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CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

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
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Editorial Notes and Comments


THE ASSEMBLY AND ITS ACTIONS

 COMPREHENSIVE report of the proceedings of the Cleveland Assembly is the leading feature of this issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY. That it is interpretative as well as descriptive does not detract from the accuracy of its factual statements. Rather facts are blind and meaningless save as they are interpreted. Just as it takes both the facts recorded in the Bible and the interpretations of those facts afforded us by the Biblical writers (*i. e.*, its doctrines) to yield us Christianity, so it takes a knowledge of the actions of the General Assembly plus an interpretation of those actions to give us anything like an adequate understanding of what happened at the 146th General Assembly. There is no such known thing as a bare fact, *i. e.*, a fact of which we have no interpretation. As DR. JAMES DENNEY once said: "A fact of which there is absolutely no theory . . . is a blank unintelligibility, a rock in the sky, a mere irrelevance in the mind of man." There may be a difference of opinion as to the right interpretation but some interpretation there must be if the fact is to have any meaning for us whatever. A history worthy of the name is much more than a chronology.

The Bible gives us not only the facts that lie at the basis of Christianity but an *authoritative* interpretation of those facts. The Bible speaks with authority. Is that also true of the General Assembly? It is to be admitted that it does in a judicial case, so far as the final disposition of the case in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. is concerned. There are those who seem to think that it also speaks with like authority when as a non-judicial body it issues deliverances similar to that issued by the last Assembly relative to the Independent Board for Foreign Missions. Such, however, is not the case. The most that can be said is that such deliverance are "entitled to great respect and deference" (Report of Commission of Fifteen, Minutes of 1926, p. 83). We say advisedly that this is "the most that can be said" as not infrequently they are entitled only to such respect and deference as is due to a few self-chosen leaders. We do not subscribe to the view that the General Assembly "has all the power the Church would have if it were possible to convene the Church together in one place," but we do hold that the actions of a General Assembly are entitled to great respect and deference in as far as they express anything like the combined wisdom of the Church-at-large. As matters now stand, however, the actions of the Assembly can hardly be said to be expressive of the wisdom of the Church as a whole. A commissioner who goes to the Assembly merely because it is his turn to go is hardly a representative commissioner. Many of them look upon attendance at the Assembly as a junket trip. What is perhaps even worse, this


method of electing commissioners brings it about that the great majority of them, being without previous experience, are subject to easy manipulation by the "platform." As a result the commissioners often do little more than "rubber stamp" what the "Hierarchy" proposes. That this is what happened in the case of the action relative to the Independent Board is obvious from the fact that it was adopted without study. This means that it is entitled only to such respect and reverence as is due the recommendations of the General Council. In our judgment the adjective "great" is out of place in this connection.

THE RIGHT TO PROTEST

 S long ago as 1758 the General Assembly recognized the right of any of its members "to protest against any act or procedure of our highest judicature . . . and to require that such protestation be recorded in their Minutes." This immemorial right finds expression in Section 106 of our Book of Discipline: "If a dissent or protest be couched in decorous and respectful language, and be without offensive reflections or insinuations against the majority, it shall be entered on the records."

This right to protest, while not denied, was unwarrantably curtailed by the last Assembly. Section 9 of the protest of the minority (see later pages for details) was deleted by vote of the Assembly on the ground that to declare what the minority considered an unconstitutional act of the Assembly to be a "nullity" is an insinuation against the majority. But unless we are prepared to say that an act of the Assembly is binding even if unconstitutional—we are not sure but that many, including the General Council, are prepared to say that—it is perfectly proper to say that such an act is plainly a nullity. Surely it is an unwarranted curtailment of the right of a minority to protest to require that they put nothing in their protest that does not meet with the approval of the majority. The next thing we know the Assembly will be appointing committees to write or at least edit protests before they are allowed to be submitted to the Assembly for record on its minutes.

A NEW PRESBYTERIAN PAPER

 T was announced at the last Assembly that it is expected that the *Presbyterian Advance* will cease publication and that its place will be taken by a new paper to be published in New York and edited by DR. EDMUND B. CHAFFEE, Director of the Labor Temple in that city. The *Presbyterian Advance* which has been forced to discontinue for financial reasons has agreed to present its list of subscribers and good will to the new paper. It is intimated that the new enterprise has sufficient financial backing to carry it through its opening years.

On Dealing with Dissenting Minorities

An Echo of the Cleveland Assembly

By the Rev. Prof. Oswald T. Allis, Ph.D., D.D.

THE question of the adoption or rejection of the "Plan of Union providing for the Organic Union of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. and the United Presbyterian Church of N. A." was one of the major issues which came before the Cleveland Assembly. In opposing its adoption the Rev. H. McAllister Griffiths pointed out that the opponents of the proposed union were not averse to the union as such, but only to the basis upon which it was proposed to unite. With a view to making this basis satisfactory by eliminating serious defects, both doctrinal and ecclesiastical, Mr. Griffiths proposed a number of amendments, all of which were promptly rejected. One of these amendments was particularly significant because it showed so clearly the attitude of leading proponents of the union.

The amendment referred to merely stipulated that dissenting minorities—congregations the majority of whose members were unwilling to enter the union—be permitted to retain their church property. The offering of this amendment called forth two very noteworthy statements from leading advocates of the Plan of Union, from Dr. Mudge, stated clerk of the Assembly, and Dr. J. Ross Stevenson, chairman of the Assembly's Department of Church Cooperation and Union. Dr. Mudge declared the amendment to be unconstitutional on the ground that church property does not belong to the individual congregation but to the Church as a whole. In saying that Dr. Mudge overlooked the obvious fact that were the amendment embodied in the Plan of Union the adoption of the Plan by the necessary two-thirds of the presbyteries would make the amendment *ipso facto* constitutional. The Plan contains a number of features that are at present unconstitutional. The reason for sending it down to the presbyteries is to make it constitutional. Furthermore, Dr. Mudge's statement ran directly counter to an action of the Assembly taken a few hours previously in dismissing two entire Presbyteries (North and South Siam) to unite with the Presbyterian Church of Siam, a native church independent of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. Consequently, Dr. Mudge's objection to the proposed amendment was without warrant in fact, but is significant as showing the strong desire of those in authority to force every congregation to enter the Union.

The statement of Dr. Stevenson was even more significant. In introducing his amendment Mr. Griffiths pointed out that it was in line with the action of the last Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church, which had instructed its representatives on the Joint Committee to see that such a provision was included in the Plan of Union. Mr. Griffiths appealed to Dr. Stevenson to confirm this statement. But Dr. Stevenson confined himself to the rejoinder that no such proposal had been brought to the attention of the Joint Committee. This placed Mr. Griffiths at a disadvantage, since he had not gone to the platform armed with a copy of the last

Minutes of the United Presbyterian Church. But on page 331 of those Minutes the following action is recorded:

The following resolution of recommendation and instruction to the Committee on Presbyterian Unity was presented and adopted:

RESOLUTION

Whereas, Memorials from seven Presbyteries were presented to the last Assembly desiring for one reason or another that all further efforts at Union with the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., and other denominations of the Presbyterian family be, for one reason or another, discontinued; also, eleven Sessions and Congregations petitioned said Assembly in opposition to the proposed Union with the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A.; and,

Whereas, said Assembly nonetheless granted the prayers of our Union Committee that it be permitted to continue its efforts at Union for another year, but with the following recommendation: "that any basis of Union with any denomination shall make provision for the protection of congregations, in the matter of Church property rights, which vote not to go into a Union, and that said provision shall be a part of the basis for any Union." See Minutes of General Assembly, page 52. . . .

Now, therefore, be it resolved that this Assembly calls the attention of the Committee on Presbyterian Unity to the above recommendation and instruction of the 1932 General Assembly with the assurance that this Assembly heartily approves of the same.

We are not primarily concerned to determine the exact method by which the expressed will of the United Presbyterian Assembly was "smothered in committee." What we are concerned to point out is that the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., insofar as the Cleveland Assembly represents it, has clearly no intention of granting any rights to dissenting minorities. The majority is to rule; the minority is to submit or get out, leaving everything except its conscience behind it.

This little episode at the Cleveland Assembly probably passed almost unnoticed by the majority of the commissioners who were apparently more concerned to vote down Mr. Griffiths' amendments than to find out what he was really aiming to secure by means of them. But it may have and we believe will have far-reaching consequences. The words spoken recently at Cleveland will be heard at Oxford, 200 miles away when the United Presbyterian Assembly meets there a month later. They will not be unheeded by the United Presbyterians who are outnumbered by the Presbyterians nearly ten to one. Now they are quite free and independent. If the union goes through, they will be a minority, and the Cleveland Assembly has given an illustration of its regard for minorities which furnishes much food for thought.

The action of the Cleveland Assembly was to say the least ungenerous and tyrannical. Such actions do not promote peace—they foster strife. The tragic results of a coerced union are writ large upon the pages of recent Canadian

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the Word of God and the Protestant character of the Presbyterian Church.

8. The resolution in effect declared certain ministers, elders and members of the church guilty of offenses without making even a pretense of observing the constitutional rules made and provided for the trial of causes.

9. The resolution, being, we believe, beyond the rightful power of the General Assembly to pass, is plainly a nullity.

About ten minutes before adjournment, and at a time when everything seemed over, the Moderator announced that because of further thought he had decided that he could not admit this protest with Section 9 in it. He said that Section 9 was a reflection against the majority! The writer hurried to the platform to defend his right to state the legal position of the minority. The amazing decision of the Moderator took everyone by surprise. It was so obviously unfair that a large proportion of the Assembly would not agree. Debate was sharp. "When we assume to try to edit the protest of the minority, it isn't their protest any more," cried a commissioner from the Synod of New York. "Certainly there is no reflection there!" Mr. Griffiths obtained the floor, and plead for the right of the minority to have the record clear as to its position. "What we say does not commit *you*," he said, "but it is the only place where *we* can get upon the record the fact that we believe the action to be illegal. Take away from a minority the right to express its protest in decent and respectful language, and what rights have the minority left?" The Moderator called for a vote, and *Section 9 of the protest of the minority was eliminated by a vote of the majority!* But about three hundred and fifty commissioners voted with the minority. Many observers feel that if the Assembly had lasted another week it might have been a different story. Many eyes were beginning to get accustomed to the inwardness of things.

Just before dissolution the protestant reporting here managed to get in a third protest in the following terms: "I wish respectfully to protest against the action of this Assembly in refusing to allow Section 9 of my protest against the action concerning the Independent Board to be entered upon the record." Subsequently, this protest was also signed by the Rev. Leo Alvin Gates, D.D., of Buffalo, N. Y.

Prior to the sudden and dramatic reconsideration of the protest after it had been accepted for record by the Moderator, an interesting incident occurred. It is thus recorded in the Assembly Daily News:

"The Rev. Walter Westerfield through the Moderator requested Mr. Griffiths to withdraw his protests. Mr. Griffiths responded that he realized that he represented a minority against a majority which was overwhelming in its opposition to his position. He said that he bore no ill will, but that his protests were based on convictions and he could not do out of courtesy what his conscience told him not to do. This statement was received by the Assembly with considerable applause. Mr. Westerfield and Mr. Griffiths shook hands."

And so the 146th General Assembly was dissolved. To the writer it was in many respects an Assembly of tragic decisions. No doubt it realized that it was a historic Assembly, but it is the conviction of your reporter that it will loom famous in historical perspective not for the reason that its decisions were wise, but that some of them were so extreme and partisan that they aroused a great reaction in the Church. For the wind is in the trees, and the Bible believing hosts in the Presbyterian Church are stirring to life as they have not stirred for ten years.

What will be next? We do not know. But this we *do* know, that whatever comes, His own are in the hand of God.

H. MCA. G.

"Studies of the Constitution"

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position with reference to the Constitution of the Church as a church member or an individual church that would refuse to take part in the celebration of the Lord's Supper or any other

of the prescribed ordinances of the denomination as set forth in Chapter VII of the Form of Government"—so we read on page 43 these "Studies of the Constitution." When it is remembered that the ordinances prescribed in Chapter VII of the Form of Government includes prayer, the expounding and preaching of the Word of God and Baptism as well as the Lord's Supper, such a statement is nothing short of sacrilegious.

6. It does not appear wherein the right of private judgment as held by the General Council differs from that of the Roman Catholics. It apparently holds that we should first have an *explicit* faith in the power of the General Assembly to decide all controversies respecting doctrine and discipline and then an *implicit* faith in its decisions. In this it forgets that the General Assembly itself is subject not only to the Constitution of the Church but to the Word of God. One wonders whether the General Council has ever read the thirty-first chapter of the Confession of Faith where it is not only stated that the "decrees and determinations" of synods and councils "are to be received with reverence and submission" "if consonant to the Word of God" but that "all synods or councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith and practice." Be that as it may, the General Council has such confidence in church judicatories that it holds that they can "decide cases of conscience" (p. 10). And that despite the fact that the Confession of Faith affirms that "God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any way contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith and worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also" (Chap. XX, Sec. II).

It was not in vain that the General Council prepared these "Studies of the Constitution" for the "guidance of the commissioners to the 146th General Assembly." Probably the General Council itself was surprised at the meekness and docility with which the great mass of the commissioners followed its leading. As a result the Cleveland Assembly not only virtually ordered the dissolution of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions but commanded all affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. to sustain its official boards and agencies "to the full measure of their ability." We hardly think, however, that either the members of the new Board or that Presbyterians in general will prove as tractable as did the mass of the commissioners to the last Assembly. There are some Presbyterians at least who still think for themselves and who, moreover, are aware that their primary responsibility is to the Lord who bought them. Such would much rather be accounted disloyal to the Presbyterian Church than disloyal to Jesus Christ. And disloyal to Jesus Christ we are if we use the funds He has entrusted to us for the propagation of modernistic missions—as the General Assembly has in effect ordered us to do. For nothing is more certain than that Modernism in all its consistent forms of expression is anti-Christian to the core.

On Dealing with Dissenting Minorities

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church history, so large that he who runs may read. If the Union proposed for American Presbyterians is so eminently desirable and so generally desired, it should not be necessary to coerce and penalize those who do not wish to enter it. To permit them to forego its benefits should be punishment enough. Here as in Canada the methods resorted to in the endeavor to bring about union are a serious indictment of the proposal itself, and a grievous hindrance to its realization.