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CATHOLIC PRESBYTERIANISM.

THE meeting at Edinburgh, in July, 1877, of three hundred and thirty-three ministers and elders, commissioned by forty-nine Presbyterian Churches, in twenty-five different countries or colonies, representing 19,040 ministers, with 21,443 congregations, holding creeds in harmony with the consensus of the Reformed Confessions, was fitted to show that, at least in the more literal sense of *καθ' ὅλου*, Presbyterianism has some claim to the adjective Catholic. Certainly it has its foot on all parts of the globe, and is especially active and advancing wherever the English tongue is spoken. That gathering undoubtedly tended to free it from a prejudice that has long clung to it—of being a poor piece of provincialism, a troublesome but insignificant obstruction to the real catholicity of the Protestant Church. It is singular how many of the clouds of prejudice that gathered during the cold eighteenth century over Presbyterianism as a whole, and over its most distinguished leaders of former days, are now yielding to the daylight and fresh air of a more honest and wholesome age. What extraordinary vicissitudes of reputation have Calvin and Knox undergone! Calvin, honoured and loved in his lifetime above all other men, and pronounced by such a strong opponent as Richard Hooker, "incomparably the wisest man that ever the French Church did enjoy since the hour it enjoyed him;"* then looked on by Anglicans in the eighteenth century as a mere incarnation of spite and mischief; and now again, despite some blots which it is vain to deny, restored to his pedestal as the great and venerable Calvin, with somewhat of the old halo shining round his head. The name of Knox has passed through a similar circuit. In his own time he was regarded as "a man of God, the light of Scotland, the comfort of the Church, the mirror of godliness, a pattern and example to all true ministers in purity of life, soundness of doctrine, and boldness in reproving wickedness;"† in the eighteenth century he had become an

* Ecclesiast. Polity, Preface.

† See M'Crie's "Life of Knox," p. 350.

exaggerations that spring up in the popular mind, that this country or the other is rapidly yielding itself to Christ. The work is gigantic, and it will be slow. We must allow for longer periods. A nation does not change its religion in a day. Their religion has trickled by an infinite number of streams into the natural life; it has become intertwined with the natural growth, with society and with the family, with literature and art; it has taken time for all this, and we must allow time for its overthrow. According to the legend, the Palmyra palm takes a thousand years to grow, and another thousand to decay; and religions die slowly. The work is far too noble to be spoiled by such loose and feeble expectations as are based upon mere show of numbers; or by a triumph or reverse at one little post, when there are perhaps ten thousand stronger. We must have a great revival of spiritual life, such a revival as will clear from the path of the Church all miserable entanglement from opium wars, and dishonest gains, and immoral lives, and the brutal contempt of the stranger for the subject-race. We must rise above our little petty standard of the good we do, to the measure of the love of Christ, and let it kindle in the Church those magnificent ambitions that He lives among us always to satisfy. Vast and countless multitudes, not measurable, like the houseless and hunger-smitten poor at home, not merely a cityful, but whole populations and great races of men stand forward helpless, their religious convictions slowly giving way, the pride vanishing from their stately history, while with folded hands they look in their passive way for the help we are so slow to carry to them.

W. Fleming Stevenson.

THE FUTURE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES.

NINETY years have elapsed since the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, constituted on the Scottish model, and with the old Scottish standards, convened at Philadelphia. Seventy-two years before, the first Presbytery was planted on the American continent. The ninety years under the Assembly have been years of varied experience—of painful separations and blessed reunions; of diversities ending, like the Cumberland schism, in permanent separation, or returning, as in 1758, to unity and peace; of blessed revival, like that which at the beginning of the century so greatly quickened and enlarged the Church, and violent convulsion, like that which for a whole generation kept Old School and New School asunder. At length, after this varied and troublous experience, the Union of 1869 terminated the era of separation, and the Church was restored once more to her original, historic attitude, and to her continental place and work.

Another decade will complete the first century in the organic life of the Presbyterian Church in the United States as thus constituted. Some thoughtful observers believe that this decade is to determine very largely the character and the career of that Church, even for centuries to come. The nine years which have elapsed since the Union have already done much to shape and colour that future. The spirit they have developed, the plans and enterprises they have suggested, and the general direction they have given to denominational thought and aspiration, have made them significant years in the history of American Presbyterianism. But the ten years that are to round out this first century are probably fraught with even more decisive results. During these years the tenacity and potency of the bond of union are to be more fully tested; the relations of the several types of theology and of preaching are to be more fully settled; the methods and policy of the united body to be more exactly determined; and the difficult problem of unity in diversity, order without tyranny, and liberty without license, is to be practically solved. The future of the Church will largely be what this critical decade shall make it. That future is largely in the hands of those who, at the present hour, are giving tone and form to the denominational life. A more momentous responsibility than they are bearing never rested on Presbyterian men at any crisis in the history of our Church, even on those who, amid the shock of the Revolution, did so much to give that Church shape and coherence and spiritual power.

It is not the purpose of the present article to discuss, specifically, the spirit or policy, or the probable drift and influence, of this significant decade. Such a discussion might carry the writer too closely along lines where personal or party predilections would be likely to warp the judgment, and to affect improperly the conclusions reached. My present aim is rather to look beyond this immediate future, in which the thoughts and feelings and activities of living men are so much involved, and to inquire what the second century in our denominational life is to be, and what may be the future that is still more remote,—to glance, in other words, at the probabilities environing this more distant future, to note some among its favourable aspects and conditions, and to suggest some grounds of hope respecting its character and its results.

Among the favourable indications which may be noted as justifying the hope of a happy future for our American Church, the first to be mentioned is the large *degree of harmony* which has come to prevail in respect to *Church doctrine*. While the differences which led to the separation of thirty years ago were not primarily or mainly theological, there were yet considerable diversities in the modes of stating and explaining the common faith, which eventually had much to do with the historic division. In respect to such topics as the nature of the connection between our sin and the original offence of our first parents, the manner in which our inherited sinfulness should be regarded and

described, the real nature and relations of the atonement, and its scope and extent as a remedial scheme, and other kindred topics, the varieties of opinion existing, though not vital in themselves, were by degrees so emphasised and exaggerated as to seem to constitute, in the aggregate, such a wide divergence, as to render it impracticable for parties so largely unlike to dwell together in unity within the tents of one denomination. Thirty years of debate became requisite to make it apparent that these varieties were not so great as to imperil in any way the integrity of the Calvinistic system, to which all parties cordially adhered. And it was the gradual discovery on all sides, that men may hold any among the varying theories without losing their hold upon the common faith, or becoming disloyal to the Church; and the further discovery by many, that the free allowance of these differences might be an actual contribution to the strength and practical force of the system of doctrine taken as a whole,—which, as much as anything else, made the Union possible, and led to the practical attempt to secure it.

The harmony thus attained was not secured by the relative triumph of the views characteristic of either party entering into the Union: it was not unity brought about by the expulsion or the obliteration of either school or type of doctrine previously existing. It is a harmony resulting from, and based distinctly upon, the free and cordial and trustful recognition of the right of all those shades and classes of opinion to live and flourish together, not only within the domain of a common Calvinism, but within the boundaries of one denomination. On any other basis, the Union would have been impossible: on any other basis, it could not now be maintained. But will such harmony be continued? There is room here for the question whether such free admission of differences is possible without impairing the unity and integrity, the belief and temper of the common body; whether this can take place without leading on to the development of latitudinarian opinions and tendencies that may prove destructive alike to the Church and to the common faith. There is room for the further question, whether the freedom now so generously allowed may not, after a time, be withdrawn, leaving the adherents of some one school of thought at the mercy of a majority belonging to an opposite school—a majority who may yet choose by ecclesiastical processes to purify the common body through the elimination of the offending portion. Such results are certainly not impossible; and so far as they occur, the history of the future will only resemble the unsatisfactory record of the century just closing. But may it not be hoped that the higher experience, gained and expressed in the Union, will itself become permanent and dominant in the Church; checking latitude in opinion, where such latitude is in danger of changing into license, and holding back the devotion to fixed doctrine where it might break out into tyrannical unfriendliness toward freer thought? Will not the historic struggle already experienced become, as in some cases of civil strife, a kind of guarantee against its

own repetition? And is it not probable that those who are to follow the present generation of active and leading minds in the Church will catch their better spirit, and be governed rather by their example; that the terms and conditions of the sacred covenant of union will still be revered by all; and that the broad and vital points of agreement, now so highly appreciated, will still be regarded as of incomparably greater importance than any present or prospective doctrinal diversities?

It may be well to advert here, more briefly, to the *more harmonious conceptions of our polity*, both *intrinsically* and in its practical *application*, which have now come to prevail within the Church. It was an important clause in the *Concurrent Declarations* on which the Union of 1869 was based, that "no rule or precedent which did not stand approved by both the bodies should be of any authority until re-established in the united body, except in so far as such rule or precedent might affect the rights of property founded thereon." The effect of this condition was to sweep aside, so far as legal authoritativeness extended, all those diversities of usage and precedent which had naturally grown up in the two Assemblies during the thirty years of the separation. By necessary inference it also set aside with the rest the Exciding Acts, as they were called, by which the separation had originally been effected. The subsequent comparison of opinion and practice in ecclesiastical administration, conducted as it has been in the spirit of mutual deference, has also led all parties to a clearer recognition of the essential principles underlying our polity, and prepared the way for a wiser and more uniform application of them. Special precedents and rules, peculiar to the one side or the other, have been found to be of small moment, compared with those broader rules and precedents to which all alike cordially adhere; and by natural consequence such special usages have been retired, and the general administration is already becoming more broad, more considerate, more fully tempered with both justice and mercy than before. It may be expected that this result will be still more beautifully apparent in the future; and that the administration of our polity will continue to grow at once more uniform, more strong, and more sound and just also. As in every denomination which has a clearly defined system of government, there will undoubtedly appear among us two opposite tendencies in administration: the strict, exact, technical on the one hand, and the freer, looser, more generous on the other; approaching each specific question, whatever it be, from different sides, and spontaneously forming different opinions as to the demands of law or equity in the case. Instances will probably arise in which these tendencies will come into conscious collision, and in which the one or the other will seem to win a temporary triumph. But it may confidently be expected that in the long-run such triumphs will balance each other; and that the aggregate results of ecclesiastical administration under the Union will conform more and more to the main, substantial principles embodied in our polity, demonstrating at

once the soundness of these principles and the scriptural validity of our ecclesiastical system.

The most important question that is likely to arise in this department of our Church life is that which relates to the possible unification of all Presbyterian bodies in the United States under one truly continental Assembly. Without adverting here to any of the differences of whatever sort now standing in the way, or expressing any positive opinion as to the probability that such unification will yet be realised, we may note the rise of the question within the range even of present vision as one that is certain to undergo practical discussion. More than a generation ago, it was suggested by one of the wisest and best men in our Church that the true path toward such unifying of the various bodies bearing the Presbyterian name would be found in a series of provincial Assemblies, distributed in the three or four main divisions of the country, each with its own admitted varieties in feature, and having a large degree of autonomy in respect to internal government and discipline, but all combined in one grand national Assembly, which should be the supreme representative body in the Church, and to which the final adjudication of all questions vitally affecting the whole denomination should be entrusted. It may be that some such method of organisation as this, added to our present system of judicatories, will yet be devised ; an organisation which will leave sufficient room for those peculiarities that must arise in different sections, and in consequence of varied experiences and culture, and which at the same time will provide for a general body, wherein every Presbyterian on the continent shall be adequately represented, and which in turn shall represent to the nation and to the world, our common faith, system, spirit, and aims as a Church of Christ. Whether under such a plan the north and the south, the east and the west, the Atlantic and the Pacific sections of our Church can thus be combined and held together, from generation to generation, is a great and difficult, as well as interesting problem. That its solution will be attempted, even within the present generation, seems to be evident ; that a solution will be found may certainly be desired by all who love our common faith. American Presbyterianism will reach its highest development, and attain its noblest position only as, merging all minor differences, and clinging simply to its broad, central principles, it grows to be as wide in extent, as single in structure, as truly one amid all multiplicity, as the nation with whose life its own has been so remarkably associated.

Next to this favourable indication as to the future of our Church, may be placed another, originating in the *enlarged opportunity*, the *increase of resources*, the new *development of zeal* and *energy* resulting from the Union. Even should the unification just referred to be indefinitely postponed, and should the Church which became one in 1869 simply go on alone in the spirit of the Master to fill the sphere providentially provided for it, it will still have a vast and a

glorious mission. It may safely be said that to no body of believers since the Reformation has God entrusted more splendid opportunities, larger resources, or a more gigantic work. In no boastful spirit of comparison with sister Churches on this continent, or with Presbyterian bodies in the British Isles, or elsewhere, but rather with a sense of responsibility too deep to be expressed in words, is this solemn fact to be recognised. God has indeed opened a wide door for our Church. Limited in New England by the ancestral position and influence secured to a strong, cultivated, energetic, spiritual congregationalism, still vitalised largely by the spirit of Edwards and his associates; limited, also, for the present at least, in the Southern States by the separate organisation known as the Presbyterian Church, South—it still has practically a whole continent, stretching four thousand miles east and west, and almost as far northward and southward, in which to do its future work for Christ. Aside from all that remains to be done in the implanting and maintaining of the denomination east of the Mississippi, two vast empires are already opening to view as fields for missionary effort: the first in that immense region lying between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains, and stretching from Nebraska to the Gulf—a region which has within itself all the capabilities and resources of a great nation, and which, within the next fifty years, is destined to be inhabited by an intelligent, vigorous population, numbered by millions; the second, on the Pacific slope, from Mexico to Alaska, five hundred miles in breadth and two thousand miles in length, a territory full of material resources of every class, inviting in climate, quick and prolific in the returns it affords to intelligent industry—a territory already occupied by nearly a million of people, and certain to become, within the next century, the home of ten times that number. Into both of these fields, almost boundless in their opportunity and promise, the Presbyterian Church may go forth, unembarrassed by any civil enactment, unhindered by any providential barrier, to plant in every city, in each rising village, and wherever the rural demand justifies it, a Church representing its faith and order, and fitted to bear some part in the rescuing and saving of the whole continent for Christ. Not to speak of the mission of that Church among the twenty-five millions of people between the Mississippi and the Atlantic, and of the measureless opportunity afforded to it in these older States, there is in the regions just described a field for consecrated effort such as has literally no bounds but those imposed by the ability and the zeal of the Church itself. And beyond, there lies a world in ruin, waiting for the Gospel!

As to the resources of the Presbyterian Church, to be brought into use in this great work, little can be said here. The statistics for the current year are suggestive. In thirty-seven synods, distributed into one hundred and seventy-eight presbyteries, we have 5232 ministers and licentiates, 5269 churches, and 567,855 members in communion. The number of children in our Sabbath schools is 600,000, and the

whole number of persons within the bounds of our several congregations is not less than 2,000,000. The increase in the last seven years has been as follows :—Ministers and licentiates, 665 ; churches, 653 ; communicants, 112,468 ; Sabbath-school children, 120,065. The contributions of the churches in 1878, for their own necessities, were $6,333,659 ; and for the various benevolent and missionary enterprises of the Church, $1,948,297. A body of Christians who can contribute from year to year an aggregate varying from eight to ten million dollars for religious uses, and who are increasing at a rate which would double their number every thirty years, and whose capacities for influence and service are enlarging in even greater proportions, may surely be expected in the coming century to do a work for Christ and this continent compared with which all past or present achievements will seem but small.

That great hindrances and perils will beset the work must be anticipated. Should the unity of the denomination in doctrine and in polity be preserved, and these outward resources remain and multiply, another and a more serious liability must be encountered—a liability growing out of the dangerous consciousness of strength, of endowment, of position and advantage, which may come upon such a Church. It will be easy for an unholy temper of pride to creep in, and corrupt the spiritual life of the Church ; it will be easy for it to become satisfied with itself, vain of its orthodoxy and organisation, content with past successes and present position ; it will be easy for it to relapse into idleness, grow deaf to the trumpet calls of Providence, and gradually subside into that state of ease and complacency which, ever since the voice of the Master sounded in warning over Laodicea, has been the peril and the ruin of the visible Churches of Christ. The inevitable result of yielding to such tendencies would be the relative decline of the denomination in the presence of other, more active bodies of believers : it would subside into and become the religion of a class ; it would lose coherence and the sense of unity ; it would ultimately crumble into insignificant fragments. The spirit of revivals and the spirit of missions would die out together ; and instead of the continental growth just sketched, the history of the denomination would be one of languor, retrocession, decay.

Besides this general liability, there will always be certain specific contingencies originating in the attempt to execute the gigantic task described. Will the machinery which has been found adequate thus far prove both strong enough and flexible enough to meet the necessities of the Church, as the work continues to broaden before it ? Will there be capacity and wisdom in the body adequate to improve old methods, to devise new schemes, to adjust the Church wisely to its work ? Will sectional claims be always held in due subordination to the highest good of the whole denomination ? Will the subtle tendencies toward centralisation, apparently inherent in our system, be so overruled and

kept in check as to prevent tyrannical administration ? Will the various judicatories continue in their present harmonious frame of adjustments; or become jealous of each other, and belligerent in their claims and relations ? Even if the Church should preserve in a high degree the spirit of revivals and the spirit of missions, may not these minor perils creep in, on the one side or the other, to frustrate effort, to impede progress, and to mar the bright future which has been pictured before us ? These are practical questions ; and no satisfying answer can be given them, excepting that founded on the hope that the Holy Spirit will continue to abide, even in larger measure, within the Church, as the inspiring power in her activities, and the true life in all her growth. Our faith for the future in this direction, as in others, must mainly be faith in Him.

A further ground for hope that the Presbyterian Church will thus be preserved from doctrinal conflict and from organic disunion, and will become a still more vital and effective agent in the religious development of the continent, may be derived from *the general tendencies of American Protestantism*, in the direction both of unity and of work. It is an obvious and a grand fact, that all parts and sections of evangelical Protestantism in this country are coming more closely together, if not in outward organisation, still in faith, and sentiment, and desire.

The agencies at work in bringing about this result are of two classes. The first is an external pressure which, from at least three distinct quarters, is now forcing American Protestants to take their stand more consciously on common ground. The first of these forces is Romanism : claiming indeed to be very much stronger in numbers and influence than either statistical or other evidence would warrant ; always presuming and arrogant, and ready for almost any species of alliance against Protestantism ; yet always diligent in the task of its own aggrandisement, and always aiming at universal supremacy, political as well as ecclesiastical. The second of these forces is Philosophy, in the low and false sense of that term : challenging at one and the same time all the fundamental tenets of evangelical Christianity, and seeking to tear away even our ultimate beliefs in God, in the soul, in duty, and immortality ; a dangerous foe, corrupting the heart of the nation ethically as well as spiritually, and in fact, if not in form, warring against the entire kingdom of Christ in the land. The third and most efficient of these hostile forces is Secularism : the devotion of the masses of the people to material interests, and consequently to material pleasures, to the exclusion of all religious life ; a service of the god of this world, which shuts out all higher, nobler service, enslaves the heart and life of millions, and even within the pale of the Church is leading multitudes into irreligious living, and into practical unbelief. The external pressure brought to bear upon American Protestants from these three directions seems at times almost resistless. And were they still disposed to make much of their differences, and to debate about the relative value of their

creeds and politics, how could they do this while the very foundations beneath them are felt to be shaking, and the cause and honour of their common Lord are seen to be in such imminent peril?

The other agency to be noted is the interior attraction, originating in an enlarging knowledge of the truth and of each other, and also in a broader and better religious experience, which is quite as obviously drawing all American Christians into closer, warmer union. The instances of organic union which have occurred between kindred denominations are so many visible evidences of this underlying spiritual attraction. It is apparent also in the more intimate connection so largely established between Churches most alike in doctrine, order, or worship. It is seen in the combinations of individual Christians, in religious associations and enterprises of various kinds. While outward forces are compelling these Churches to draw nearer to each other for mutual protection, this inward attraction is also bringing them into a new sense of oneness in faith, in hope, in destiny. And this interior agency is much the stronger, as it ought to be; if this were absent, it is probable that the fierce onsets of outward foes would only scatter and divide the flock of Christ.

The unification which, by this double process, is going forward everywhere within the circle of evangelical Protestantism, is making itself especially manifest in the sphere of evangelistic effort. That Protestantism is more and more consciously accepting its providential mission in this land, as the conservator of sound doctrine, the defender of right principles and institutions, the promoter of piety in the hearts and homes of the people, the supporter of sound and just government, the minister of charity to needy classes, the missionary of a true and pure Gospel in every quarter of the country, and to every soul of whatever nationality, colour, or condition. Unless these functions were filled by such a spiritualised Protestantism, they would never be filled; and without such spiritual ministries the nation would become a ruin. But to fill such a sphere adequately, Protestantism must be one; not indeed organically, for it is possible that the present organisation of all Protestants into one great Church would prove an infinite mischief to these great interests; but rather spiritually—in faith, in desire, and in a common consecration to the mighty task of winning and holding this continent for Christ.

Without further consideration of these general facts, it will be evident that their bearings on the future of the Presbyterian Church here must be close and vital. The spirit of the age is the spirit of union, and with that spirit such a Church cannot refrain from sympathising. Among the various evangelical denominations, this one already occupies a central place, and exerts a large unifying influence. Its affiliations are broad; its sympathies are wide and free. By its creed and by its history it is pledged to the largest Christian fellowship. And there are those who believe that God has established our beloved Church in so advan-

tageous a position among the denominations, and has so endowed and constituted it, that it may become a powerful agent in this process of coalescence among the various Protestant bodies,—itself representing at once the clearest and strongest individual convictions of Divine doctrine, and the most free and catholic sentiment toward all who accept the common Gospel.

The spirit of the age is also the spirit of missions ; and God has given to that Church an honourable place among the evangelising forces to which the welfare and salvation of the nation are providentially entrusted. It is the belief of many that on this continent the Gospel of our blessed Lord is either to win the grandest victory it has ever gained since the age of Constantine, or to suffer a final and remediless defeat. Certain it is, that the future of humanity on our earth is to turn very largely on the work to be done by American Protestantism during the next century. And on what section of that Protestantism can a weightier responsibility be resting than on the Presbyterian Church ? To what body of believers has God entrusted larger capacities or resources, or given a more splendid opportunity ? May we not, on most practical grounds, anticipate that that Church, instead of rending itself to pieces through internal dissension, or settling down into inaction and apathy, the precursor of death, will rise to the magnitude of its Divine calling, and become, in the centuries to follow, all that such a Church, in such a land and time, ought to be ?

It is true that expectations like these may fail of realisation. It is possible that the future to which we have been looking forward will, in fact, be little better than the past ; it is even conceivable that, for its pride or its delinquencies, God may suffer our Church to fall again into fragments, or to sink into insignificance. Latitudinarianism, like that which once through the influence of the Moderates affected so disastrously the Church of Scotland, may creep in on the one side, to impair our faith, to depress our purposes, to embarrass our efforts, and to bring upon us outward failure and humiliation. A rigid conservatism, tenacious in tenet, narrow in policy; awake to no inspiration, and jealous of all progress either in thought or in effort, may, on the other side, impose its own bondage on the Church, diminishing its sympathies, destroying its catholicity, and making it simply the Church of a faction and a class. Certain it is that without a large increase of piety, without much of consecration and of exertion, without the very special presence and aid of the Holy Ghost, such perils can never be adequately met.

Let us hope for the *better*, for the BEST. Let us trust that the Presbyterian Church will duly appreciate its present position and prospects, and will move forward into the future in the same elevated spirit which animated the men who, almost a century ago, laid its strong foundations. Should it thus accept the sphere and the mission divinely provided for it, who can tell what in another century it may become ?

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