

1893

Recent developments within the Presbyterian church in the United States

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/47350>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

"Recent Developments within the
Presbyterian Church in the United States"

James Arminius Ross.

May 1st 1893.

1
James S. Ross.

School of Theology, Class of 93

May 1st 1893

"Recent Developments within the Presbyterian Church in the U.S."

In our present survey, we shall go back as far as 1837, because that year marks an important era in connection with Presbyterianism in the U.S. The proceedings of the General Assembly of that year have awakened intense interest in the public mind. The transactions of no other ecclesiastical body convened in the U.S. have probably excited so general attention or called for so strong an expression of feeling from all classes of the community, as those of that assembly.

The principal acts of that Assembly, claiming attention, are those which relate to the Abrogation of the Plan of Union of 1826; the excommunication of the Synods of Ulster, Geneva, Geneva, and the Western Reserve; and the exclusion of the American Home Missionary Society and the American Educational Society from the bounds of the Presbyterian Church.

That we may arrive at an intelligent understanding

of what was comprehended in this Plan of Union, and the complex nature of religious & educational work growing out of the same, it will be necessary to revert briefly to the circumstances of its origin & history.

The first settlers of Western New York & Ohio, were emigrants from New England. With these other emigrants mingled from the Southern & middle states and from Europe. The New Englanders were mostly Congregationalists. They of course carried with them to their new residences predilections for Congregationalism, while the emigrants from regions where Presbyterianism prevailed, having imbibed views of Church government according to that system, retained their attachment to the peculiarities of their own church. On all great doctrines of the gospel, such as are essential to salvation Congregationalists & Presbyterians had a common faith. Still attached to the institutions of religion, but too few & feeble to provide separately for the ministrations of the word, they were prepared for the general good, to unite under a modified system of discipline, in the bonds of a common

fellowship. It seemed especially advisable in
 relation to frontier missionary work, Accordingly
 a scheme of Union was drawn up, which was
 adopted by the General Assembly with great
 unanimity, and was sent by delegates from this
 body to the General Association of Connecticut who
 agreed to the plan as proposed. This in brief is
 the origin of the Plan known as the "Plan of Union"
 of 1801. A common bond of operation in religious
 work between Congregationalists & Presbyterians who
 by mutual consent & upon common terms of agreement
 became one body. It was this "Plan" which had
 served as a bond of Union, and for 36 years, had
 existed as the ground of friendly intercourse and
 cheerful coöperation in the work of spreading the
 the gospel. ^{that was dissolved in '37} As to the merits of the Union, there
 is a variety of opinions. Some are passionate in
 its praise, some are ready to condemn it, some
 claim that it had served a temporary good but that
 its usefulness was at an end. What ever may
 be our estimates as to the good which the Plan
 effected, it seems not to much to say that the
 action of the General Assembly in Abrogating it, was

a movement decidedly revolutionary, ~~It took~~
 upon itself the power, not merely to repeal the
 act of the former Assembly, which it might in
 some cases very properly have done, but it
 reversed the decisions of the whole Presbyterian
 Church and of all her judicatories for the last
 thirty six years, on a subject involving the relations,
 and interests, and welfare of a multitude of her churches.
 It set aside a compact as binding as any constitution
 could be, on the plea of its unconstitutionality, and
 that, when the most important consequences
 were involved. It did this, not only without the
 consent, but in opposition to the known wishes
 of both of the other parties concerned. It must
 therefore be regarded, in whatever aspect its measures
 are contemplated, to say the least, as having transgressed
 the spirit of the Constitution, in its usual and able zeal
 to maintain the letter. The Claims of the Unconsti-
 tutionality of the Compact, which was the basis
 upon which the Assembly proceeded, was 1st
 That the General Association of Connecticut had no
 authority to act as a party in the Agreement.
 2nd That these important standing rules ^{had} no

never been submitted to the Presbytery.

The limits of our paper prevents our entering into a discussion of the Constitutionality of the proceeding. It is sufficient to say that the best lawyers & jurists of the times advocate the Constitutionality of the plan. The best works I have found on the subject are Gillett's "History of the Presbyterian Church," & Crocker's "Calamity of the Presbyterian Ch."

The motives which actuated the General Assembly are complex, and it must be affirmed that there were other reasons than those which ^{were} of the legal status of the Compact. It was a time of theological ferment and bitter dogmatic controversy. The action taken against such men as "Albert Barnes," "Geo. Duffield," "Dr Lyman Beecher" are sufficient to indicate the Religious trend. When we consider the heterogeneous mixture of theological thought & belief, which were represented in the two wings of the Presbyterian body we cannot wonder that there was strife. "Staid Calvinism" on the one hand & liberal, progressive New England Orthodoxy on the other this is what we find represented respectively in the Old & New School. These terms Old School & New School

date back further than the time of the disruption. They were familiar terms as applicable to certain theologians, and doctrines maintained by them, for years before there were any Old and New School Churches as separate organizations. With the New School it was a principle that Theology was a progressive science as Geology, Chemistry &c. With the Old School it was a fundamental principle, that while the Church ~~is not~~ ^{itself should be} progressive, the faith of the Church, revealed once for all, should know no change from age to age. Hence true to these principles, the one party "progressed" from certain important doctrines and took the name "New School." The other party progressed, with these same important doctrines, and took the name Old School.

The proceedings of the Church in the case of Mr. Barnes will give us an insight into the issues which was waged between the two Schools, and also ^{sent} present us a picture of the rigidity with which a large conservative portion of the Presbyterian body held to the old tenets. When Mr. Barnes Case came before the Assembly it remonstrated and testified against the following errors, declared to be held &

taught within the bounds of the Presbyterian Ch.
 It is interesting to us as showing the progress of the
 Church on the one hand & its conservatism on the
 other...

1. That Adam was not the covenant head or federal
 representative of his posterity, and sustained no other
 relation to them than that which subsists between
 every parent & his offspring.

2. That we have nothing to do with the first sin of
 Adam more than with the sin of any other parent;
 and that it is not imputed to his posterity

3. That infants have no moral character; that they
 are neither sinful nor holy

4. That all sin consists exclusively in voluntary
 acts or exercises, and consequently that there is no
 innate, inherent, or derived corruption in the souls
 of fallen men.

5. That man in his fallen state is possessed of
 entire ability to do whatever God requires him to
 do independently of any new power or ability
 imparted to him by the gracious operations of the
 Holy Spirit

6. That Regeneration is essentially a voluntary

change which the soul is active in producing, and that the Holy Spirit acts only mediately in the way of moral suasion by the presentation of motives

7. That Christ did not become a legal substitute of sinners; did not pay the debt of His people or endure the penalty of the law in their behalf.

8. That the Atonement is merely an exhibition of the wrath of God against sin; an expedient for enabling God to forgive sin consistently with the welfare of the Universe, of itself not securing the salvation of any one, and not satisfying divine justice; and

9. "That the Atonement is general made for all men alike, as much for the non elect as for the elect."

Mr Barnes was arraigned before the Presbytery of "36," on the charge of Heresy. The new school being in the majority, he was acquitted. During the following ecclesiastical year the whole church was canvassed by both parties, to bring out its strength. When the Assembly met the Old school were found to be in the majority. They made the most of their

When the resolution to purge from existing evils was taken up it was passed yeas 128. nays 122.

Three years succeeding the Abrogation of the Plan of Union were years of prosperity. In 1853 the Old School branch of the Church, was as large as the whole Presbyterian Church at the time of its separation, while she had spread herself North, South, East & West.

Reunion II. The next great movement of far reaching consequence to the Church was the ^{Reunion} ~~separation~~ of the ^{Old School} Church ~~North~~ & Church ^{of the New School} South in the year 1869.

The year 1837 will ever be memorable in Presbyterian Annals as the time which marked the disunion of the Church into the New School & Old School. So the year 1869 will ever be looked back to as the epoch when these two Assemblies were reunited into one organization. In the year 1864 an unofficial movement in favor of Reunion on the basis of the Confession, in a spirit of unity & fraternity, was made in Newark N.J. during the session of the Old School Assembly in that city. It was in the form of a paper, expressing the desirableness of such a union. But the paper was independent of the General Assembly, and no action was taken as yet

by that body. By a singular Providence, both the Assemblies met ~~in 1865~~ appointed St. Louis for the same place of meeting in 1866, wholly without such design or any knowledge of each others action. The Assemblies met, the Old School on Fifth Street, & the New School on Lucas place. Action was taken on the part of both towards reunion. A joint-Committee of Fifteen from each Assembly, thirty in all, was appointed to draft a Basis of Organic Reunion, during the year 1866-7, to be reported at the ensuing Assemblies of 1867. The Basis as thus drawn up went down to the Presbyteries for action during 1868-9. An extended discussion was had over the Basis of Union in both Assemblies (1868); the Old School feeling still dissatisfied with the first Article, and the New School having objections raised to the tenth. For an account of the Articles of the Basis of Union & the discussions, an interesting source is, "Extracts from the Minutes of the Reformed Presbyterian Churches in the U.S." (Boston Public Library 75.44.50) The Union was affected with great unanimity, & the sincerest Christian brotherly feeling.

Slave 7. The attitude of the Church on the question of Slavery, resulted in the secession of the Southern Churches in a body & the forming of a Southern General Assembly. But here again, the Reunion of the Church north & south, shows that Christian love is stronger than race & sectional prejudices, and in the reunion of these two branches, a step has been taken, which it is hoped our own Church will not be slow to follow.

III. The next great movement, absorbing attention and interest, within and beyond Presbyterian circles is the progress toward the revision of the West Minister Confession. This revision is no local or temporary movement. It is the product of the evolution of Christian life and thought in our century. The revision movement started in this country without leadership, and it has puzzled the leaders of the Church to keep abreast of it. It was but a spark in Apr. 1889. In May of that year the General Assembly started the flame. Now it has spread until the whole church is kindled by the agitation. In nothing is the progress of the Presbyterian Church more distinctly marked than in its ~~persistence~~ persistence toward a better interpretation of its standards of faith. The Westminister confession was completed Dec. 4th. 1646. Two hundred & forty six years have passed, years fraught with changes & great movements in philosophy, in science, in art, in commerce, in industry & in society. While from our Arminian standpoint, we are amazed at the slowness with which our sister denomination, has sought-relief from the trammels of a Creed alike inconsistent

~~With~~ both reason + religion, instead of casting stone at her for her tardiness, we feel like holding out to her our Arminian hand, and saying, "Come with us + we will do you good." The issue between the friends + foes of revision is fairly + squarely stated, when it is said that it depends altogether upon the question whether the Presbyterian Church has changed its attitude towards the Confession or not. That the Church has changed its attitude + that this attitude has been through no one that has observed recent movements within that body can deny. One of the greatest improvements in modern theology has been the development of the discipline of Biblical Theology. It was originally assumed that the Westminster system was based on the Scriptures, and that its essential + necessary articles are in harmony with the Scriptures; but there are many unessential + unnecessary articles that are not in accord with the Scriptures. There are other important doctrines that are in the Scriptures and are not in the Confession. An advance in the study of the Bible is the sum of the revision movement. It will be interesting to note a few of the tenets of the Confession about which the Contention for revision is the strongest.

The desire for revision was very strong with reference to Ch. III "Of God's Eternal Decree"; Ch. X "Of Effectual Calling"; and also with some strength with regard to Ch. XXIV "Of Marriage & Divorce"; and Ch. XXV "Of the Church". Moreover many of the presbyters asked the insertion in the Confession of a more explicit statement of the love of God for the world; and sixty presbyters for a statement of the sufficiency of the Atonement; and free offer of salvation to all men. As regards other parts of the Confession, no other chapters received more than twelve votes of the Presbyters desiring revision. The work of revision has been referred to a Committee on Revision. The success of their work thus far we are presently to consider. But before we consider the progress of revision let us notice some of the tenets which were so particularly obnoxious.

The III Chapter reads as follows — 3. "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men & angels are predestinated unto ever lasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death."

4. "These angels & men thus predestinated and foreordained are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain & definite that it cannot be either

increased or diminished"

7. "The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice,"

The two Special Sections of Ch. X that are the chief points of attack are --

3 "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how He pleaseth; so also are other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word."

4. Others not elected, although they may be called by the Ministry of the Word, and may have some common aspirations of the Spirit; yet they never truly come to Christ, and therefore cannot be saved; much less can men, not professing the Christian religion be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, and the law of that religion they do profess; and

to assert and maintain that they may is very
pernicious, and to be detested."

We now turn to the work accomplished by the
Committee on Revision. Besides giving attention to
the above four chapters concerning which the Church
asked for revisions, they propose alterations in no
less than 19 chapters out of the 33 chapters of the Confession.
For a detailed discussion of these changes some of which
are very trivial and laudable. See Andover Review for
Aug 1892. But have the Committee successfully revised
the four chapters which gave difficulty to the
Church. The intent of the revision of Ch. I was to
remove from the Confession the doctrine of infant damnation
and to secure a basis for the salvation of some of the
heathens. The difficulty is removed in the case of
infants by striking out the word "elect" before infants,
but it is immediately restored by the statement which
is inserted that they are included in the election of
grace. What is the difference between "elect infants"
and infants included in the "election of grace" we fail
to see. The mention of the clause "so also are all other
elect persons who are not outwardly called by the
word" is a definite recognition of the salvation of elect
heathens; but we doubt the propriety of substituting "called

by the word for "called by the ministry of the word" Art. III. On God's Eternal Decree. The chief revision of Sec. 7 is entirely unsatisfactory. Who can ever say with authority how we are to interpret the committee's substitute "not to elect unto everlasting life", and "them hath He ordained unto dishonour and wrath for their sin"? What a strange consolation to offer to Presbyterians who are shocked with the thought that their fellow men in great masses should be excluded from the enjoyment of grace to say, "But then they are not reprobated, as the old divines used to say, they have not been passed by as we used to think, they have simply 'not been elected'". The work of the Committee to say the best is very unsatisfactory. The difficulty that stands in the way of any thing like a thorough and satisfactory revision is considerable, & the goal to be ultimately reached will be by a process slow & tedious. Each step in the progress will be attained only through bitter strife and controversy, but that the Church is equal to the task ^{her} past history & present trend both positively indicate. On the score of scholarship, the Church is quite as competent to put its faith into clear & intelligent expression, as have been the divines of any past age. Again the difficulties of revision are not those that belong to the theological position. Many of the leaders of the Church know what they believe and are competent to say it. The real difficulties of the case are to reverse the standards till they

shall exactly express the present faith of the Church, and at the same time to keep those standards in their integrity. A second difficulty is the prolonged theological ferment in which it will be likely to keep the church. A few changes in a few chapters, could easily and promptly be made; but the demand for revision is one that steadily increases in Area. There is scarce a Chapter that has escaped criticism & suggestion for revision. For these reasons it seems wise to a good many who are anxious that something should be done, that this something should take the form of a new statement. Technically Dr. Briggs is opposed to all revision, preferring to leave the confessions untouched, and to adopt a new creed for the working uses of the Church. However the tendency is surely & steadily towards a "Confession more Christocentric; more vividly suffused with the solar splendor of the truth that "God is love"; more palpably pulsant with the heart throbs of the Divine Fatherhood of man's quest of the world redemptive outreachings of the Cross; more insistent with the missionary impulses of a Pauline Christianity; more responsive to the

claims and affiliations of a Christian brotherhood; man in touch with the hymns & prayers & activities of the Holy Church universal; and now that the tide has set in this direction, shall ~~we~~ ^{we Methodists} not hail heartily every rising movement, shall we not rejoice at the mass & swell of the gathering current that threatens to break over Calvinian boundaries promising an ever widening affiliation, with the clear placid waters & profoundly deep Christian truths of American Theology.

But just now while the Presbyterian Church is in a silence ferment over the Articles of Westminster Confession. Another Movement no less ominous has directed the attention of the Christian Church at large. A Movement which though not immediately connected with the Revision of the Creed, may be said to have grown out of it; or perhaps it would be nearer the exact truth to say it is the leaven from which the agitation for revision has sprung up. We refer of course to the arraignment & trial of Prof. Briggs & Smith before the Judicial body of the Presbyterian Church & the acquittal of the one & the expulsion of the other, on the charge of teaching heresy.

We shall not take the time & space to enumerate the Specification of the Charges, nor the process of the trial. These would make a sufficiently lengthy paper of themselves, and they are still fresh in the minds of all. A recent work - work of value is a book, "The Case against Professor Briggs." Published in 1892, Boston: Public Library. Excellent articles may also be found in

But what is the meaning of these proceedings for Presbyterianism & what is to be the ultimate outcome & the influence on the Protestant Church, at large? These are the questions of greatest interest after all. How can such a procedure as the arraignment & trial of two or more of the foremost men in theological thought, settle the issue? The issue is drawn around the subject of Biblical Criticism; but these subjects lie altogether in the region of facts. They are not merely theories of inspiration, but matters of today. Eventually the truth will be ascertained to the satisfaction of the Church; and the attempt meanwhile to arrest earnest & reverent & loyal Christian scholars in their investigations, by ecclesiastical violence, is nothing short of supreme folly.

The attempt to suppress inquiry within the realm of speculative theology, has proved to be utterly futile; — much more the attempt to restrain inquiry within the realm of historic fact, must the orthodoxy of the Presbyterian Church in its inherited views be vindicated?

There is but one way in which orthodoxy can vindicate itself — through the truth. Dr Briggs represents two things which cannot be dealt with by "way of discipline" viz
1st The rights of recent Christian scholarship & 2nd the enlargement of Calvinism to the measure of Christianity.

He may have personal methods of urging these claims; Every positive man has like methods; they do not affect the main question. In the Providence of God, —

In the Providence of God, Dr Briggs, has become one of the chief representatives in the Presbyterian body of that movement for the readjustment & enlargement of faith, which is going on in all evangelical bodies.

His vindication of his position, before the Judicial body of the Church & his acquittal by that body, marks an era of triumph of truth over error. From many sources,

the action against Prof Smith, has been pronounced as extremely narrow & radical. The editor of the Andover Review says "The trial of Prof Smith shows even more

clearly than that of Prof Briggs the determination of a strong party

in the Pres. Church that there shall hereafter be room in it for only one way of thinking on the question of Biblical Criticism & inspiration, namely the Puritan way. The attempt to force all Presbyterian ministers to pronounce aught these barbarous test words of an antiquated Creed must result in a division again, whether it shall come to that depends very much on the wisdom & grace of the General Assembly which meets in Washington in May of this present year. --

But while the recent trials have shown that there is in the Presbyterian Church a large mixture of the non-progressive side of types of thought, it has shown that there is much progressive leaning. To judge the Church by the old Conservative element alone would be doing the greatest injustice to the body of which, this rigid frozen type is but a part. Can we not see a budding horizon, an awakening of the Church to the spirit of the times, an alacrity to read the meaning of the present a clarified vision to see & interpret the future. What may be the immediate result to the Church of these controversies might be difficult to determine, but what the ultimate end will be; can we not read ^{it} in the history of the

Presbyterian Church of the past? Though ~~she~~ has moved slowly her march has been steady & progressive.

Though there have been disruptions time has been sufficient to heal them & out of every struggle, she has come forth with renewed strength.

We have thus traced the progress in this country of a Christian denomination, which has attained a position second to that of no other in social influence, intellectual cultivation, and the means of extended usefulness. Its history is largely identified with that of the nation. It has planted far and wide religious as well as literary institutions, under which millions have been trained. It has evinced its unswerving patriotism and loyalty during the most trying periods of our national existence. It has sent forth to take their places at the bar in the senate, or in the pulpit, men whom it has educated, of whom the nation may well be proud, and whose names it will not willingly let die. Its annals are enriched with the frequent records of that devotion which has characterized the efforts of pioneer missionaries and self-denying pastors to evangelize the land and speak in the ears of heedless men the words of eternal

life. It is well that the Presbyterian Church, moving manifestly on to a more wonderful future should be made familiar with its past career. It needs the lights of experience to guide its steps. With these - shinning upon its path, and with the providence of God, leading it on & still onward to more extended usefulness, and to enlarged plans of effort, its future can scarcely fail to furnish even more exciting and wonderful records than the past. The present crisis cannot be anything more than a mere episode - an agitation upon the surface of whose waters is the deep under current of truth which sweeps strongly onward into the bosom of the great shoulder sea of religious & intellectual life & liberty.