

THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH AND THE WAR.

[One of the principal ministers of the Reformed Presbyterian church, has requested us to republish an article in the Scottish Reformed Presbyterian Magazine on the position of the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian church in regard to the U. S. government and the present war. The crowded state of our columns and the large space occupied by Prof. Steele's inaugural address have hitherto prevented compliance with a suggestion from a source so highly respectable. Even now, we are obliged to omit some passages which, however, are not at all relatively important, but we append some extracts from a subsequent article in the same magazine, elicited by a reply in the American Covenanter.]

It is deemed expedient at least to republish the following article from the Reformed Presbyterian Magazine, the organ of our beloved church in Scotland, of September, 1863. I offer no comments upon it at present. There are some things in it that I would have stated otherwise; but these are of little consequence. It is, upon the whole, a fair estimate of the present position of our brethren in this land, who designate themselves "Old Lights," and as "New Lights," as well as a clear exhibition of the fact, that the continuance of the schism of 1833, which was always causeless, would be entirely inconsistent with the modest advanced and liberal ground of our separating brethren. Consistency demands the healing of the breach.

Our Scottish brethren have recently had, from causes similar to those which produced the disruption of our church in this country, their own difficulties. But they have nobly passed the Rubicon. They have well-answered the riddle of the Sphinx. Their position and that of our General Synod are identical—Fidelity to the Testimony of our Fathers, and to our own Covenant obligations, combined with Christian moderation and forbearance toward brethren in the application of our principles. But more of this hereafter.

WILLIAM WILSON.

Cincinnati, Nov. 19th, 1863.

THE OLD-LIGHT SYNOD IN AMERICA, THE GOVERNMENT, THE ARMY OATH AND THE WAR.

It is scarcely necessary to remind our readers, that the sister Church in America has, for many years, been broken up into two nearly equal sections, denominated respectively "the Synod," and "the General Synod," of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. These are better known on both sides of the Atlantic by the pithier names of the Old Light and New Light; and although the justice of the nomenclature is strongly contested by the New Light Synod, which claims to occupy the old ground, the designations are too convenient to be laid aside, and are likely to last as long as the two bodies remain apart.

The ploughshare of war has been employed by the Most High, to break up the fallow-ground of the higher politics in America, and both Synods, knowing that the Lord has intrusted them with truths for the times, have labored to sow the good seed. The United States' Constitution, it seems certain, will undergo some radical alterations ere the war is finished; and the two churches, true to the grand distinctive principle of the Reformed Presbyterian community, the Head of Christ over the nations, have been taking steps to impress upon their rulers and statesmen the duty of inserting into the Constitution an explicit recognition of the Lord Jesus Christ, and of his law, as delivered in the holy Scriptures. Not content with this, they have been endeavoring, with most encouraging success, to stir up the other evangelical denominations to unite with them in the same effort. It is our fervent prayer that their labors may be prospered. It seems evident that the large Presbyterian denominations of both sides of the Atlantic are nearer a cordial recognition of the Redeemer's universal dominion than some of us ever hoped to see them. Who can tell but the conjoint endeavor to obtain a national recognition of Christ on the part of the United States, may be over-ruled as the means of not only healing the breach in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, but of bringing about a still more extensive union among the Presbyterian bodies of America?

So far as respects the high and honorable enterprise referred to, there is and can be no diversity of opinion in either Synod. It is otherwise with some other matters, arising out of the war, which have been coming up of late among the Old Light brethren. The position occupied by them since the division, has been somewhat similar to the one which the brethren who lately seceded from ourselves wished the Scottish Synod to take up. In some things they go farther, as, for example, in absolutely prohibiting their members from sitting in juries, and from "occasional hearing;" on other points, perhaps, they do not go quite so far. The protesters here would, of course, protest against a man's entering the army with or without an oath. Their position being such as we have described, could not fail to be seriously affected by the breaking out of the Civil War.

What, in these circumstances, were the ministers and sessions of the Reformed Presbyterian Church to do? They had taken up the ground that the Constitution of the United States was so antagonistic to the law of Christ, that they could neither vow allegiance to it, nor accept any office, political, municipal, or military under it. On the other hand, they shared in the passionate admiration of republican institutions in general, and the American Union in particular, which is the universal sentiment of the Northern States; and, be-

sides, they felt towards the enslaved negroes of the south an intensity of sympathy which few of their countrymen shared. It was impossible they could look passively on, when traitorous hands attempted the destruction of a Union which, with all its faults, they deemed the most benign government under heaven. Above all, it was impossible for them to endure the thought that the Union should be broken up in the interest of a Confederacy that boasted of having for its chief corner-stone the divine right of African slavery! Under the influence of these feelings, members of the Church flocked to the national standards, and, in at least one instance, an esteemed minister left his congregation for a season, and became an officer in the United States' army. The loyalty of the denomination was so unsuspected, that in many cases the members were admitted without an oath; but in other cases, especially in the neighborhood of the boundary between north and south, the ordinary oath of "allegiance to the United States," as tendered to soldiers, was rigidly exacted.

Discussion was inevitable, and discussion accordingly took place. The matter came up to the Supreme Court two years ago, but the brethren were not prepared to give forth any decisive deliverance. But this would not do. Accordingly, it came up at the next meeting of Court (1862). A committee, embracing several of the ablest ministers in the denomination was appointed to consider it maturely, and report. The substance of the report and portions of the discussion follow.

"The Committee close by giving answers to some queries in the papers referred to them.

1. "In relation to ministers entering the army, they reply, 'That while we regard it as the right and duty of ministers, as well as others, on necessary and proper occasions, to bear arms, yet we are not aware of any present occasion requiring any of our ministers to do so.'"

2. "In relation to the Soldier's Oath, we answer, 'that as the soldier's oath is objectionable, and cannot receive the approbation of Synod, we recommend that a Committee be appointed to prepare a suitable form of oath, and endeavor to procure its sanction by the proper authority.'"

3. "Regarding aliens, we reply, 'That it is not inconsistent with our principles for aliens to obtain exemption from draft, provided they are not required to profess subjection or allegiance to a foreign government.'"

"After some questions in relation to a minority report, presented by J. S. T. Milligan, were settled, Synod entered upon the consideration of the report."

"After the consideration of some amendments, the question was now upon the original resolution of the Committee. W. Milroy moved to strike out the latter part of the answer, and insert words to the effect, 'But in no case can a minister of the gospel among us accept a military office under the United States' Government as at present constituted.' J. M. Wilson said no doubt Mr. Milroy desired to settle the question, that it was not right for any man to do this. If it was not right for a minister, it was not right for any man; if it were not right for Covenanters, then it was not right for others. There was only one code of morals for all men. (The Moderator wished Mr. W. to state the difference between a jurymen and a military officer.) An officer in the army, said Mr. W., does not become a member of the Government; his office gives him no civil connection with it. An army is but the physical force of a nation—a great club in the hand of the nation, wielded for the overthrow of its enemies. If the nation is wrongfully assailed, then we may and ought to help it, by adding our force to that of others."

"In support of his amendment, Mr. Milroy said—1. The great distinctive principle of this church is the supremacy of Christ practically carried out. This principle Mr. Milroy stated and developed very fully and at length. He observed, 2. Proceeding on this principle, Covenanters have always dissented from and testified against the government. While it is true that the Confederates are in rebellion against the United States Government, still that government is in a great rebellion against Christ. . . . Before we would sustain the Government of the United States, that government should have a charter from the great Bill of Rights, the Bible, otherwise it has no right to exist. It may be said we are not loyal in uttering such sentiments. If by loyalty we meant no sympathy with the rebellion, then we are as loyal as any. But loyalty does not require us to think the United States Constitution is right. The Professor had last evening taken a most extraordinary position, that in entering the army a man was not in 'homologation' of the government. One who holds that position has but a little step or short journey to go to occupy the position taken by the majority of the Scottish Synod in its recent action. That club is a living, rational, thinking, and accountable club, in the hands of and wielded by a strong man. He had no desire to form a part of that club. He should fear that he should be dashed to pieces. Why may not ministers enter the army? 1. Because the object for which the army is used is only partially right. As to putting down the rebellion, it is wholly right; but that is not the main object of the war. He quoted from a resolution passed by the House about two years ago since to shew that the object of the war is to maintain the supremacy of the laws, and the integrity of the Union. . . . 2. Because an immoral oath in required in order to enter the army."

3. Though the object of the war was entirely right, yet a minister could not join with it in the war. Scripture condemns it. He quoted the case of Asa joining with Benhadad; Ahab joining with Tiglath-Pileser, and other instances. These are all condemned in the Bible; so in the case of Amaliah, who hired 100,000 wicked Israelites. We may not, said Mr. Milroy, even allow the wicked to join us in self-defence. Mr. Milroy enlarged upon the instance of Jehoshaphat and Ahab uniting

*We understand that these terms occur in the oath.

in order to recover Ramoth-Gilead. The inference he drew from this was, that however the nation may in some measure have repented, and however just the war and its object, yet we must not help the ungodly. 4. Ministers should not enter the service, because they can do no good.

J. M. Wilson said—I have no prepared speech to deliver, nor have I any eloquence to display, and I would not if I had. That is not the way this question is to be settled. Mr. Milroy has said the government is immoral, and therefore has no right to live at all. Mr. Milroy interposed, I meant to have said, 'before God;' but, said Mr. Wilson, we are not speaking of rights before God, but whether this government has a right to defend itself against ruthless rebels. The whole basis of Mr. Milroy's speech is a misapplication of the doctrine that man by his sin forfeited all right to live, and so forfeited every other right. Man by his fall forfeited as before God every right, but as against his fellow-man he has rights which he may plead and defend. The doctrine of this speech is the same substantially with that of the Mormons, that no one has any right to the earth but the saints. They sought to carry out this doctrine at Nauvoo; they were driven to Utah; and there the United States Government is after them now. He hoped they would be driven into the Pacific.

"If a wicked man has no rights, then a man has no right to defend his wife when she is assailed, if she be wicked; a father has no right to defend his child, a brother has no right to defend his sister, unless the child or the sister are in a regenerate state. Now, if this be so, mark it well, the premises are wrong. It is a reductio ad absurdum. No man can believe that a husband has no right to defend his wife, or a father his children; but this necessarily follows from the premise that a wicked man has no rights, and the conclusion proves that the premise is wrong."

"Mr. Milroy has brought instances from the Scripture in reference to alliance of good with bad kings which God denounced. But they are not relevant. If the Southern Confederacy were established, and we were to assist that confederacy in its iniquity against another nation, then these Scripture examples would be in point. But will Mr. Milroy be good enough to show us where God denounced an Israelite for defending his own government against unjust and cruel attacks? But we have a Scripture example in point, 2 Kings, xiii, 19-23. Here was a wicked king, ruler of a kingdom founded in wickedness, who came to a prophet of the Lord—and that prophet calls the arrow which symbolized the victories of that wicked king 'the arrow of the Lord's deliverance,' and gives express promise of victory. An example of this kind is of more force than all fine-spun reasonings."

"Mr. Milroy has faulted my argument about the army, and the illustration I used. He had thought that he was referring to every one knew, and all admitted that entering an army did not connect a man with the institutions of a country. In our revolutionary struggle, many Hessians were British soldiers, but they were not British men; the civil law had nothing to do with them, or they with it. Any one in the standing armies of Europe has no connection with the civil institutions. So true is this, that soldiers are deprived of their civil rights, with a few exceptions. If you take an army in Europe, there are in it men from almost all nationalities, and they do not become incorporated in the nation in whose army they are. I believe, said Mr. Wilson, that these things have never been contradicted before. They are not new—they were not got up for the purposes of this war. Why is it that guerrillas are not dealt with as soldiers? But because they are not of the armies, but are part and parcel of the civil institutions. They are citizens, not soldiers. Mr. Milroy says the club is used against God. I do not know that this is true. The army has fought against bad men, who rose up against right. It liberated thousands of slaves. When or where had it fought against God?"

"Mr. Milroy said, any man who maintained that Covenanters might enter the army was but a short step or journey from being a New Light. Mr. Wilson quoted from the Historical Testimony to show that Covenanters had aided their country in the war of 1812. They 'generally thought it their duty to aid in the defence of their country.' 'While they refused to bind themselves to sinful oaths, they were willing to expend their property, employ their influence, and risk their lives in defence of their country.' Mr. Milroy has said they became New Lights. There is one man, a member of this court, (pointing to John Z. Wilson, who sat just at the edge of the platform,) who fought in that war, and he has never looked toward New Lightism."

"The doctrine here maintained is, that the Government has no right to make war or to defend itself; and we are not to be told that those who maintain it are New Lights. We follow the footsteps of the fathers, and he maintained that the men who 'had gone about the country saying that we are leaving the truth, belied the fathers, as they had belied us. Some say, we may fight in a foreign, but not in a domestic war. The war of 1812 was to secure the rights of naturalized foreigners, Irishmen and others. This war began in defence of human rights, and because of the determination of the Government not to yield to the demands of slaveholders. Now, if the Covenanters of 1812 entered into that war, who has got new light when they denounce us as traitors to Christ?"

"Mr. Milroy referred to the resolutions of Congress in 1861 to indicate the purpose of the war. The lower house did this. It was a bad resolution—such as men will frame in transition times. How was it, however, when Vallandigham and other copperheads wished to have this resolution re-affirmed, near the close of the close of the last session? They would not re-affirm it; and why? Because they did not believe it. The times had gone beyond that resolution. Mr. Milroy has referred to the malignants in the time of our forefathers in Scotland. This was not in point now. The question was then

as to giving office and influence to men who were opposed to the truth, and would use their office and influence to overturn it. It was now as if the question were—whether slaveholders or copperheads should be elevated to places of power and trust?" Mr. Wilson then briefly touched upon the question directly before the Synod. He said ministers, as to moral character, are precisely as other men are. If it be right for other men, then, as to the moral character of the act, it is right for ministers to go. He referred to the case of Colonel Clark—a minister at Pittsburgh—who had raised a regiment. A Stevenson asked if he were a Covenanter? Mr. Wilson said the question referred to ministers. It was replied, it is ministers of this church. He replied, it did not matter much, for ministers of our church are no better, as such, than the ministers of other churches. He did not believe that the ministers should go unless it were necessary. The amendment was laid on the table. Ayes 56. Noes 19.

"The second resolution, or the answer to the second query, was then taken up. This relates to the soldier's oath."

"J. M. Wilson, in lieu of the latter part, presented the following oath:—I do solemnly swear, by the living God, that I will be faithful to the United States, and will aid and defend them against the armies of the Confederate States, yielding all due obedience to military orders." Mr. Wilson explained that 'United States' meant the country, and that 'due' was to shew that it was only obedience to right and justifiable orders. A Stevenson said he would swear no such oath. J. R. W. Sloane said this had been his sentiment from the beginning. The form of oath expressed his views. He would vote for it heartily. Mr. Milroy was not prepared for this; it implies that members of the church may enter the army. The form of oath was adopted. A Stevenson called for the ayes and nays. (Owing to the many changes that were made, and the speedy adjournment of Synod, I could not ascertain definitely how the vote stood, but only some eight or ten voted in the negative.)

It will be observed that several of the American brethren advert to the charge of abandoning the church's distinctive position, with which, like ourselves, they have been pertinaciously assailed. They have experienced no difficulty in repelling the charge, but we are not sure that they have been equally successful in proving that there has been no charge at all. We are aware of the delicacy of the case, but think it would have been the wiser and manlier course to have frankly acknowledged a change, not indeed in the church's principles, but in regard to the practical application of them. The arguments employed to show that their decision involves no change at all, are reducible to three, and the reader can judge of their cogency.

1. They plead that they do not sanction the swearing of the oath of allegiance to the United States' Constitution. We fear this plea will not bear to be scrutinized. For (1.) They have omitted to enjoin the exercise of discipline on those members and office-bearers of the church who have taken the oath. It is a significant circumstance, moreover, that, in the May number of the denominational Magazine, published just before the meeting of Synod, a sensible, and well-informed writer, to whom the editor assigns the post of honor, institutes an argument to show that the 'ordinary soldier's oath contains nothing inconsistent with the position of the Reformed Presbyterian Churcher.

(2.) It seems to us that whatever objection there may be to an oath of allegiance must apply with greater strength to the giving of armed support. To shed one's blood in the defence of a government is surely the very strongest form in which a man can yield to its support.

(3.) The soldier's position, with respect to the civil constitution, corresponds exactly that of the jurymen. The Moderator's request to Professor Wilson, "to state the difference between a jurymen and a military officer," was both reasonable and to the point. We do not find fault with the metaphor adopted by the professor. As the jurymen, once in a box, must cease to judge the law, and must simply do his part in the execution of it, good or bad; so, undoubtedly, the soldier, once enlisted, ceases to have a will or a judgment of his own, and has simply to obey orders. But surely this fact that the soldier consents to become a "club," does not mitigate the responsibility attaching to his position; it ought rather to make him doubly careful respecting the character of the government under which he enlists. Clearly, if the jurymen is a government officer, (and we believe he is,) the soldier is a government officer too. Every government has two arms by which it exercises its power, and of these the jurymen and the soldier are the representatives. Neither of them need be a citizen, neither of them need take the oath of allegiance, but both of them come under obligation, by acceptance of office and oath, to do their part in executing the law, and thus giving effect to the constitution—the one in the municipal, the other in the military sphere.

As regards the form of oath adopted by the Synod, we have only to say that it would be a very unreasonable government that would refuse to accept it, unless, indeed, the rejection were based on the impolicy of having different forms of oath for different classes of the community. We do not know the precise terms of the ordinary army oath in the United States; but this we know, that the form our brethren have drawn up is quite as explicit as the British oath of allegiance, which, it is well known, was purposely made as general in its terms as possible.

2. The character of the present war is strongly urged as a reason why Reformed Presbyterians should support it. Now, we admit, notwithstanding many strong arguments that may be adduced to the contrary, that the war is, on the whole, a righteous one, and that the result, if not the design, is sure to be the destruction of slavery. But we cannot, for a moment, admit that it is not a war in defence of the constitution. The President we believe to be an honest man, and he has declared, times without

number, and still continues to declare, in the most solemn manner, that he has not and never had, the remotest intention to break the constitution, or to interfere with the rights that it concedes to slaveholders. Accordingly, the infamous Fugitive Slave Law is unrepealed at this hour. Slavery has been assailed by President Lincoln just where the constitution permitted it to be assailed; protected, wherever the constitution engaged to protect it. On this point there can be no doubt whatever. A few days ago the mail brought us the President's proclamation, calling for a National Thanksgiving on the 6th of August. In it we find specified, as the principal cause of thanksgiving, the "reasonable grounds" which God in his providence has given "for augmented confidence, that the Union of these States will be maintained, their constitution preserved, and their peace and prosperity permanently secured." We can understand how intelligent and high-principled men in America, like Mr. Sumner, should take part in the present struggle, in the belief that (as indeed Professor Wilson admirably expresses it) "the purpose of the war is to be judged by the whole state of the case," that any nominal support they may meanwhile be obliged to yield to slavery, as guaranteed by the constitution, is counterbalanced, and more than counterbalanced by the effect which they foresee will flow from maintaining the constitution against the Southern Confederacy. We can understand this position. It is precisely the position occupied by those conscientious Presbyterians and Independents who hold seats in our houses of parliament; and they say, "the purpose of sitting in parliament is to be judged by the whole state of the case, and this determines that our doing so is the way to get the constitution reformed according to the law of God." We can understand, therefore, the position of President Lincoln's best supporters, in the Reformed Presbyterian Church and out of it; but we cannot understand how men, intelligent and high-principled as we believe our brethren to be, can persuade themselves that they can go into the war, and yet withhold their support from the United States constitution.

Let us not be misunderstood. We are far from thinking that our brethren by countenancing their members engaging in the war, have let down their testimony, or abandoned their protest against the evils, negative and positive, which they have hitherto condemned in the American constitution. On the contrary, it is our persuasion, that neither their action nor our own involves "an homologation" (in the sense in which our fathers undoubtedly used the phrase) of aught that is unscriptural in the constitution of either country. It has always seemed to us that the Old-Light Synod have had rather the advantage over their brethren in the General Synod, in carefully abstaining from language that might seem to endorse with approval a constitution which recognized slavery; and this advantage they do not forfeit by their late decision.* We wish it to be distinctly observed, that while we hold that by going into the war they support the constitution, we attribute to them only that kind of support which is perfectly compatible with an honest acknowledgment of its evils, and a consistent unflinching protest against them.

We are well aware that there are men on both sides of the Atlantic who profess inability to see any middle-course between keeping absolutely aloof and yielding entire approval and support. But it might easily be shown that the rigorous application of their principle would oblige them to condemn the conduct of our fathers in the purest times of the covenanted reformation, for, as every one knows, as the covenants themselves show, they were in allegiance to the imperfect civil government of their age. Moreover, it is neither candour nor common sense to suppose that myriads of Christians in Great Britain and America are taking the oath of allegiance in a sense that would involve downright perjury.

3. It is urged, that in taking part with the Federal government against the South, the Reformed Presbyterians of the present day are, really walking in the steps of their fathers, who so cordially engaged in the wars against Great Britain. We have met with this plea before: for we cannot forget that the New-Light Synod have all along urged it in enforcement of their protest against the justice of the designation given to them by the popular voice on both sides of the Atlantic. They claim to be Old-Light, and hold that the extreme antagonism to the United States' government evinced by the other party, prior to the breaking out of the present war, was really a departure from the old position occupied by the fathers of the American Church. This is a matter, however, in which it would be presumptuous to intermeddle. The Scottish Synod has constantly refused to do so. We have only to say, that if the recent action of the Old-Light Synod have the effect of enabling the sister churches to realize their substantial agreement, we shall unfeignedly rejoice. We have friends, dear to us in the Lord, in both churches; we believe they have yet a good work to accomplish in America for Christ, and we long to see them striving together for the faith of the gospel.

It is just possible these observations may be construed as indicating lukewarmness towards our Transatlantic brethren in the present crisis of their nation's history. But no one will do so who knows the real sentiments of the ministers, and more intelligent members of the Scottish Church on the American war. Our sympathies are altogether on the side of the North, and we expect great good to result from the present struggle. We rejoice to see our brethren in the Old-Light Synod rising superior to a false regard for consistency, and disdaining to let their witness-bearing degenerate into a vicious habit of sitting aloof and snarling at the movements of the age.

The American Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter, the organ of the Synod in this country, having made some remarks in reply to the article in the Scottish Magazine, we find a rejoinder in the Dec. No. of the latter periodical. After alluding to the

[* This is a misconception of the position of the General Synod, which has always admitted that there were defects in the U. S. Constitution.—Eds. of BANNER.]

failure of the attempt to set aside the cogent arguments presented, several of which are passed over without any notice, the editor of the Scottish Magazine refers to Professor Wilson's remarkable sophism that the "war is for the country and not for the constitution," as if we could have a country without having a constitution, as it is the constitution which binds our various States together and makes our government "e pluribus unum," of many One. As to "the object of the war," says the editor, "we imagined, &c."

There could be only one opinion about so simple a matter of fact. It seems we were mistaken. Professor Wilson does not hesitate to affirm that the war is "for the defence of the country, and not for the constitution." If so, then certainly the government of Abraham Lincoln, which we have hitherto regarded as entitled to the praise of honesty, is the most mendacious government on the face of the earth at this hour; for however much it may have wavered on other points, it has never once wavered on this, but has long proclaimed to the world, in ever possible way, that the one thing it is fighting for is the maintenance and defence of the constitution. We are astonished at the boldness of Professor Wilson's assertion. And yet we can understand what has led him to take a view of the case so opposed to patent and indisputable facts. He is too clear-sighted not to perceive that if the object of the war is the defence of the constitution, his Synod, in supporting it, occupy the identical position which they ascribe to the Scottish Synod—a position considerably in advance of that which the Scottish Synod believes itself to occupy. The fact that the ablest spokesman of the Old-Light American Synod finds that he cannot vindicate the consistency of his Church in condemning us, except by denying that the war is for the defence of the constitution, will be taken by most people on this side of the Atlantic, as a plain proof that their consistency cannot be defended at all.

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