

MINUTES

OF

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

OF

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

IN

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA:

WITH

AN APPENDIX.

A. D. 1837.

PHILADELPHIA:

PUBLISHED BY THE STATED CLERK OF THE ASSEMBLY.

PRINTED BY LYDIA R. BAILEY, 26 NORTH FIFTH STREET.

1837.

rule of faith and practice, and pursue their course as those who must give account to the great Shepherd and Bishop of their souls.)

We have now, dear brethren, briefly explained the reasons for the course we have taken on the present occasion, and we believe it would have been a blessing to our church, if the measures now adopted had been resorted to at an earlier period. The progress of controversy has greatly destroyed brotherly confidence. Indeed, the union between the parties, for several years, has only existed in name; in fact they have been two separate bodies, and we believe the sooner they are brought to consider themselves as forming distinct denominations, the sooner will they return to the spirit and principles of the gospel of Christ.

We must observe, in conclusion, that on whatever side the principal fault of our present disturbances may lie, the whole church has abundant cause of deep humiliation and repentance before Almighty God. Our calamities have not arisen from the dust; our heavenly Father has stretched forth his hand over us, and let us acknowledge "the rod and him that hath appointed it." Let us return to him that he may return to us; if he has wounded, it is he alone that can heal; if he hath broken down, he can build us up.

By order of the General Assembly.

DAVID ELLIOTT, *Moderator.*

JOHN M'DOWELL, *Stated Clerk.*

Philadelphia, June 8th, 1837.

CIRCULAR LETTER.

S. Miller.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, to all the churches of Jesus Christ, wish grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, through the Eternal Spirit.

VERY DEAR BRETHREN—

Assembled by the good providence of God, as the supreme judicatory of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, constituting by our ecclesiastical organization, not only "the bond of union, peace, correspondence, and mutual confidence among all our churches," but also the only organ "of correspondence with foreign churches," we cannot consent to separate, after the unusually long, interesting, and important session which we are about to close, without pouring out the fulness of our hearts in reference to the weighty matters concerning which we have been called to act since we came together, into the ears and bosoms of all other Christian churches, and especially those with which we are in friendly correspondence.

You cannot be ignorant, dear brethren, that for a number of years past, the friends of truth and of regular Presbyterian order in our beloved Zion, have been filled with painful apprehension at the manifest departure from our ecclesiastical standards, which appeared to be gaining ground in a number of our judicatories. Firmly believing that the great purpose for which the church was founded, was that she might maintain in their purity the doctrines and discipline of Christ, and hold them forth to a dark world. We have thought ourselves called upon to make inquiry respecting the errors and disorders alleged to exist, and as far as possible to banish them from that portion of the professing family of Christ with which we are connected. You have witnessed for a number of successive years our struggles for the attainment of this object. You have witnessed the mortifying disappointments, which, from time to time, have attended our efforts to obtain, by constitutional means, a redress of the grievances of which we complained. You have seen what we regard as error becoming more extensive in its prevalence, and more bold and over-

bearing in its claims. You have seen certain voluntary societies, under the cover of professed zeal for the doctrines and order of our church, in fact if not in intention, gradually subverting both. You have heard the motives of the friends of truth reproached; their name cast out as evil; their zeal for maintaining the purity of the gospel represented as a mere struggle for power; and all their attempts to detect and censure heresy, held up to public view as the efforts of restless and ambitious men to gain the pre-eminence for themselves. Amidst these ineffectual attempts to banish error, and to restore order, vital piety has languished; mutual confidence has disappeared; the reviving and converting influences of the Holy Spirit have been withheld; and our time and strength have been painfully occupied with strife and debate, instead of being wholly given to the spread of the gospel and the conversion of the world.

We shall not stop to inquire, by whose agency or by what steps this state of things has been produced. The adjustment of the proper award in regard to this question, might be deemed an invidious task, and fail of commanding universal assent. But on the deplorable character of the situation in which we were placed, there can be but one opinion. Over our conflicts every friend of religion has mourned; every intelligent member of the Presbyterian Church has felt grieved and humbled; and we were becoming a reproach among all surrounding denominations. To every enlightened beholder it has been long manifest, that parties so heterogeneous and discordant could no longer act together in the same body, either with comfort to themselves, or with honour and edification to the cause of our common Christianity.

Such has been our melancholy history, especially for the last six years; and such were the discouraging and distressing circumstances in which this Assembly convened. On coming together, it was found to contain such a decided majority of the friends of truth and order, as to place within our reach the most thorough measures of reform. And it is worthy of special notice, that this majority was created and brought together in full view of the measures adopted by the orthodox Assembly of 1835, and of all the conflicts and painful disclosures which characterized the Assembly of 1836. It was after the attention of the whole church had been strongly called to these measures and disclosures, that our Presbyteries sent a delegation, the major part of whom declared in favour of the doctrines and order of our body. We felt ourselves, therefore, distinctly and solemnly called upon, by the voice of the church, to go forward and rescue her struggling and bleeding interests from that humiliating and degrading perversion to which they had been so long exposed. This painful duty we have endeavoured to perform in the fear of God, and although we do not claim that our manner of discharging it has been wholly free from the manifestation of human infirmity, we do hope and believe that our measures have been accompanied with much sincere and humble seeking for divine direction; and that they are such as the enlightened and impartial friends of our ecclesiastical constitution will ultimately approve.

As the great truths of the Gospel lie at the foundation of all Christian hope, as well as of the purity and prosperity of the church, we felt ourselves bound to direct early and peculiarly solemn attention to those doctrinal errors, which, there was but too much evidence, had gained an alarming prevalence in some of our judicatories. (The advocates of these errors, on their first appearance, were cautious and reserved, alleging that they differed in words only from the doctrines as stated in our public standards. Very soon, however, they began to contend that their opinions were really new, and were a substantial and important improvement on the old creed of the church; and, at length, that revivals of religion could not be hoped for, and that the souls of men

must be destroyed, if the old doctrines continued to be preached.) The errors thus promulged were by no means of that doubtful or unimportant character, which seems to be assigned to them even by some of the professed friends of orthodoxy. You will see, by our published acts, that some of them affect the very foundation of the system of gospel truth, and that they all bear relations to the gospel plan, of very serious and ominous import. Surely, doctrines which go to the formal or virtual denial of our covenant relation to Adam; the native and total depravity of man; the entire inability of the sinner to recover himself from rebellion and corruption; the nature and source of regeneration; and our justification solely on account of the imputed righteousness of the Redeemer, cannot, upon any just principle, be regarded as "minor errors." They form, in fact, "another gospel;" and it is impossible for those who faithfully adhere to our public standards, to walk with those who adopt such opinions with either comfort or confidence.

It cannot be denied, indeed, that those who adopted and preached these opinions, at the same time declared their readiness to subscribe our Confession of Faith, and actually professed their assent to it, in the usual form, without apparent scruple. This, in fact, was one of the most revolting and alarming characteristics of their position. They declared, that in doing this, they only adopted the confession "*for substance*," and by no means intended to receive the whole system which it contained. Upon this principle, we had good evidence that a number of Presbyteries, in the ordination and reception of ministers and other church officers, avowedly and habitually acted. And hence it has not been uncommon for the members of such Presbyteries publicly and formally to repudiate some of the important doctrines of the formulary which they had thus subscribed; and even, in a few extraordinary cases, to hold up the system of truth which it contains as "an abomination;" as a system which it were to be "wished had never had an existence." No wonder that men feeling and acting thus should have been found, in some instances, substituting entirely different Confessions of Faith in place of that which is contained in our constitution. Who can doubt that such a method of subscribing to articles of faith is immoral in principle; that it is adapted to defeat the great purpose of adopting confessions; and that, if persisted in, it could not fail to open the door of our church wider and wider to the introduction of the most radical and pestiferous heresies, which would speedily destroy her character as an evangelical body.

Was it possible for us to doubt or hesitate as to our duty, when such errors were evidently gaining ground among us, and when it was in our power judicially to condemn them? Errors which, ever since the days of the apostles, have been pronounced by the true church to be dangerous corruptions of gospel truth. We are conscious that in pronouncing the errors in question to be unscriptural, radical, and highly dangerous, we are actuated by no feelings of narrow party zeal; but by a firm and growing persuasion that such errors cannot fail, in their ultimate effect, to subvert the foundation of Christian hope, and destroy the souls of men. As watchmen on the walls of Zion, we should be unfaithful to the trust reposed in us, were we not to cry aloud and proclaim a solemn warning against opinions so corrupt and delusive.

In the course of our attempt at reform, we have thought it our duty to annul the Plan of Union between Presbyterian and Congregational Churches in the new settlements, formed in 1801, and evidently intended as a temporary system to meet a temporary exigency. By that Plan, Congregational Churches were brought into complete union with the Presbyterian Church; and their delegates, without having adopted our public standards, were introduced into our judicatories, and vested with the power of giving authoritative, and, in

some cases, decisive votes on the most important questions of doctrine and discipline; and thus, in reality, of governing our church. And it has happened, in fact, in a number of instances, that some of the most important decisions, in their bearing on the truth and order of our body, have been decided by the votes of those who had not subscribed to our ecclesiastical constitution, and stood aloof themselves from its authority. Thus Congregationalists were found, in effect, to control the Presbyterian Church, and to prohibit her carrying into execution our appropriate system, while we had no more authority over them than they chose to recognise.

It is impossible to contemplate this Plan of Union now, without perceiving that it is most unnatural in its character; that it has not a shadow of foundation in the constitution of the Presbyterian Church, and that it is adapted to be deeply injurious in its influence on us. It is but just, indeed, to say, that it was first proposed and commenced on our part, and that it was dictated by that spirit of unsuspecting simplicity and fraternal confidence which foresaw no evil. Its mischiefs gradually disclosed themselves, and it was not until they had taken wide and deep root, that they began to attract the attention and awaken the fears of the friends of truth and of Presbyterian order. It was more and more perceived, not only that this system, as before remarked, was most unequal, as it in fact conceded the right of governing us to those over whom we could exercise no controlling power, but that its effect must be, slowly but inevitably, to subvert the order and discipline of the Presbyterian Church. Surely no impartial judge can blame us for wishing this mischievous system rescinded, or for annulling it when we had the power. It is due to ourselves, however, to say, that this measure was not either hastily conceived nor abruptly executed. The Union in question has been for many years regarded by the great body of the Presbyterian Church, as perhaps the most fertile source of the difficulties existing among us, especially when viewed, not merely as a violation of our constitution and an invasion of our order, but as grievously abused by those who have taken advantage of it, in a manner not intended by its original framers, to disseminate their pernicious errors. Viewing the subject in this light, the General Assembly of 1835 respectfully requested the General Association of Connecticut to consent that the Plan of Union in question should be annulled. Having now waited two additional years in vain for any favourable action in the case, on the part of our brethren of Connecticut, and having witnessed with the deepest sorrow the ever growing evils of this relation, we have felt at this time solemnly called upon to abrogate the whole Plan, and to put an end, as far as in us lay, to the destructive effects which have so long resulted from its operation.

If it were obviously equitable and important, that the Plan of Union alluded to should be annulled, it was in our view no less equitable and important that the ecclesiastical bodies to which that Plan had given existence, and which were animated and governed by its spirit, should be declared to be no longer connected with our church. It has been indeed painful to the Assembly to declare bodies in which were brethren, whose piety we cannot question, and whose activity in extending the visible church we must regard with approbation, to be no longer connected with our body. But we were shut up to this painful duty. Being irregularly brought into our church, and retaining all the feelings and habits growing out of the circumstances of their original introduction, we could not hope that they would walk together in peace with us, so long as the points of difference between us were so many and so serious. Although the creation of more churches on the Plan of Union was made to cease by the previous act of abrogation, still, as all must grant that the act which brought them in was wholly unconstitutional; and, as if this were the

case, the act itself was of course void from the beginning, and all the acts and bodies growing out of it equally void—we have deemed it necessary to declare the brethren connected with those judicatories no longer connected with the Presbyterian Church. Fully aware of the painfulness of this decision to both parties, in order to avoid it, we made overtures to the brethren who were opposed to us in sentiment and in policy, which had for their object an *amicable separation*; offering them, in order to bring about such a separation, what we deemed equitable and even indulgent terms. These terms will be learned from the correspondence of the joint committee appointed to negotiate on the subject, which has been already made public. Our brethren saw fit to decline our proposal, and chose rather to abide the enforcing of the constitution. They cannot complain of our course, when the only alternative was the ruin of the church, or the restoration of our form of government to its legitimate and uniform reign.

We are aware that some have called in question the constitutionality of our proceedings. On this subject, the more maturely we reflect the more firmly are we persuaded that we have taken the most eligible and even the only practicable course. To have attempted to separate from us the brethren with whom we could no longer walk in peace, by personal process in each case, would obviously have been impossible, and even if possible, tedious, agitating, and troublesome in the highest degree. The General Assembly is vested by the constitution of our church with plenary power “to decide in all controversies respecting doctrine and discipline; to reprove, warn, or bear testimony against error in doctrine or immorality in practice, in any church, Presbytery, or Synod; to superintend the concerns of the whole church; to suppress schismatical contentions and disputations; and, in general, to recommend and attempt reformation of manners, and the promotion of charity, truth, and holiness, through all the churches under their care.” It is manifest that no other body but the General Assembly is competent to sit in judgment on a Synod; and it is equally manifest that no other body can be vested with power to abolish a system which the General Assembly itself had formed, without consulting any of the Presbyteries. We have, therefore, not hesitated to apply the constitutional remedy in its fullest extent. And now, reposing on the high ground of our truly primitive and apostolical system of order, while we appeal with unshaken confidence to the sympathy of all evangelical churches, to the approval of the American people, and, above all, to the sanction of Him “who sits as King upon the holy hill of Zion.”

In the adoption of these measures, we are earnestly desirous that our views and feelings in regard to our Congregational brethren of New England should be correctly understood. We have no controversy with them, nor do we desire to have any, with respect to the Congregational form of church government as it exists among themselves, nor with any other form of church polity. Toward the excellent brethren beloved in the Lord in those and all other churches, who are now testifying against the errors which are troubling *them*, as they are troubling *us*, we entertain the most cordial esteem and fraternal affection. They are engaged in the same hallowed cause with ourselves, and we cordially bid them God speed. Let there be no strife between us. There *ought* to be none, and there *will* be none, so long as there is no effort made by any party to intrude on the domestic concerns of any other. We cannot wisely attempt, with our different views and feelings, to inhabit the *same house*; but, as *neighbours*, we may be on the most amicable and even affectionate terms. We wish for no more than to be allowed the fair and unimpeded action of our own ecclesiastical principles. We desire to stand on our own responsibility, and not to be made involuntary sharers in the responsi-

bility of other bodies and systems of action, with which we cannot entirely harmonize. We desire to perform our Master's work upon the principles which we conscientiously prefer, because we believe those principles to be found in the Word of God; and we cannot consent to an alliance with any individuals or bodies of men in their system of action, without reserving to ourselves the right of review, of control, and, if necessary, of correction.

It is our earnest hope, with respect to the brethren thus severed from us, that both parties will be essentially benefited by the separation. We trust that both will henceforth proceed in the conscientious discharge of duty, without being crippled or embarrassed by each other; and that hereafter there will be no other strife between us, than who shall love the Redeemer most, and who shall serve him with the warmest zeal.

We have already adverted to the unhappy influence which has been exerted for a number of years past, by certain voluntary societies, which, though not responsible to any church, and of course, therefore, not to us, were pursuing a train of measures adapted covertly but effectually to weaken her energies and govern her proceedings. We believe that if there be any departments of Christian effort to which the church of Christ is bound, in her appropriate character, to direct her attention and her unwearied labours, they are those which relate to the training of her sons for the holy ministry, and sending the gospel to those who have it not, and planting churches in the dark and destitute portions of the earth. To be willing to commit either of these branches of her peculiar work to foreign and irresponsible hands, we are more and more persuaded is unfaithfulness to the best interests of Zion, and adapted fatally to injure the cause of gospel truth and of Presbyterian order. Surely if the church is under obligations, not only to maintain in her own bosom, but also to impart as far as possible to the whole world, all such religious knowledge, worship, and ordinances as God hath revealed in his Word, she is bound to see to it, that no persons shall be either educated or sent forth as ministers who are not well instructed in her doctrine and order, and, as far as can be ascertained, firmly attached to both. This is equally a dictate of duty to our Master in heaven and to our own beloved institutions. To suffer Boards constituted by ourselves, pledged to adhere to our own standards, and responsible to our own judicatories, to languish while we sustain and strengthen societies over which we have no control, and which are gradually undermining at once our purity, and, of course, our real strength, while professing to add to our numbers, would be manifestly as unwise as it would be criminal in those who profess to love the Presbyterian Church, and to consider her as conformed, in her doctrine and order, to the apostolic model.

One of the most formidable evils of the present crisis is the wide spread and ever restless spirit of *radicalism*, manifest both in the church and in the state. Its leading principle every where seems to be to level all order to the dust. Mighty only in the power to destroy, it has driven its deep agitations through the bosom of our beloved church. Amidst the multiplied and revolting forms in which it has appeared, it is always animated by one principle. It is ever the same levelling revolutionary spirit, and tends to the same ruinous results. It has, in succession, driven to extreme fanaticism the great cause of revivals of religion, of temperance, and of the rights of man. It has aimed to transmute our pure faith into destructive heresy, our scriptural order into confusion and misrule. It has crowded many of our churches with ignorant zealots and unholy members; driven our pastors from their flocks; and with strange fire consumed the heritage of the Lord, filling our churches with confusion, and our judicatories with conflict; making our venerated name and beloved institutions, so far as its fearful influence extends, a hissing and a

by-word before the American people; and even threatening the dissolution of our national Union, as well as the dismemberment of the Presbyterian Church.

While we have endeavoured to take, as our Master enabled us, decisive measures for securing, under the divine blessing, the future purity and peace of our body, we would openly admit, dear brethren, that mere orthodoxy and regular scriptural government ought not to be considered by any church as the *only* or even as the *chief* objects of her regard. Let it never be forgotten that truth, whether in respect to doctrine or discipline, is in order to godliness; and that the real prosperity and glory of any church consists in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, enlightening, reviving, and sanctifying her members, and adding to their numbers daily of such as shall be saved. We would, therefore, now that the adorable Head of the church has enabled us in some measure to remove from our body the most prominent sources of division and strife, humble ourselves before God, and call upon all our brethren of every name, with us to seek and pray without ceasing, for those reviving and converting influences of the Holy Spirit, which alone can render any church what it ought to be—a real blessing to the world and a nursery for heaven. And while we earnestly desire and implore this blessing, let us remember the great importance of distinguishing between genuine revivals of religion, and those which are spurious and fanatical. The former are the product of gospel truth, impressed on the heart and conscience by the Holy Spirit of God. The latter are mere excitements of natural feeling, produced either by error or by some other form of human machinery. In proportion as the former prevail, the church is prosperous and happy. The latter, however arrogant in claim or plausible in appearance, are only fitted to send a blight on the garden of the Lord, and to deceive and destroy the souls of men. We fear that not a little of that which has assumed the precious name of revivals, in various parts of our bounds, is of this latter description. This lamentable fact, however, creates no prejudice in our minds against genuine revivals of religion. It rather excites us to desire and long for them with more ardour; to pray for them with more importunity; to promote them with more care by an edifying example; and to guard against all counterfeits with more enlightened vigilance.

Brethren farewell. May the God of Israel bless you all—every one. We love, with tenderness which we cannot utter, our own portion of the church of Jesus Christ our Lord. But we love also every other portion of the inheritance of that dear Saviour, and rejoicing in the confident hope that heaven will ring with praises of the redeemed from amongst every Christian denomination, our ardent and constant desire is, to draw the bonds of union between us and all the rest, as close as possible here below. Hence the present epistle to our brethren. Hence our earnest desire to explain clearly to them our posture, our action, and the solemn crisis, which, having first overtaken several of our sister churches, has at length fallen upon us, and will unquestionably overtake in succession all denominations of Christians.

And now may God, of his infinite mercy, set the seal of his visible approbation upon what his providence and grace have enabled us to do. And may you, brethren, be preserved from the evils which we have endured, or be enabled to meet them with more promptitude and fidelity than we have done.

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ abide richly on all who love his holy name.

By order of the General Assembly.

DAVID ELLIOTT, *Moderator.*

JOHN M'DOWELL, *Stated Clerk.*

Philadelphia, June 8, 1837.