because in said statement and examination said Vrooman did not sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* of the said church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures, without equivocation, evasion or mental reservations, as required in Chapter xv., Section 12. *Proof:* Extract from written statement, "I claim the Scriptures as my open book. I deny the right of any man, or men, to introduce any infallible popery of human standards

between my open soul and my open Bible. I claim liberty of conscience and liberty of intellect as two inalienable rights which I surrender to none. Now it is for you to say whether you find here Calvinism. As herein defined and interpreted I can sign the standards. I do not know much about dogmatic theology. My studies and activities have been in other directions more congenial to my inclinations and my convictions."

Proof from responses to constitutional questions:

THE MODERATOR: "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* of this church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?"

MR. VROOMAN: "In the light of the interpretation of this morning, I do most sincerely answer, yes."

THE MODERATOR: "Give an unequivocal answer."

MR. VROOMAN: "The answer is, I do."

THE MODERATOR: "Do you approve?"

MR. VROOMAN: "Yes, sir."

(Cries of "What is the answer?" "We did not hear it." "Repeat it.")

MR. VROOMAN: "I wish to say right here —"

THE MODERATOR: "The Moderator will conduct this business. The question not having been heard, will be reread and the answer given. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* of this church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?"

MR. VROOMAN: "I do."

DR. ———: "That question was answered a moment ago, and it is only fair that I should have heard that answer, and the answer should have gone on record."

MR. VROOMAN: "Mr. Moderator, I do not want any possible doubt or hesitancy in the mind of one single brother here this morning. I do not believe in the verbal inspiration of the standards of the Presbyterian Church, but I do believe the substantial outlines as interpreted by all that I have said here to-day and a week ago to-day; I accept them wholly and without a doubt."

For the aforesaid reasons your complainants humbly pray that you reverse so much of this action of the Presbytery of Chicago as sustained his examination as satisfactory, and that the steps following thereupon, namely, his reception into this body and the arrangements for his installation as pastor of Kenwood Church, you declare null and void.

When the complaint came before the Synod of Illinois, it was referred to the Judicial Committee. The committee brought in two reports. The majority was as follows:

"In the matter of the complaint of the Rev. W. S. P. Bryan and others *vs.* the Presbytery of Chicago, the undersigned members of the Judicial Committee, to whom the said complaint was referred, would respectfully report that the right of complainants to have the complaint entertained depends upon the question of a presbytery's being the judge of the qualifications of its own members, and, believing that presbytery does possess this power, would recommend that the complaint in this cause be not entertained by the synod."

This report was signed by the chairman of the committee, Dr. John W. Pugh, Rev. T. A. Robinson, and three ruling elders,

W. B. Metcalf, C. C. Lines, and George K. Ingham. We have here an illustration of the fact that one may grow old in the ministry, and become eminent in the church, and never learn the primary lessons in parliamentary procedure. The writer recalls one of his own early exploits. He was moderating a presbytery. A motion was made calling for action which was plainly unconstitutional. The young moderator promptly ruled the motion out of order, and silently felicitated the presbytery on having one to preside over its deliberations who could guide it safely within constitutional limits. His sweet complacency was soon interrupted by one of the venerated church fathers, who informed him that it was not expected of the moderator to bear the responsibility of deciding questions of constitutional law. The young moderator's loss of self-conceit was compensated by a permanent gain of self-distrust. He has never since been appointed to a duty by a church court that he has not carefully considered, with timid caution, the limits of his prerogative. Evidently the majority of the synod's committee had never enjoyed the benefit of such salutary training. They mistook the duties of a judicial committee for those of a judicial commission. They proposed to relieve the synod of the trouble of adjudicating the matter in dispute between the complainants and defendants. If a judicial committee may pass on questions of law involved in a case, they may with equal propriety pass on the evidence submitted. But granting that they are empowered with such prerogative, no case could ever get before a court. The judicial committee would decide each case on its merits, and if they decided adversely, they would recommend to the court to throw it out; if they decided favorably, they would simply ask the court to ratify their finding.

The minority report was as follows:

"We, the undersigned members of the Judicial Committee, beg leave to present a minority report in the case of the complaint of W. S. P. Bryan and others against the Presbytery of Chicago, believing the complaint in order would recommend that it be entertained, and that the case be issued by a commission of Synod."

This report was signed by two ministers, G. A. Pollock and C. T. Phillips. They recognized that their duty was simply to

find whether or not the complaint was in order, and then recommend the best method of procedure. No matter what a committee's views about the constitutionality of a question involved in a complaint, the Presbyterian Church gives to its humblest member the right to have, not the committee of a court, but the court itself pass judgment on the question.

The parties in the case offered the following agreement as a substitute for the minority report:

"We, the respondents, agree to submit the whole question to a commission of Synod, and agree to consider their finding as completely final in consideration of a similar agreement on the part of the complainants. Both agree also that the complaint is in order in form, and that the number of the commission be twenty-five, and the commission to be appointed by the Moderator."

The majority of the Judicial Committee, upon request of its chairman, were granted leave to withdraw their report, and the agreement was adopted as a substitute for the minority report. The commission appointed under this motion organized with Rev. T. D. Logan, D. D., as moderator, and Rev. Ambrose S. Wright as clerk.

Dr. W. S. P. Bryan, in behalf of complainants, and Dr. Thomas Hall, in behalf of respondents, appeared before the commission by its request and explained that they agreed that the papers were technically correct, and that they submitted to the commission: (1), The entertainment of the complaint; (2), The method of procedure; (3), The merits of the case.

After argument on the first point by representatives of both parties in the case, the commission voted nineteen to four in favor of entertaining the complaint.

The next thing was to decide the method of procedure. Both parties agreed that the case be submitted to the commission on the printed evidence as substantially accurate except in regard to specification fourth, in reference to the adoption of the standards, concerning which the respondents were permitted to present evidence as to impressions made upon them by Mr. Vrooman. The evidence which they introduced was a written statement signed by Thomas C. Hall and C. A. Lippencott:

"We hereby solemnly aver as our best knowledge and belief concerning the allegation of a qualified acceptance of the standards, that the last paragraph of the

evidence must be inserted in or about the third line, and that there is omitted a solemn repetition by the Moderator of the constitutional questions, and amidst a great stillness there was given an unqualified assent."

Supposing this to be a correct version of what took place, it only strengthens the case of the complainants. For Mr. Vrooman to give an unqualified assent to the standards, after having contravened their teachings on several of the fundamental doctrines, could hardly inspire confidence in his soundness in the faith, but must inspire distrust of his perfect moral honesty. One member of the presbytery said that "he would rather cut off his right hand than subscribe to the *Confession of Faith* after making such a statement as that of Mr. Vrooman." We are not surprised that he should have said this if Mr. Vrooman subscribed with an unqualified assent. One of the most interesting points suggested by this trial is the meaning of the question, "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?" We hear constantly about two classes, those who hold to a strict construction of this language, and those who construe it loosely. Is it not in order to suggest that the only honest construction to put on language is that which permits it to speak for itself? If it says a certain thing, it should be taken for granted that it was designed to say that thing. Putting this construction on the aforesaid question, it means, do you accept the Calvinistic system of doctrine as the system taught in Scripture? Do you accept sincerely, without qualification or mental reservation, all the doctrines which constitute that system? There can be no doubt in a candid mind that this is what is involved in the question, and when one answers, "I do," to this question, there ought to be no doubt that he is a Calvinist pure and simple. The writer once asked a minister in the Episcopal Church (now a bishop), how one holding Arminian views could subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles? He said, "Our subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles is not understood to bind the conscience." When a man has adopted a principle of casuistry that will permit him without a twinge of conscience to say one thing and mean the opposite, is he not in training for successful competition with Ananias and Sapphira his

wife? What shall we say of a performance which goes under the name of religion, in which one party asks a question and another answers it, and both parties understand that conscience plays no part? The performance is merely paying respect to traditional ritual, and question and answer are to be understood in a Pickwickian sense.

It is to be noticed, however, that Mr. Vrooman diverges from the Calvinistic system, not only at the points where that system differs from other schools of theology, but at those vital points in which all evangelical churches agree. Take from the *Confession of Faith* the doctrines of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice, the imputation of Christ's righteousness, and the endlessness of the punishment of sin, and you leave no system of doctrine; not only is the integrity of the Calvinistic system impaired, but the very keystone in the arch of evangelical truth is knocked out, and the whole structure tumbles into ruin.

On the merits of the case, one and a quarter hours were allotted to each party. At the conclusion of the arguments, the commission went into private session for deliberation, the result of which was to sustain the complaint by a vote of fifteen to eight. The judgment of the commission reported to synod to be spread on its minutes as the final judgment in the case was as follows:

"In the case of the complaint of Rev. W. S. P. Bryan, D. D., and others against the action of the Chicago Presbytery in receiving the Rev. Frank B. Vrooman on presentation of a letter from a Congregational Church, and his examination in reference to his doctrinal views submitted to a commission of the Synod of Illinois, the said commission recognizes the due care recognized by the presbytery in Mr. Vrooman's examination, and the honesty of the majority who voted to sustain that examination; nevertheless, without impugning the loyalty of that presbytery to the accepted doctrines of our church, we judge that the evidence presented to us proves plainly that Mr. Vrooman expresses his belief in language too sharply conflicting with our doctrinal standards to entitle him to admission to our ministry, and that the presbytery erred in receiving him.

"We, therefore, direct the said Presbytery of Chicago to reconsider and reverse its action on the question of sustaining the examination of said Rev. Frank B. Vrooman, and to return him his credentials."

This result gives pleasure to all those who are interested in the preservation of the Westminster Standards. Had synod given its sanction to the proceedings of Chicago Presbytery, it would have

added the weight of its authority to sink out of sight these standards as the test of orthodoxy and as the safeguard of truth. Emphasis is given to the decision of synod by the following considerations:

1. Rev. F. B. Vrooman is a man of parts and power. He is not the kind of man that a church can bar from its ministry without a pang of regret. For a young man, his culture is broad and varied, his tastes are literary, his thought fresh and vigorous, his style polished and attractive, and his influence over his audience most marked.

2. The church that asked for him as pastor is an influential church. While young, it contains wealth and social position, and is capable of speaking with a voice that cannot be lightly disregarded. It threatened to go into independency rather than suffer its pastor to be taken from it.

3. The sixty-nine members of the Chicago Presbytery who voted to receive Mr. Vrooman were men of prominence. To demand of them that they should reverse their action was to put on them an unpleasant task. The commission did all it could by sweet and gracious language to so sugar-coat the rebuke as to make it palatable, but it was too bitter to be disguised. It could not be swallowed without a wry face.

4. The thing complained of was a thing already done, and time enough had elapsed for excited feelings to abate. In such case, there is a strong temptation to leave things in *statu quo*, even though the judgment might wish them otherwise. "He that meddleth with strife is like one that taketh a dog by the ears." Sensible and peaceable men do not fancy taking a dog by the ears, especially an ecclesiastical dog.

All these considerations favored the defendants and give additional weight to the adverse decisions of synod. Two things favored the cause of the complainants, and account for their victory:

1. The ability and thoroughness of their prosecution. Dr. Bryan and his coadjutors left nothing to the hap-hazard of the occasion. They trusted not to any impromptu work, nor did they rely upon memory to recall on the spur of the moment such con-

siderations as the exigencies of the case might demand. They carried up to synod a printed brief, containing (1), A history of the case; (2), The complaint, with the grounds and the proof; (3), A statement of facts showing the complaint to be in order; (4), Reasons for proceeding to trial; (5), An elaborate argument on the jurisdiction of synod; (6), An exposition of the method of procedure, and (7), Twenty pages of compact and exhaustive argument on the merits of the case. The whole brief covers forty pages, and suggests the irony which every child recognizes in the title of our "*Shorter*" *Catechism*. The complainants looked at the case, with keen eyes, from every conceivable point of view, and were prepared to place it before synod with all its intricacies laid bare. They had won their case before synod met. *The Michigan Presbyterian* describes the situation happily: "It was like General Grant's seige of Vicksburg, everything slowly, deliberately, but invincibly concentrated upon a certain point, which made final surrender as inevitable as a logical syllogism."

2. The one other consideration that helped the complainants to win their case was the honest adherence of the synod, as a body, to those venerable confessional documents on which the denominational structure of Presbyterianism rests. We are constantly informed, by pulpit, press and platform, that our progressive age is not standing still in theology; that the churches are outgrowing their creeds and leaving them behind; that the nineteenth century cannot be anchored to the seventeenth century. There are some of us who exult whenever such information is discredited by facts. We rejoice when we see a great church paying homage still to that "form of sound words" which braced the hearts of a martyr ancestry. We rejoice that others beside ourselves believe that all true progress in theology is a progress backward. The goal of highest possible attainment was reached when the Apostle John said, "Even so come, Lord Jesus," and laid down his pen. Nothing is left to the church but to study the book, and to formulate its teachings into a logical system.

It is not a violent presumption to suppose that sixteen hundred years allows time enough for the great and good of successive

generations to cull out and put in proper relation the leading doctrines of the book. We do not, therefore, offer any apology for regarding with profound veneration the Westminster Standards, especially since the ripest scholarship and devoutest piety of the intervening two hundred years have compared them carefully, over and over again, with the inspired oracles, and pronounced the harmony perfect. We agree with Mr. Vrooman in that we "do not believe in the verbal inspiration of the standards of the Presbyterian Church"; we differ with him in that we believe they are far more nearly in accord with inspiration than his divergencies are. But let the standards of the church be what they may in respect of their conformity with the word of God, it is perfectly evident that they cease to be standards when the church ceases to use them as the measure of orthodoxy for her teachers. Let not the church go through the farce of demanding subscription to them, if she is going to admit one who subscribes to the ranks of her ministry on the ground of his own private creed. Let her not have it understood that subscription does not bind the conscience, but leaves the subscriber free to hold and teach doctrines fundamentally hostile. Above all things, the church should be honest, and should demand honesty. There are plenty of pulpits and platforms in other communions for those who cannot subscribe *ex animo* to each and all the doctrines which together make up the system contained in her standards.

R. C. REED.

Nashville, Tenn.