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The United Synod

AND THE

STATE OF THE COUNTRY.

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THE  
POSITION, RELATIONS AND PROSPECTS  
OF THE  
UNITED SYNOD:

IN REFERENCE TO THE

Moral Issues Involved in the Present War.

Adopted by the Synod of Virginia, October 25th, 1862.

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## PREFATORY NOTE.

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The following report was adopted by the Synod of Virginia during its sessions in October, 1862, and published soon after, and extensively circulated in the "Christian Observer" and the political papers of this city. At the reading of the Minutes at the opening of the meeting of Synod in 1863, a desire was expressed that this paper, on account of its historical interest, should be issued in a form convenient for its preservation. The Synod, therefore, ordered its publication in pamphlet.

*Richmond, Dec. 11th, 1863.*

## POSITION, RELATIONS AND PROSPECTS OF THE UNITED SYNOD.

*Report of the Committee appointed to prepare a paper upon  
“The Position, Relations and Prospects of our branch of  
the Church, etc., in reference to the moral issues involved in  
the present war.”*

The *organization* of the UNITED SYNOD—with which the Presbyteries constituting the Synod of Virginia are connected, and by which this branch of the Presbyterian Church assumed its *position* in the South—was felt by many, at the time of its consummation, to be in itself a fact of much importance, and significant of other possible, if not probable, divisions and new combinations, in ecclesiastical and political relations.

This organization was initiated by a representative Convention of Churches in the Southern States, held in the city of Richmond in August, 1857, and perfected by Commissioners from the Presbyteries, at a meeting held in Knoxville, Tenn., in April, 1858.

The reasons for *this organization* were, in brief, the *invasions upon our rights of conscience, and the violation of the Constitution and Form of Government* under which we had for years been associated with Northern Churches, in the General Assembly of the United States.

On various occasions, prior to the year 1850, the Commissioners from our Southern Presbyteries had protested solemnly and distinctly against these invasions and violations, and we were pained to find that these protests were disregarded, and that our conscientious convictions and feelings were treated with increasing disrespect.

In 1856, the Southern delegates to the General Assembly, held in New York, issued from that city, a *circular letter* to our churches, apprising them of the condition of things, as it was then apprehended, with such suggestions as were deemed prudent, with a view to preserve unity of sentiment and harmony of action among them in anticipation of a crisis which might demand a separation from that Assembly.

In May, 1857, our delegates to the General Assembly, at Cleveland, Ohio, felt themselves constrained, for truth and conscience sake, to withdraw together from that body, and to recommend the Convention which was held in the United Presbyterian Church, in Richmond, in August following. The *doings of that Convention*, and of the *United Synod*, which was formally organized at Knoxville, in 1858, are matters of record and history, which are worthy of present notice. There were thinking men who, then, regarded *those doings* as, in a sense, *prophetic*; and those who now review them will not fail to discover some striking parallels and realizations in the developments and events now transpiring in ecclesiastical and political affairs.

The following extracts from the published minutes of the Convention and United Synod, referred to, may here be appropriately introduced.

In the RICHMOND CONVENTION, after full and free discussion, the following preamble and resolutions were unanimously adopted:

WHEREAS, all acts, resolutions and testimonies of past General Assemblies, and especially the action of the last General Assembly, whereby suspicions and doubts of the good standing and equal rights and privileges of slaveholding members of the Church, or imputations or charges against their Christian character, have been either implied or expressed, are contrary to the example and teachings of Christ and his Apostles, and are a violation of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church:

And, whereas, the relation of master and servant, *in itself considered*, or further than the relative duties arising therefrom, and

slavery, as an institution of the State, do not properly belong to the Church judicatories as subjects for discussion and inquiry :

And, whereas, in the judgment of this Convention, there is no prospect of the cessation of this agitation of slavery in the General Assembly so long as there are slaveholders in connection with the Church : therefore,

1. Resolved, That we recommend to the Presbyteries in connection with the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, to withdraw from said body.

2. Resolved, That in the judgment of this Convention, nothing can be made the basis for discipline in the Presbyterian Church which is not specifically referred to in the Constitution, as crime or heresy.

3. Resolved, That the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church have no power to pronounce a sentence of condemnation on a lower judicatory or individuals for any cause, unless they have been brought before the Assembly in the way prescribed by the Constitution.

4. Resolved, That the Convention recommend to all the Presbyteries in the Presbyterian Church, which are opposed to the agitation of slavery in the highest judicatory of the Church, to appoint delegates, in the proportion prescribed by our Form of Government for the appointment of Commissioners to the Assembly, to meet at Knoxville, Tenn., on the FIRST THURSDAY IN APRIL, 1858, for the purpose of organizing a general Synod under the name of "The United Synod of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America."

5. Resolved, That the members of this Convention adhere to and abide by the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures; and that we adhere to the Form of Government and Book of Discipline of said Church.

In the UNITED SYNOD, as first regularly organized, at Knoxville, a "DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES" was unanimously adopted, from which the following extracts are taken :

WHEREAS, In the Providence of God, we, the representatives of Presbyteries heretofore in connection with the General Assembly of

the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, have been constrained by a regard to our convictions of duty to ourselves, to the Church of Christ, and to our entire country, to withdraw from said General Assembly, and to form a separate ecclesiastical judicatory, under the name of "The United Synod of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America," to be possessed of powers similar to those recognized in the Confession of Faith, as belonging to the General Assembly: and whereas, it seems to be necessary, in order to avoid misapprehensions of our position, both now and hereafter, that we should place upon permanent record, a statement of the principles which have governed us in forming a separate organization; therefore,

Resolved, That this "United Synod" make the following DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES, as, in their judgment, in accordance with the Word of God, and the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, and as essential to the peace, unity and permanent prosperity of the Presbyterian Church in this land.

1. We declare our agreement in, and approbation of, the Westminster Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures; and also our adherence to the Form of Government and Book of Discipline of the Presbyterian Church in these United States.

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2. It is a fundamental principle of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, that no judicatory, or minister, or private member, can be censured or condemned, or excluded from church privileges, by any court of the church, for doctrinal sentiments expressed, or for practices that the court may regard as sinful and inconsistent with the requirements of the Confession of Faith, without a process of trial, such as is prescribed in said Constitution. \* \* \*

3. According to the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, the General Assembly is an advisory and judicial body. It possesses no legislative power in the proper acceptation of the term. It cannot enact laws that are binding upon the lower judicatories. The Constitution expressly provides that all ecclesiastical rules or changes in the Constitution shall receive the approval of a majority of the Presbyteries before they can be obligatory upon the churches. This "United



Synod," therefore, disclaims the right to legislate, or to make laws upon any subject that will be binding upon the lower judicatories, or upon any portion of the Presbyterian Church. \* \* \*

The Westminster Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, contains what we believe to be essential to truth and morality. Presbyterians profess to be governed by CONSTITUTIONAL LAW as it is developed in the Confession of Faith, and not by the opinions of a Session, or Presbytery, or Synod, or General Assembly, further than they act in a judicial capacity with respect to matters distinctly referred to in said Confession. A departure from this principle, and a recognition of the right of an ecclesiastical judicatory to decide what is heresy or crime, when there is no allusion in the Confession of Faith to that which is so regarded, would be tantamount to making the judicatory, instead of the Confession of Faith, the standard of truth and morality, and as the decision of one judicatory cannot bind another, there might be as many different opinions in reference to the supposed heresy or crime, as there are judicatories in the Church. This "United Synod," therefore, deny the right of any judicatory of the Presbyterian Church to make anything a subject of discipline, which, according to the usual mode of interpreting language, and the manifest intent of the framers of the Confession, is not SPECIFICALLY referred to in the Constitution of the Church.

6. As slaveholding, or the relation between master and slave, is not referred to in the Confession of Faith, either directly or indirectly, as an offence, it cannot, IN ITSELF CONSIDERED, in any case, be made the basis of discipline in the Presbyterian Church. At the same time, we declare the right of the Church Courts to take cognizance, in their judicial capacity, of cruelties practiced in this and other relations in life. The Confession of Faith gives to Church judicatories the power to discipline members of the Church for cruelties, whether they occur in the parental or any other relation, implied, in the language of the Confession, "superiors and inferiors."

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8. Inasmuch as neither the Saviour nor his Apostles intimated that the slaveholding relation was sinful, and as they did not attempt to remove slaveholders from the church by legislation or by testifying against it; and further, as the system of slavery is an institution of the State, its continuance or abolition depending entirely upon the

will of the State, irrespective of the views and decisions of church courts, it is the opinion of this Synod that the discussion or agitation of slavery in the judicatories of the Church, except so far as respects the moral and religious duties growing out of the relation of master and slave, is inappropriate to said judicatories. This Synod representing Presbyteries that have withdrawn from their former ecclesiastical connection, because of the repeated and unconstitutional action on slavery by the General Assembly, therefore declares, that, under the present Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, the agitation of slavery in any of our judicatories, further than pertains to the moral and religious duties arising from the relation, would be inconsistent with the design of our withdrawal from our former connection, and in forming a separate organization. Whilst, then, we propose no alteration of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, believing that as it now stands the spirit of it is against the agitation of slaveholding in the Church, we express the opinion that those who unite with us, or who may come after us, will be under a moral obligation, so long as the Constitution remains as it is, to exclude slavery, the agitation of which has already divided three large denominations in this country, as a subject of discussion, from the Church Courts.

From this rehearsal it will appear that our act of secession from the Northern Assembly and the process of new organization were in advance, and not in the wake of political dissolution and military coercion. The *position* assumed and made public in 1857-'8, by a formal and solemn act of withdrawal from our Northern Connections and a formal and solemn act of organization and utterance of principles, is our position still, in which we have enjoyed peace among ourselves and some good measure of prosperity under God's blessing upon our efforts to preach the Gospel and preserve a pure christianity in our churches. The developments of the last four years—the fanaticism and sectionalism at the North, the grasp for power and its centralization, in violation of express constitutional principles and limitations, and the purpose to *coerce* compliance with the decisions of arbitrary majorities, in *political* as well as in

*ecclesiastical* affairs—these developments would seem abundantly to justify the *position* taken and resolutely maintained by our branch of the church, and to prove that it was not taken too soon, or too firmly maintained.

Our *relation* to the *moral issues* involved in the present war are obvious. Prominent among *these issues* are: 1st. The “*Higher Law*” doctrines, proclaimed and insisted upon by our calumniators and persecutors, before which written constitutions, both in Church and State, have been openly violated; and 2d. The *coercive policy*, by which conscientious and legal rights are invaded and despoiled, without appeal or redress, thus making separation and self-government the only possible alternative. In opposition to *these* cardinal errors, and assumptions of power, our Presbyteries then acted, as the Southern States have since done, in the assertion of independence, and in the establishment of a Government upon the basis of *affinity* and *consent*. Our testimony, by *protest*, by *patience*, whilst *patience* was a virtue, and by solemn assertion of our principles, rights and freedom to worship God after the dictates of our own judgment and conscience, so far as human authority is concerned, very plainly exhibits our relation to these and kindred other moral issues involved in *this* war—between the Confederate States of America and Mr. Lincoln’s government—and our hearty sympathy with these States in their present struggle for independence.

Our *prospects* are, to us, hopeful. God has not left us without some decided and encouraging tokens of His gracious recognition as a Church, in the comforts of the Gospel to believers, and in the power of His Spirit, by which the preaching of the Word and other Christian efforts have been made effectual to the salvation of sinners. We have reason to hope and believe that the conviction is a growing one in the minds of candid and observing people, generally, that the stand which we have been called, in the Providence of God, to take, the testimony which we have borne, and the sacrifices endured in the defence of the Constitutional principles of the Presby-

terian Church—of its old doctrines and paths, and of our civil rights—have been of use to the cause of religion and the interests of society at large in this part of the land.

We have churches to care for and nourish, and open fields to occupy in the service of Christ and of souls. The Providence of God seems plainly to say to us, *Go forward!*

We see a *great work* to be prosecuted in this Confederacy by the various Evangelical Churches. We desire to take part in this work, co-operating, so far as we may, with sister churches, wishing them God-speed and enlarging success in their efforts to honor the Saviour; praying that *all Christians* may, by a growing conformity and resemblance to Jesus Christ, become daily more and more like each other in all the essentials of doctrine and piety; so that, if they shall continue to move and act in different spheres, as organized bodies, their spheres, and lives, and efforts to glorify God and do good to men shall be harmonious.

In grateful recognition of Divine Mercy in the past, and commending our cause to God, this Synod would here, and now, set up a Stone of Memorial, for hitherto hath the Lord helped us. We would extend to the several Synods, Presbyteries, Churches, and private members of our body, and to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ, our salutation in the blessed bonds, labors and hopes of the Gospel.

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