

THE PRESBYTERIAN AND REFORMED REVIEW

No. 3—July, 1890.

I.

RECENT DISCUSSION IN MATERIALISM.

THESE are phases of contemporary materialism which have little in common with the doctrines of ancient and mediæval materialists, and which in point of subtlety and philosophical attractiveness are quite in accord with the advanced position of nineteenth century thought. The idealist of to-day flatters himself that he avoids the inconsistencies of Berkeley and Fichte, so the materialist smiles at the mention of Priestly, D'Alembert, and Holbach. But these growths respectively in idealistic and materialistic thought have not been parallel. Idealism has tended in the last thirty years to withdraw its gaze from the thought-ultimate as a monistic conception, to perception as a dualistic relation, that is from cosmic to psychological idealism; while materialism has tended in quite the opposite direction, *i. e.*, from the crude postulate of matter in bulk to the search for an ultimate materialistic principle, that is from psychological to cosmic materialism. Each has strengthened its flank and the battle is now joined between psychological idealism and metaphysical materialism.

Spiritualism has gained vastly by this change of base. As long as the ontology of spirit rested upon a dogmatic assertion of universal mind, there was no weapon at hand wherewith to attack the corresponding assertion of universal matter. I have as good right to assert an universal as you have and *chacun à son goût* is the rule of choice. But now that philosophy is learning to value a single fact more than a detailed system, and is sacrificing its systems to the vindication of facts, it is spiritualism and not materialism which is profiting by the advances of science. Materialism has appealed to the metaphysics of force, spiritualism has appealed to consciousness

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

THE One Hundred and Second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church was a notable meeting. It was notable for the large amount of important business which came before it, and for the skillful rather than hasty rapidity with which it was dispatched. It was more notable still for the high plane on which its discussions moved, and the earnest regard which it paid to all the interests which came before it. It was most notable of all for the fraternal spirit in which matters on which opinion was divided and concerning which feeling was aroused, were debated and issued. Where strife had been feared, a spirit of mutual concession rather ruled; and the Assembly was able to present to the world a spectacle of Christian brethren sitting down together to discuss their differences, without acrimony and in an evident desire to yield to one another all preferences, the yielding of which did not involve treason to principle. The detailed proceedings of the Assembly have already been for some weeks before the Church, in the reports published in the weekly papers. It will not be necessary to recite them here anew. Some of the most important measures inaugurated have been intrusted to committees, as, for instance, the attempt to revise the *Confession of Faith*, and the initiation of correspondence with sister Reformed bodies looking towards the framing of a "Consensus Creed," as a visible sign of our unity in the faith. Others, scarcely less important—such as the reports of the committees on the increase of the ministry and unemployed ministers—have been passed over to the next Assembly. But the Presbyteries are apt to discover that a very onerous and difficult year's work has been committed to them. Not only are they asked to discuss and determine upon the proposed additional chapter to the *Form of Government*, defining the methods to be pursued in amending our Constitution and doctrinal formularies; but also to advise the next Assembly upon the whole subject of ministerial supply and the means of bringing vacant churches and unemployed ministers together; and to give formal ecclesiastical recognition and direction to woman's work in the Church by the reconstitution of the office of deaconess.

The matter which aroused the most intense interest, both in the Assembly and out of it, was naturally the proposed revision of the *Confession of Faith*. The great unwisdom of the Assembly of 1889 in sending down its sweeping overture—an unwisdom which was early demonstrated by the opportunity taken under it by some who, while in the Presbyterian Church are not of it, to attack the very citadel of our creed—has been, it is hoped, largely neutralized by the wisdom of the Assembly of 1890 in proceeding to attempt the desired revision under a safe-guard which confines it within the limits of "the Reformed or Calvinistic system of doctrine taught in the *Confession of Faith*." No other course, indeed, was open to the Assembly. One hundred

and thirty-four Presbyteries had expressed their wish for some revision: and no one of those who wish no revision has ever doubted the right of the Church to amend or even recast her subordinate standards whenever to her wisdom it shall seem desirable, or was inclined to throw unnecessary obstacles in the way. But, on the other hand, not only had sixty-eight Presbyteries expressed themselves as entirely satisfied with the *Confession* as it now is, but sixty-nine others were formally reported as insisting that no changes should be made which would impair the integrity of the system of doctrine taught therein; and it was made known on the floor that many more had intended to make or thought they had made the same requisition. If then a large majority of the Presbyteries desired revision of the *Confession*, the overwhelming majority demanded that there should be no revision of the truth taught in the *Confession*. In these circumstances, the way was open to a conclusion in which harmony could be attained: and under the able and magnanimous leading of President Patton, in a speech of singular candor and power, delivered at the very opening of the discussion, the Assembly happily found it. The large and representative committee which has been appointed to formulate and report to the Assembly of 1891 "such alterations and amendments to the *Confession of Faith*," as do not "in any way impair the integrity of the Reformed or Calvinistic system of doctrine taught in the *Confession of Faith*," but "in their judgment may be deemed desirable," will be able to address themselves to their difficult task with the consciousness that they have the hearts and hopes of the whole Church behind them. Those who have desired that certain changes shall be made in the mode of stating the truths brought to expression in the *Confession*, have warmly and unmistakably testified to their undiminished devotion to the whole content of the Calvinistic system taught in it, while the loyalty of those who have opposed revision is to the truth formulated and not to the mere mode of its formulation. The Presbyterian Church may congratulate herself that out of a cloud that seemed to be lowering upon her doctrinal horizon, she has made opportunity rather to announce anew (to use the eloquent language of Dr. Patton's speech) "her unalterable devotion to that system of truth which has been the inspiration of her life, in the proclamation of which she has grown so great, and which has been her watchword on many a hotly contested field of theological battle."

The way to the satisfactory disposal of the revision question was undoubtedly prepared by the discussion and settlement with almost entire unanimity, of the even more important matter of the proper methods of effecting changes in the *Confession of Faith* and the Constitution of the Church. This came before the Assembly through a very able report of a committee appointed as long ago as 1887. The debate that arose about it was a remarkably illuminating one. There have long existed in the Church serious differences of opinion as to the constitutional methods of effecting amendments in the various documents

which together make up our doctrinal and formal Constitution. They can scarcely survive the light cast on the whole matter by this searching debate. Probably never before have the whole history and effect of the creation of the Assembly in 1788-1789 been so fully investigated or so lucidly expounded. What has seemed dark or bungling in that work is now clear and seen to be straightforward. The salient points in the history are the following: The *Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms* were adopted by the Synod of 1729, and only amended in 1788. The Adopting Act of 1788, therefore, was primarily the adoption only of the other portions of the Constitution, and only the reaffirmation of the binding authority of the doctrinal standards as now amended. The preparation and adopting of these formularies as the Constitution of the Church was part of the very cautious preparation of the Synod for constituting the Assembly. It must be remembered that the Synod claimed and exercised plenary legislative functions, in virtue of which it imposed this Constitution on the Church. But it did not transmit these functions unlimited, to the Assembly which it created as its successor, but carefully guarded the Church against hasty legislation by that merely representative body by so distributing the legislative power between the new Assembly and the Presbyteries that neither could legislate apart from the other. Accordingly, it embodied in the *Form of Government* a "Barrier Act," taken almost bodily from Pardoan, which provided that even "Standing Rules" could not be enacted by the Assembly alone, but required, before they became obligatory on the churches, the written approval of the majority of the Presbyteries. Accordingly, too, in embodying in the Adopting Act, a provision for amending the Constitution with which it had now supplied the Church, the Synod required a similar concurrence of action—providing that amendments could only be made by the proposal of two-thirds of the Presbyteries and the agreement of the Assembly. The bringing out of these facts made it abundantly plain that the very essence of the fundamental law on which our whole present organization is based, is that no legislation is valid which is not enacted concurrently by the Presbyteries and the Assembly. To invade the rights of either would be revolutionary, and not merely revolutionary, but dangerous as well to the franchises obtained on the faith of our constitutional law, as to the liberties secured by it. The debate, thus, in the end, turned on the necessity of preserving in any provision for amending the standards, the core of the Adopting Act, viz., the concurrent action of two-thirds of the Presbyteries followed by the agreement and enacting of the Assembly. This being made clear to the Assembly, a paper was adopted which differed from the original report of the committee in its careful preservation of this essential feature. Thus, also, the raising of the question of the unalterableness of the Adopting Act was avoided, inasmuch as by the careful inclusion of its essence in the provisions proposed, they became merely the authoritative publication by the Church of a method of

procedure for amending under the authority of that Act. Whatever may be our theories, the adoption of this paper by the Church will give us legal certitude.

In bringing out the true intent and meaning of the fathers in placing such safe-guards around the amendment of our standards, the debate threw unexpected side-light also upon their wisdom. The anomalies and difficulties of our practice—and we may add the divergencies of our theories—have nearly all grown up out of the amazing misinterpretation of the “Barrier Act” by the Assembly of 1799, as if it were a provision for amending the *Form of Government* itself—a misinterpretation that was fixed a few years afterwards by a change of the language of the act to suit the new purpose to which it was being put. The Church would do wisely, if, instead of striking out *Form of Government*, XII, vi, it would restore it to its original form and purpose. In that case, to mention but a single instance, such “Standing Rules” as were proposed by the committee on the increase of the ministry, would no longer puzzle the Church, and could be adopted and put into effect without overloading the *Form of Government*. It would also be wise, in our judgment, to return to the original provision of the Adopting Act, which required two-thirds of the Presbyteries and a subsequent enactment by the Assembly, in order to amend the *Form of Government*, the *Book of Discipline*, and the *Directory for Worship*, as well as the doctrinal standards. As it is, such striking anomalies face us as (to mention, again, but a single instance) this: that by a simple majority vote of Assembly and Presbyteries, those sections of the *Form of Government* may be stricken out which require our office-bearers to adopt the *Confession of Faith*, while two-thirds of the Presbyteries and a subsequent Assembly must concur in making the slightest change in the *Confession* thus adopted. Our fathers acted with careful consistency when they bound all the parts of the Constitution together in a single bundle, and subjected it as a whole to the same law of amendment. We would be wise to return to their arrangement. We should be sorry, of course, to counsel any action that could endanger the adoption by the Presbyteries of the proposed new chapter to the *Form of Government*. We do not forget, and we hope that the Presbyteries will not forget, that this chapter must be adopted or rejected entire. But nothing prevents the sending up of independent overtures embodying such proposals as we have hinted at, as manifest improvements.

BENJAMIN B. WARFIELD.

PRINCETON.