

Miscellaneous.

DR. NELSON SPEECH ON REUNION IN THE HARRISBURG ASSEMBLY.

Rev. Henry A. Nelson, D.D., of the Presbytery of St. Louis, said:

Mr. Moderator: I rise at this stage of our deliberation upon this important question to say a few words; because I am provisionally in a position to make some statements which no one else but yourself, sir, is able to make; and I apprehend (from your position in the chair) you would prefer that they should be made by another. I think that this testimony may assist brethren of this Assembly in coming to a complete understanding of each other, and of the brethren of the other assembly. I solemnly believe that such an understanding is all that is necessary to an unanimous adoption of the report which is before us. I am sure that in this Assembly, there are no obstacles to the adoption of the report, except those which arise from the solemn, conscientious convictions of brethren who have not yet been able to see any way of voting as they would wish to vote on this report. I desire most earnestly to invoke from all this Assembly the utmost brotherly forbearance towards those who are not able in all respects to agree with them. The difficulties which are in the way of some minds, and which have been seriously in the way of mine, are chiefly presented in that solemn paper which was read immediately after the Report of the Joint Committee; and I think it only justice to say that I believe I have had better opportunities of understanding the heart, as well as the brain from which that paper emanated than some of my brethren, and I say, without hesitation, that there is no other heart, and no other brain, the throbbings of which I have ever felt, for which I have a more thorough respect. Sirs, if this Assembly had been the Diet of Worms, and had had behind it all the powers of the German Empire, and all the dungeons of that Empire at its disposal, that paper would have been read just as steadily, and just as calmly as it was read then. More than this—I seriously believe that it is easier for a Christian man to express his convictions in the face of such terrors, than to express them with the solemn fear of his heart that he will grieve an Assembly of brethren whom he loves in Christ Jesus.

Then, sir, let me proceed to give a statement which I think I am in the best position to give. I rejoice in my soul at what those brethren have said to us [referring to Rev. Dr. Richardson and Ex-Chancellor Green, delegates from the Old School General Assembly], and the brotherly way in which they have alluded to the delicate differences between the two branches.

The most difficult part of this proposed Union is that part which is called the "Doctrinal Basis," because it is that part which undertakes to tell the world what we think to be the essentials of the Gospel of Christ—the truth which must not be sacrificed for any earthly consideration. As Christians and Presbyterians, we have no diplomatic secrets. I therefore feel at liberty to say that when the Joint Committee were in session the last time in Philadelphia, they appointed Dr. Stearns and myself, (Brother Patterson having been under the necessity of leaving before that time, else I have no doubt that the Committee would have appointed Dr. Stearns and Dr. Patterson,) and the other part of the Committee appointed Dr. Gurley and Dr. Backus to prepare a Doctrinal Basis. We met for serious fraternal consultation. At our first interview we were not able to agree. That which Dr. Stearns and myself felt to be necessary as a suitable guarantee for that liberty which we understand to be demanded by this Church, was not satisfactory to our brethren, and we parted under a solemn fear that we should not be able to come to an agreement. After this interview of the sub-committee, the two Committees met separately, the New School Committee in one room, and the Old School Committee in the other room. Dr. Stearns and myself reported that we could not agree with the other members of the sub-committee, on several points, and they were essentially these; that the Plan of Union must embody a distinct recognition of the entire equality of these two bodies as to their orthodoxy. We had said to our brethren in the sub-committee, that "our people and our ministry were particularly pleased with the report of the Committee of last year, which was acceptable because the preamble said that the negotiations were to be conducted on the ground of the entire equality of the two Churches. We had been able to tell our brethren that that item in the preamble came from our Old School associates, and that made it particularly acceptable. There is no point on which brethren of the New School will be more sensitive than on this point of orthodoxy. The general assertion of equality in the preamble, followed by refusal to have in the Doctrinal Basis a distinct recognition of equality in orthodoxy, would be fatal to the plan." Our associates of the New School Committee fully sustained Dr. Stearns and myself in the position which we had thus taken.

In the afternoon when we came together, Dr. Gurley surprised us by presenting a statement, which seemed at first view to be a more full, more ample, more complete statement of what we asked for than our own phraseology. This was referred to the sub-committee, and we retired to consult and report upon it, while our associates proceeded to consider the other parts of the plan of Reunion. Instead of reading as you see it now, it read (these I am confident were its exact words)—commencing after the clause which is known as Professor Smith's amendment to the Philadelphia platform, viz: "It being understood that this Confession of Faith is received in its

proper historical—that is the Calvinistic or Reformed—sense." "It is also understood that various methods of viewing, stating, explaining, and illustrating, the doctrines of the Confession of Faith shall be allowed in the United Church as they have hitherto been allowed in the separate Churches, to any extent which does not impair the integrity of the Reformed or Calvinistic system." After a few moments of silent scrutiny, one of the Committee representing this Assembly said, "Dr. Gurley, the grammatical construction of this sentence fairly allows an interpretation which would be offensive to us, and which could never be accepted." The brother who made the remark was requested to state what that interpretation was. He thought it could fairly be understood to imply "That there is now allowed a variety of views and statements and interpretations of the Confession of Faith in one or the other of the Churches, which does impair the integrity of the Reformed or Calvinistic system, and the majority of the United Church is to determine how much of this liberty is allowable. This does not amount to a liberty equal to the variety of views which are now known to prevail in the two branches of the Church." Dr. Gurley disclaimed the intention of such an interpretation. It was proposed to alter the paragraph so as to divest it of that liability. And the proposed changes—all that Dr. Stearns and I thought necessary—were readily and cheerfully accepted. We proceeded to scrutinize every phrase and every word. Dr. Stearns said: "I do not exactly like that word 'allowed'." "I did not like it," said Dr. Gurley; "but could not think of any synonym which I thought you would like as well." "Have you any objection to inserting the word 'freely'?" said Dr. Stearns. "None at all," said Dr. Gurley. "So in went the word 'freely'." "I shall be 'freely' allowed." The sub-committee had appointed me their clerk, and they desired me to transcribe it. As I was doing so I said, "I do not exactly like that phrase 'to any extent.' How would you like to change that for the relative pronoun, and to say 'various views, &c., which do not impair'?" "We will like it better," my three associates said. Dr. Stearns made a further suggestion. He said, "Are you not willing to have it read 'The Confession of Faith shall continue to be received'?" "Certainly," they all said. And I take it there is not a man here who does not appreciate the purpose and import of that change.

I have made this statement, in order that the Assembly may be as fully advised as the Committee were advised of the animus with which this article was drawn as it is, and as reported and accepted in Joint-Committee. It left the impression on all our minds, that it was a more ample and complete statement of all that we had insisted on than the phraseology we had chosen. I know that to be the impression avowed in respect to the guaranty of our liberty. I subsequently learned that Brother Patterson and some others of the clearest minds with whom I am acquainted, thought it still open to the interpretation, against which we supposed we had secured it by these amendments. I am constrained therefore, to think that the paragraph is fairly liable to that wrong interpretation; and I wish that sharper minds than those of the sub-committee had been there to successfully divest it of all liability to such wrong interpretation. I am competent to testify, as I have now done, that the purpose of that article of all liability to that construction which it has nevertheless received. When I discovered that brethren viewed it in that way, I at once said, "If that be taken as the intent of the article, I know of no New School man who will accept it. But we must be so frank in our statements; we must be so clear in our testimony, that that is not its intended sense, that no one in the future can honorably claim it is so. If my statements are confirmed by my associates in the Joint Committee, it seems to me it will relieve the anxieties of brethren."

Let me say a word, sir, about this matter in a more general way. It is extremely difficult to devise phraseology which shall be absolutely secure against such misunderstandings. There cannot be language, I think, which will define what the Calvinistic or Reformed system is, which will be absolutely free from liability to misinterpretation.

The Confession of Faith is capable of being understood differently by different minds. And so, let me reverently say, is not even God's holy Word? We must have allowance for different views and different interpretations. But, sir, I plant myself on the history of this Church and defy the world to bring to any candid mind evidence that all the views which are acknowledged as orthodox in this Church, are not to be accepted as Calvinism. We are going to have in the future, I believe, less difficulty, than in the past about this. When good old Dr. Hawes was ministering in his orthodox way to his people in Hartford, a young minister came to him in great distress because the people in a neighboring town were becoming greatly excited by preaching which he thought contained Arminianism. The Doctor patiently listened to him, and calmly replied, "Why, dear brother, I guess it is not Arminianism; I guess it is only Calvinism moving." And, sir, that is what we are about to have—Calvinism moving at the head of all its hosts in an unbroken column—moving immediately on the enemy's works! And in that forward movement, men will not find time to arraign their brethren for heresy as they found time when you and I were boys.

Having said thus much upon that part of our work, I beg the indulgence of the Assembly while I proceed to other parts. Article 2d of the Basis affects those churches in our connection which are spoken of as "imperfectly organized," some of the most orderly, some of the most orthodox, some of the most Calvinistic and virtually most

Presbyterian of any of our churches. Thirty-seven years ago I was permitted to be received into the fellowship of the Church as a communicant in one of those churches that has sent a number of its sons into the Christian ministry, and into this Church, and they are confessed to be good enough Presbyterians. That church cannot complete its organization in our sense of the words, without doing violence to the consciences of some of its most revered members. But it has in it men enough, and women enough who understand Presbyterianism as well, certainly, as I do, and love it as well as any of us—enough such men and women to make two or three Presbyterian churches as large as some in our connection, and man them with as intelligent elders as any that are upon our roll. There are other such churches. We have reason to entertain profound respect for them. I trust that the sentiment which has been expressed by the Joint Committee in their explanatory remarks in connection with their report, is the sentiment of this Assembly; and I take it to be the sentiment of the special Committee, whose report we are now considering. I trust those churches will continue with us in good fellowship. The most of whom will complete their organization according to our theory; and if some of them do not, God forbid that their liberty should ever be touched by the General Assembly.

I wish to say a few words now in regard to that other troublesome part of the report,—the examination of ministers, as they pass from one Presbytery to another. Being a minister of good standing in one Presbytery of this Church, I hold that I have the right to be so recognized by any other Presbytery into whose bounds I may come, until that Presbytery shall convict me by judicial process of heresy or sin. This I believe to be the true doctrine. But, sir, I find that many of my brethren in this body do not agree with me in this. Conspicuous that the other sentiment prevails, I yield to it; but if we were to vote upon the articles in detail here, I should still vote against that. If the plan was still open for amendment, I should still insist on that amendment. I wish to be understood as yielding my own opinion here, to the opinion of my brethren. But if there should be a man whose conscience constrains him to vote against his brethren on any question, God forbid that I should sit against Charity and against the Holy Spirit of Love by imputing any but pure motives to such a brother, or that I should fail to honor such fidelity to one's personal convictions. In the Joint Committee a year ago, one brother only of the Old School dissented from our action, and declared himself distressingly sensible that one man standing against so many, to whom he claimed no superiority, was in an adious position. We hastened to console him. We thanked God that Presbyterian education in Calvinistic theology does make it impossible for a man to yield his conscientious convictions, even for the sake of agreeing with his brethren.

One word more, if you please, sir, in regard to that matter. I think I have discovered some misapprehensions that can be removed. There is a serious fear in the minds of some of the brethren in this Assembly that our plan of Union will be understood to mean this: that every man who goes into it is on his oath before God to accept every proposition in the Confession of Faith as absolutely as he receives all that is written in the Word of God. I am sure it will not be wrong for me to refer to a famous historical incident. Our beloved and honored brother, Rev. Dr. Fisher, has in the providence of God been appointed to a conspicuous position before the Church, in connection with an eminent leader in theological controversy. I am sure that incident has been misunderstood by some of our brethren. On that conspicuous platform in the Philadelphia Convention, Rev. Dr. Hodge, highly honored by us all, disclaimed the disposition which he thought had been unfairly attributed to the Old School, to require the acceptance of "philosophical theories and theological speculations," superadded to the Confession of Faith. He disclaimed all this, and proposed to take the Confession of Faith in its own words, without philosophy or interpretations. He proceeded to recite some statements, and to call upon Dr. Fisher, as a representative man, to say whether he accepted them; and Dr. Fisher said that he did, and that led to that affecting scene which has thrilled so many hearts. But did Dr. Fisher mean that he accepts every statement in the Confession of Faith as it stands, according to its real meaning? Dr. Hodge has publicly said that he could not say that; and if I recollect rightly that he knew but one man in the United States that could say that, I would travel a hundred miles to see that man, if Dr. Hodge had told his name. We are Calvinists. We are a body known in history as Calvinistic. Our plan of Union, as I have shown that it was meant to be understood, guarantees all the liberty that we now enjoy.

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