

Miscellaneous.

RE-UNION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

BY REV. SAMUEL T. SPEAR, D.D.

I have received your letter, dated the 5th inst., requesting my opinion upon the following question: "In your judgment, will the two branches of the Presbyterian Church—the Old School and the New—unite, and form one Church and one General Assembly?" You intimated that my answer, if given at all, should be given as briefly as possible.

It is an undoubted fact that the two branches of the Presbyterian Church have, for several years past, evinced toward each other a courtesy, consideration, and confidence which, unhappily, did not exist for a much greater number of years immediately following the division. It is especially true that the Old School Presbyterians have abandoned the theory of gradual absorption in respect to the New School, and to a large extent the offensive practice of impugning the orthodoxy of the latter. It is equally true that, of late, there has been a growing disposition in both branches toward organic union, culminating at last in the appointment of a joint committee by the two General Assemblies, in the recent report of this committee, and the action of the two Assemblies thereon. This brings the whole matter before both branches of the Church for consideration.

What, then, is the relation between these two Presbyterian bodies, as now existing? Though both adopt the same standards and the same polity, they are, nevertheless, organically and ecclesiastically distinct from each other—as much so as any two denominations on the face of the earth. The union, then, means the merging of the two denominations into one, either by the creation of a new denomination, or the merging of the one into the other. In one or the other of these ways it must be accomplished, if at all. "The united body" will not be the Old School, and it will not be the New School; but it will be the joint result of the two, in the event of the creation of a new denomination. And, in the other case, the so-called "united body" will simply be the ecclesiastical organism of the Old School, or that of the New, greatly enlarged by the addition of the other.

Will this union take place under the circumstances as now existing, and according to the plan as submitted by the joint committee? Upon this question I understand you to seek my opinion. This opinion I shall express by a brief comment on the following series of points:

1. It is very plain that the effort ought not to be successful, unless both branches of the Presbyterian Church, by a majority amounting almost to unanimity, think the union expedient and sincerely desire it. The committee name a majority of three-fourths in both bodies; yet I have serious doubts whether a measure changing the ecclesiastical status of all the churches in both bodies, or merging all the churches of one or the other of these bodies into the other, ought to be carried except by a much nearer approach to unanimity on the part of all the parties to be affected by it. It is a very grave question whether the ecclesiastical relation and rights of the local churches, as now established, are to be disposed of and altered by any vote taken in the Presbyteries. Suppose some of these churches as a whole, and minorities in others, refuse to abide by such a vote; suppose they insist on remaining just as they are, and where they are; and then the consequence would be division in one direction in order to effect union in another. How the question will be decided when submitted to the Presbyteries, if ever so submitted, I of course cannot tell. Yet at present I see no sufficient indications that the measure, when thoroughly canvassed, as it will be, and certainly ought to be, will secure the majority specified by the committee. In this remark I allude more particularly to that branch of the Church to which I belong, not feeling myself as competent to judge of the other branch.

2. If any considerable minority in the Old School shall be found in opposition to the measure, this fact would be fatal to its success with the New School. The latter, now at peace among themselves, and by their prosperity and good order both deserving and commanding the respect of their Old School brethren, will not be likely to place themselves in a position to fight over again the old battles. They have had quite enough of this to know what it means. But for the persistent, and, as I think, wholly unjustifiable attack of the Old School upon the New there would not have been any division; and hence the prospects of union between the two will be very materially affected by the attitude of Old School Presbyterians. Nothing short of the most earnest and nearly unanimous desire on the part of the latter will give the measure the least hope of success with New School Presbyterians. This question is not to be manipulated by a few leaders. The heart of the Church must be thoroughly in it on both sides, or nothing can be done.

3. I have failed to see any urgent, practical necessity pressing upon either branch of the Presbyterian Church which requires organic union in order to its relief. Both branches are strong in themselves. Both are well organized. Both have their missionary boards for the propagation of the Gospel. Both have large invested interests. The country in which both are working, is abundantly ample for both, without any conflict or jealousy. Both are in the process of rapid growth. Neither needs the other for the purposes of church-life. It might be a pleasant spectacle in some respects to see the two united in one organic fold; but it is very far from being evident that the aggregate usefulness of the two would be increased thereby. It might be seriously impaired, especially if the union is to result

in the revival of old controversies. There is at least some danger that the spirit of party would again make its appearance. It is, hence, a very important question for both branches to consider whether both—each now working so well in the separate state, and each accustomed to its own particular line of policy—had not better let well enough alone.

4. New School Presbyterians, in looking at this subject, will readily see that their position in the united body would be that of a minority, since the other branch would contribute the largest element to the common organization, and hence be able to count the most votes in the General Assembly. As a natural result, the Old School would determine the general policy and course of the united body. Union would be practically merging the New School into the Old, so far as the control and management of ecclesiastical matters are concerned. The politics of the Church would be virtually Old School. I have some doubts whether New School Presbyterians will judge it best to put themselves in this position. Among themselves they now do things in their own way and that too a very good way; they have an ample opportunity for the display of their own peculiar characteristics. But in the event of union, all this would be very greatly modified by the numerical preponderance of the Old School. This, I confess, seems to me a point which New School Presbyterians will do well thoroughly to consider before taking the step proposed.

5. The doctrinal basis, as submitted by the Committee, is in the following words: "The Confession of Faith shall continue to be sincerely received and adopted, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures; and its fair historical sense, as it is accepted by the two bodies, in opposition to Antinomianism and Fatalism on the one hand, and to Arminianism and Pelagianism on the other, shall be regarded as the sense in which it is received and adopted." Just here lies, perhaps, the greatest difficulty of the whole question.

What is this "fair historical sense," as it is accepted by the two bodies? and when and where has it been set forth? Is this sense the same in the two Schools? And if not, then which of the senses—that of the Old School, or that of the New—is to be deemed the "fair historical sense"? Is there to be a new sense, different from that of either of the Schools, which shall have the power to harmonize both? Are the two senses, though in some respects different, to be accepted and adopted, each being viewed as perfectly orthodox? No one can deny that in the interpretation of the Confession of Faith Presbyterians of the two Schools have differed to some extent, and that they still differ. They stand in this respect just where they did thirty years ago. Dr. Hodge, of Princeton, for example, and the Rev. Albert Barnes, though subscribing to the same Confession, are very clearly Calvinistic theologians of different types. The immediate Imputation Theory which figures so largely in the theodicy of the one is not held by the other; and hence Princeton, the recognized expounder of Old School theology, can not consistently regard Mr. Barnes as being orthodox, though he is most cordially accepted and honored as such by his New School brethren. The simple truth is, there is a real difference between the two Schools, hitherto claimed by the Old School to be essential and vital, and also admitted as a fact by the New School, while denied to be essential and vital. Thus the matter has stood; thus it now stands; and thus it will continue to stand, unless the Old School do—what there is not much probability of their doing—virtually concede that all their past allegations of heresy against the New School were little better than simple slander.

Now, in respect to this admitted difference, what is to be done, and what are to be the terms of union? The two schools once contended over this difference with great earnestness; and if brought together in the same ecclesiastical organism, upon a basis manifestly so ambiguous and uncertain as that proposed by the Committee, they are quite likely to do the same thing a second time. It strikes me that this point needs a more precise and definite solution. There ought to be an absolute and explicit covenant of mutual toleration, in plain words, binding both schools in respect to the peculiarities of each; and if they cannot agree to such a covenant, to be placed in the fundamental law of the church as one of the terms of the union, then this fact will be proof conclusive that they had better not unite together. Such a covenant is the very least that the exigency will permit; and as human nature is constructed, even among theologians, it is not quite certain that even this would answer the purpose. I object to the basis of the Committee, because in the well-known circumstances to which it refers it is indefinite, and hence liable to almost any interpretation which party spirit might inspire. Perhaps the Committee could not agree to a more definite basis; and if so, then it is a fair question whether they had better try to agree at all. The simple Confession of Faith as a basis has failed to unite the two Schools; and now, if we are to have something added in the way of explanation, to prevent the recurrence of this failure in the event of re-union, then let that something be as definite as words can make it.

6. The expanding acts of 1837, originally enacted by the Old School, and at no subsequent period reaffirmed, and always declared by the New School to be acts of gross ecclesiastical usurpation and outrage are left untouched in the proposed plan of union. They were the immediate occasion of the division. The assumption of powers on the part of the General Assembly involved in these acts has never been recalled. It remains on the record uncontradicted and unchanged; and there it will remain, unless something more than the committee propose be done to change it. This I am apt

to think, will not be quite satisfactory to New School Presbyterians, especially when they remember that they differ somewhat from their Old School brethren as to the powers of the General Assembly. They will naturally want some positive guarantee incorporated into the constitution of the Church, that the like assumption shall not be repeated at any future time. This is a question that ought to be settled beforehand—not by indirection, but in language too plain to admit of the slightest doubt as to its meaning.

7. It is a very obvious fact that what may be termed the tone and type of Presbyterianism in the two schools are not precisely the same. The one partakes more of the Scotch spirit, and the other more of the New England spirit. The one has been designated as Scotch Presbyterianism, and the other as American Presbyterianism. It is not clear, by any means, that these two types, without deciding the question of their relative merits, will not work better for the glory of God and the edification of the Church in the separate than they will in the organically united state. Both certainly have done very well since the division; and whether they will do better in the state of union is at least a matter of some doubt. I certainly do not desire any union which leaves the way open for conflict between these two phases of Presbyterianism. The phases are real; and whether they can be harmoniously blended in one organism is a point which at least admits of debate. If they cannot be, as the history of the past would seem to indicate, then things had better be left as they are.

8. What disposition will be made of the property questions to be settled in the event of union I am not sufficiently a lawyer to decide. Yet it seems to me that these questions will involve some difficulty. Take, for example, the church-erection fund, now held as a trust fund by trustees, under a special act of incorporation, and placed under the care of a certain New School General Assembly that met at Philadelphia, and also under the care of all successive assemblies representing the same constituency. This fund was contributed by New School men, and for New School purposes. Where then is the power to change the ecclesiastical status, and relationship of this fund? This with like questions to arise in the other branch of the Church, and perhaps other property questions to grow out of union, will demand very grave consideration. Neither branch should commit itself to union until both see very clearly the end of the experiment. The law-committee proposed may shed light upon this subject; but until the light comes it will be prudent to wait.

I have thus, in response to your request and as concisely as possible, named some of the difficulties which have occurred to me in respect to the proposed plan of union. I am quite aware that the whole subject is as yet in an inchoate state. Both Assemblies have continued the joint committee directing them to report, in 1868, any modification of the plan "they may deem desirable in view of any new light that they may receive during the year." It is to be hoped that the subject will be frankly and thoroughly discussed; that all the objections will be carefully weighed; and that both branches of the Presbyterian Church will fully understand each other when they come to the point of final action. It is just now, as it will be until settled, the great question in the Presbyterian Church. Both Assemblies were eminently wise in simply accepting the reports of the joint committee and remitting the whole question to both branches of the Church for "deliberate examination." Perhaps the committee in their next report, will see occasion to modify the plan. Whatever may be the result, all good men must rejoice in the Christian and fraternal spirit which seems to be at the bottom of this movement. This is as it should be. Yet, whether it will be best for the two Presbyterian bodies to unite together upon the terms as thus far indicated, or upon any terms likely to be adopted—whether either will by union improve its condition, or contribute more to the common cause—this, I confess, is a point upon which I have many doubts. Perhaps more reflection, or greater progress in the movement, will change this opinion; yet such is my present light.

THE REUNION OF THE OLD AND NEW SCHOOL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES.

This is a thing all devout Christians ought to thank God for. It is a great event in the history of the Church. But whilst we cannot but rejoice at the healing of the breach in the Presbyterian church, our heart is filled with sadness and sorrow at the widening of the gap in our own. This division is contrary to the true genius of the Lutheran church. A few years ago we boasted that the Lutheran church had never given rise to any sect, that amid all the terrible conflicts and revolutions through which she had passed, she always righted herself, and in the end remained a unit. So we hope and trust it will be again. Such is the good sense, and piety of the church, her liberality and the biblical and reasonable character of her doctrines, that we cannot see how she can divide, and remain in a divided state even as long as our Presbyterian brethren were separated. There are some points of resemblance between the Presbyterian separation and ours, though in other respects the cases are widely different. Both branches of the Presbyterian church labored to build up the spiritual interests of the Redeemer's Kingdom, both prayed and labored for genuine revivals of religion. The New School was not more earnest in leading souls to Christ than their brethren of the Old School. There was no tendency in either branch of the church to ritualism or Romanism. The Old School loved their Confession of Faith, and they feared that the least departure from it would fill the church with heresy. The New School look-

ed upon the confession in a different light. They claimed the right to understand that venerable document as it struck them and to explain it accordingly. We are willing, said the New School men, to receive the confession of faith as we suppose its framers intended it to be received. But the Old School replied nay, you must receive it, and understand it just as we do, or you cannot be Presbyterians. If you do not receive it precisely as we do, in an unqualified manner, we will unchurch you and you shall not be Presbyterians—you have no right to call yourselves by our name; we are the true Presbyterians, and you have no right to call yourselves Presbyterians. Is not this the very position now taken by our Symbolical brethren. Do they not unchurch us on precisely the same grounds? Is not the very existence of these two famous confessions of faith, viz: The Augsburg Confession, made in 1530, and the Westminster Confession, made in 1643, a strong presumptive evidence that all creeds are but imperfect documents, and that it is contrary to the mind of Christ, and the dictates of sound reason for a government or a church to compel men to subscribe *ex animo* to articles which in the end may turn out to be wrong? The New School, through its great representative men Lyman Beecher and A. Barnes, said, "we cannot think that the Lord Jesus ever designed that the unity of His church should consist in an entire uniformity of doctrines or ceremonies, for such a unity as the human mind is constituted, is an impossibility. We profess to understand the meaning of God's word as well as those pious and learned divines who formed the confession in 1643, and we think we are quite as honest and sincere in our search after truth as they were, and we think we have as good a right to canvas their opinions as they had the right to examine the confessions of those who had preceded them. We contend that the Saviour has never authorized, much less commanded, any set of men however pious and learned, in any age, to lay down any form of doctrine or ceremony that must be received by all men under the penalty of his displeasure. We are willing to receive the confession as we understand it, and you may do the same, but we deny your right to compel us to receive it in the same sense that you do. You may separate from us, but you cannot drive us out of the Presbyterian church, we will be Presbyterian Christians in spite of you."

The wedge was driven in, and the Church was split in two! The men who so vigorously swung the mauls in riving the body of Christ asunder, have nearly all gone to their reward. For thirty years the two branches of this great and powerful church stood apart. Either branch of this great Christian family would have done honor to any Christian denomination in the world.

In point of piety, learning, and pure biblical discipline, and moral power, both these branches of the Presbyterian church stand out in bold and honorable relief, second to no other church on earth. The Old School, honest and sincere in her convictions, went on "conquering and to conquer," and the New School was not far behind. The New School was somewhat smaller numerically, but what she lacked in numbers she made up in zeal and energy. Both branches of this great Protestant church stand out boldly for a true, living Christianity. Experimental piety seems to be the polar star of their efforts. We should all thank God for the great influence, and the intellectual and moral power of the Presbyterian church. The Presbyterian church is the great moral bulwark of Protestantism. Puritanism was once laughed at by churchmen, Romanism, and infidelity, but it quietly held on its way and made itself a great power in the world. It is true there are some things in the Presbyterian system, which we as Lutherans do not like, but it has so many good and commendable traits, those parts we do not approve are entirely lost in the resplendent glory of its good ones. Well, God in His wise providence that permitted this great and efficient church to separate thirty years ago, and now, after the lapse of nearly the third of a century, covering an entire generation of men, the most of the instigators of the division being dead, or having retired from the active duties of the ministry, their successors having, perhaps, more liberality and less sectarian bigotry, and being more fully permeated into the spirit of Him who prayed that His disciples "might be one," are now about to unite in the bonds of a great Presbyterian brotherhood! Thank God for this, another evidence of progress in the right direction. Oh, that our poor, weeping and distracted, and dissevered Lutheran Zion would profit by the experience of the Presbyterian church. If the Rev. C. G. Finney, in 1837, could say that the Devils held a jubilee in hell when the General Assembly met, may we not now suppose that the angels of heaven rejoice over this contemplated union?

The last thirty years will constitute a marked era in the history of the Church. It will be remarkable for three things, viz: 1. The emancipation of Slavery in Russia, the United States, Brazil, and some of the West Indies. 2. The progress of the Gospel in heathen lands, and the counter Reformation, or the strong tendency of some of the Protestant Churches towards a Romanistic Ritualism.

In the first conflict the New School church took an active part, and contributed not a little to that glorious result. The Old School was rather conservative. But now the work is done, and both branches of the church can unite in thanking God for what has been done. Both branches of the church have been active in extending the Redeemer's Kingdom in Pagan lands, they have brought their immense resources to bear on this work.

In the third conflict the two branches have been true as steel to the principles of Protestantism. Geneva, since the days of Calvin, has been a thorn in the side of Popery, and so all the streams of Protestant Christianity that have issued from that renowned city, have been opposed to Popery

in every form and shape. There has not been and is not now the least tendency in the Presbyterian church towards Ritualism. Would to God, we could say as much for our dear Lutheran church. But I suppose God intends to permit us to complete the separation that has been commenced, and after a while we will all be heartily ashamed of our selfishness and dogmatism, or if we do not live to see that day, our children, like the Presbyterians, will in the course of time, see the folly of their fathers, and with a more enlightened zeal, pray and labor to unite the church their fathers so unnecessarily divided.

Twenty years ago, a good Presbyterian brother said to me, when I sympathized with him on the painful divisions in his church, "your time too must come, your church, like ours, will have to pass through the fires of controversy." Well, it has come. The Presbyterians have passed through the Red Sea, and are now rejoicing in their quiet way, on the banks of deliverance, whilst we are just plunging into the turbulent waters! May the good Lord help us through! We need much piety, grace and humility to pass safely through this terrible ordeal. May the Lord give us grace and wisdom to do that which will be well-pleasing in His sight. "Domine succurre nobis visceribus commotus super nos."—R. W. in *Lutheran Observer*.

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