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The Proposed Union with the Cumberland Presbyterians

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Section

THE PROPOSED UNION WITH THE CUMBERLAND PRESBYTERIANS.

THE General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, meeting at Los Angeles, Cal., in May, 1903, received from a number of its Presbyteries overtures "relating to closer coöperation or union with sister denominations." In response to these overtures it appointed a Committee "to consider the whole subject of coöperation, confederation and consolidation with other Churches." This Committee was instructed "to enter into correspondence with any Churches of the Reformed family with whom, in the judgment of the Committee, such correspondence would be likely to promote closer relations"; and "to report to the next Assembly such plans and measures as seem to them wise, proper and profitable for the advancement of fraternal relations, for the increase of harmonious work, and, if God shall open the way, and incline the hearts of the Churches thereto, for the reunion of those who hold the same faith and order in the service of Christ." No doubt the Committee, under the guidance of its able and energetic Chairman, has been diligently prosecuting throughout the year the somewhat extensive task committed to it. It is to be sincerely hoped that it will be able to report to the approaching Assembly much progress in the great work of drawing more closely together in the service of Christ those who hold the same faith and order. Meanwhile, however, we are incompletely informed of these labors.

What absorbs our attention at the moment is the result of the conference of the Committee with a similar Committee appointed by the General Assembly of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, meeting at Nashville. This Committee "on Presbyterian fraternity and union," was appointed, it seems, on the same day (May 27) on which our own Committee was appointed. A notification of its appointment was sent at once to our Assembly, and an appropriate reply to this notification was returned, implying that consideration of the general subject of "Presbyterian fraternity and union" was included in the proposed work of our Committee.* During the year these two Committees

* Cf. *Minutes* of Presbyterian Church for 1903, pp. 90, 123, 169.

have been in repeated conference, but the details of the conferences held between them have not yet been fully made known to the public. The ultimate results reached, however, as drawn up at a joint meeting of the Committees at St. Louis during a part of the week closing on February 20, have been published. These results include a "Plan of Reunion," certain "Concurrent Declarations," and some "Recommendations." These the two Committees have agreed to present concurrently to the two Assemblies at their approaching meetings; and on the adoption of them by the two Churches union between the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church will be consummated.

As these documents have been quite generally printed in the newspapers, it does not seem necessary to reprint them here in their entirety. The most important thing to observe about them is that the actual basis of union proposed is very brief, clear and simple. It is embodied in the following statement which forms the heart of the "Plan of Union:":

"The union shall be effected on the doctrinal basis of the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, as revised in 1903, and of its other doctrinal and ecclesiastical Standards; and the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments shall be acknowledged as the inspired Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice"

This constitutes the entire "basis of union," into which nothing else enters: and it is declared that when this basis of union has been adopted by the two Churches in a constitutional way, "then the same shall be of binding force, and both Assemblies shall take action accordingly."

As, however, there are matters which require adjustment on the accomplishment of union, and concerning which it is highly desirable that there shall be a previous good understanding, the Committees propose that the two Assemblies adopt a series of eight "Concurrent Declarations," providing for such adjustments. These adjustments do not enter into the *qua* of the union; but each of them may fairly be considered a *sine qua non*. They are in general mere matters of course, and call for no special remark. But certain ambiguities in them raise questions and will require explanations. We are moved to inquire, for example, into the intention and effect of the two provisos attached to the section dealing with institutions of learning. Are the Cumberland institutions to have liberty to withdraw from the direct control of the courts of the united Church, while the Presbyterian institutions are not to enjoy this liberty? For the present we leave such questions, however, to one side, with the simple remark that if the "Concurrent Declarations" are to serve their purposed end of bringing about a good understanding as a preparation for the union, there will be need of some elucidation of their meaning in more matters than one.

Under the head of "Recommendations" an additional *sine qua non*

seems to be added to those included in the "Concurrent Declarations." For though the matter here alluded to is put forward merely as a "recommendation," it is subsequently included in the enumeration of those things which "shall have been adopted in their entirety" before "this entire plan of union shall be operative." It is not clear what force the adjective "entire" here has. But it is clear that this "recommendation" involves a matter of some importance, which demands careful and prudent handling. Its object is to provide in the united Church for what have been called "race Presbyteries." Its terms are not mandatory but permissive: though the query may possibly arise whether the permission is intended to be given to the stronger or to the weaker "race."

A prominent feature of the secondary documents remains to be mentioned. There is incorporated into the "Concurrent Declarations" a comparatively long section in which certain statements are made relative to the faith of the contracting Churches. As this section may be supposed to have some explanatory value, and it is not always either very lucidly or happily expressed, so that it may be difficult to abstract it accurately, we give it here in full.

"In adopting the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, as revised in 1903, as a Basis of Union, it is mutually recognized that such agreement now exists between the systems of doctrine contained in the Confessions of Faith of the two Churches as to warrant this union—a union honoring alike to both. Mutual acknowledgment also is made of the teaching and defense of essential evangelical doctrine held in common by these Churches, and of the divine favor and blessing that have made this common faith and service effectual. It is also recognized that liberty of belief exists by virtue of the provisions of the Declaratory Statement, which is part of the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and which states that 'the ordination vow of ministers, ruling elders and deacons, as set forth in the Form of Government, requires the reception and adoption of the Confession of Faith, only as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.' This liberty is specifically secured by the Declaratory Statement, as to Chapter III and Chapter X, section 3, of the Confession of Faith. It is recognized also that the doctrinal deliverance contained in the Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith, adopted in 1902, by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 'for a better understanding of our doctrinal beliefs,' reveals a doctrinal agreement favorable to reunion."

These statements do not in any way condition the basis of union, which is and remains solely (to speak briefly) the doctrinal and ecclesiastical Standards of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Their function seems to be only to "ease the soul" of our Cumberland Presbyterian brethren in acceding to this basis of union. Their gist appears to be that the Committee representing the Cumberland Presbyterian Church finds a sufficient doctrinal agreement between the two Churches to warrant them in recommending their Church to unite with ours, and sufficient liberty allowed by our terms of subscription to warrant them in recommending their Church to unite

with ours on the basis of our Confession, adopted by means of our formula. It is, of course, very gratifying to us to learn that this is the case; and we shall not easily or soon forget the generosity of the act. But we cannot profess to think that what it is so well to say has been in this section well said. We feel no necessity laid upon us, it is true, to enter into a detailed criticism of the language of statements having so personal a reference, and managing on the whole, perhaps, to convey their sense. But one or two points require explicit mention to avoid the possibility of serious misapprehensions. We content ourselves with a bare mention of them at this point, since it will be necessary to advert to them with some emphasis later. It would not be true to say that the systems of doctrine contained in the Confessions of Faith of the two Churches agree: though it may be true that systems of doctrine not seriously out of agreement with each other are widely believed in the two Churches. It would not be true to say that the liberty allowed by the formula by which we accept the Confession is at all increased by the Declaratory Statement: though no doubt that liberty is reasserted in the Declaratory Statement. It would not be true to say that either the Declaratory Statement or the whole mass of the revision accomplished in 1903 in any way or to any degree modifies our doctrinal system: though it may possibly be true that some elements of truth not always recognized as provided for in our doctrinal system are emphasized in it. It would not be true to say that the "Brief Statement" in any way conditions the obligation resting on all office-bearers of the Church to hold, teach and defend the total system of doctrine taught in our Standards—among which the "Brief Statement" has no place: though it may possibly be true that it reveals the doctrines most insisted upon by many of the pastors of the Church in their ordinary preaching.

Such, then, are the terms of union proposed to their respective Assemblies by the two Committees. What are we to think of them? It would be as idle as it would be disingenuous to affect to dissemble our natural gratification that it has been found possible to propose that the union shall take place on the basis of our own doctrinal and ecclesiastical Standards, "pure and simple." From our point of view this, of course, simplifies matters vastly. But it would be as disingenuous as it would be idle to affect to dissemble the fact that even so we have misgivings—misgivings growing out of the nature of the case and fostered by some of the phenomena of the proposed terms of union themselves. Utter frankness becomes us in all negotiations of this kind; and in the present case this frankness is made especially incumbent by the generosity of our Cumberland brethren. It would be a poor requital of the generosity of brethren who have agreed to come to us on terms presumably peculiarly agreeable to us, if we left matters unexplained which, if thoroughly understood, might modify their action; and which,

therefore, if left unexplained, might place them in a position of permanent distress. The last of the proposed "Concurrent Declarations" calls on the united Churches to study the things that make for peace, and in order to that, "to guard against all needless and offensive references to the causes which have divided us, and to avoid the revival of past issues." There is but one way to secure obedience to such an exhortation: as there is but one way to justify giving such an exhortation. The causes that have divided us must be removed, and the issues that have separated us must be made really past. If the causes that have divided us remain in action and the old issues still live, it is vain to suppose that those causes will not continue to divide us or that still present issues can possibly be treated as past. If the terms of union proposed imply the removal of the causes that have hitherto divided us and the antiquating of the old issues, they should be accepted by all with acclamation. If they do not, they can produce only an "entangling alliance" and no real union: they can only tempt us to "build a great house around a divided family." Our first duty in the premises is, clearly, to scrutinize the terms of union which are proposed, with a view to discovering whether they really imply the removal of the old "bones of contention."

At first sight, certainly, the terms of union proposed seem to promise exceedingly well for the removal of dividing causes. They reduce in brief to this simple and *prima facie* effective provision: that the Cumberland Presbyterian Church adopt as its own the doctrinal and ecclesiastical Standards of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and thus put itself practically upon our ground. Any misgivings we may feel must turn, therefore, on doubt as to the real efficiency of a simple adoption by our Cumberland brethren of our doctrinal and ecclesiastical Standards to remove the causes which have hitherto divided the Churches and to antique the issues that have separated them. Studying that utmost frankness which seems demanded by the occasion, we shall proceed to indicate the nature of some of these misgivings.

It is not obvious to us, in the first place, that simple adoption of our doctrinal and ecclesiastical Standards on the part of our Cumberland brethren will remove all the causes that have hitherto divided the Churches and antique all the issues that have been raised between them, because it is not clear to us that all the differences which have hitherto divided us—or ought still to divide us—reduce to differences of doctrine and polity.

We are quite aware that there is abroad a zeal for the external union or, as it is now fashionable to call it, "organic union" of Churches, which would fain make light of all obstacles to union except perhaps (at the most) irreducible antagonism in doctrine and polity. But we cannot, for ourselves, help regarding this

degree of zeal as excessive. And we are not a little strengthened in this opinion by the observation that, if we are to judge on the principle that actions speak louder than words, it is not an opinion peculiar to ourselves. It does not appear, indeed, that any one has practically the least intention of surrendering anything he holds very valuable to promote the cause of external Church union. Men may talk sentimentally (because without due regard to the application of their words) of the sin of "rending the seamless robe of Christ" and the duty of "healing the wounds of our Lord's body": but they commonly have reference in this particularly to the sin and duty of others. There lies hidden away somewhere among the roots of action a saving leaven of common sense which comes into operation when the union proposed involves a sacrifice on their own part of something they esteem of high worth. In prelatial Churches, to be sure, there may be some logical justification offered for the subordination of other interests to that of "unity"—if indeed those Churches really believe that the Church is fundamentally an external body, determined by external marks, and organized under external forms, outside of which there is no Church of God. But surely those who know that God's Church consists fundamentally of His elect children and, in its external manifestation, of the *congregatio sanctorum*, should be able to remember that the unity for which our Lord prayed in His high-priestly prayer and to which we are exhorted in the apostolic epistles is no artificial unity of external organization, but is rooted in saintliness and is advanced only by the advance of Christians in saintliness with all that saintliness involves, in respect both of faith and life. Least of all should they be able to believe that any true unity can be induced by neglecting differences that really divide and stifling tendencies that clog harmonious coöperation in common duties. A story is told of a rustic who, wishing a hive of bees, caught every bee that visited his flowers and shut them up together in a box, merely to discover only too quickly the difference between an aggregation and an organism. It were surely better to have two hives—or fifty—and honey: than one hive and no honey.

In very truth separate denominations have something like the same right of existence as separate congregations, and may be not merely defended but advocated on very much the same classes of grounds. Even mere convenience in administration may properly be given decisive weight in the matter. "Organic union" of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America with the Reformed Church of Hungary, or even with the United Free Church of Scotland, or even with the contiguous Presbyterian Church in the Dominion of Canada, would have its difficulties on this ground alone. And surely it will not be contended that the only separation between Churches which will justify their remaining distinct organizations is a separation in mere space; or that the chief difference that can divide Churches is difference in the civil government under which they enjoy property rights and

police protection. We heartily agree that differences as to the nature of the Gospel—the very Gospel which it is the mission of the Church to proclaim—constitute the primary ground of righteous separation. Differences here can never be minimized without treason to the very life of that Church of God (which, we are told, is the pillar and ground of the truth) that we profess to be serving in seeking its unification. And next to doctrinal differences, no doubt, differences in polity, or the organization of the Church for the preservation of its life and the performance of its functions, should take rank. But it does not appear that there are not many other differences which will not merely excuse but justify, and not merely justify but demand, the separate existence of denominations with an insistence proportionate in each instance to the value of the interests at stake. No congregation, for example—to revert to a suggestive illustration already hinted—would be justified in concluding a union with a neighboring congregation, though of the same faith and polity—no matter what additional *éclat* or worldly advantage came to it thereby—if thereby any special work it seemed called to accomplish in the field of the Lord were closed to it, or even rendered more difficult successfully to prosecute. Similarly it were surely a grave mistake, to use no stronger word, for any two denominations to enter into a union which threatened to handicap either of them in any special mission which seemed to be committed to it in the world. The work of the Lord is more important than any union of Churches.

Are there no differences of this relatively secondary—but nevertheless possibly decisive—sort between the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, such as demand at least the most serious consideration when a union of the two bodies comes up for discussion? Differences, perhaps, in traditions and that spirit which grows out of traditions; differences of training and that adaptation that grows out of training; differences in modes of work and the habits that grow out of long-settled modes of work; differences in theories of conduct and those principles of action in dealing with the problems that face the Churches of our day and land which are the outgrowth of these theories: differences, in fine, of manifest mission, opportunities and facilities for special kinds of work, of providential equipment and call to particular tasks? That no such differences exist between Churches of such diverse origins and histories is unlikely: that none of those that exist are of sufficient significance to engage attention when a union between the Churches falls under discussion is incredible: that some of them are of the highest importance is notorious. One or two such differences receive some mention, more or less full, in the subsidiary conditions of union, adverted to in the “Concurrent Declarations” and “Recommendations.” Whether they are dealt with there with wisdom and determined satisfactorily will no doubt become a matter of discussion in the debates of the coming year. Others lie in the background, out of which they must

surely sooner or later emerge. We have no intention of entering upon a discussion of them here. Enough if this bare general reference explains and perhaps so far justifies the misgivings we have expressed as to whether a simple adoption of common Standards, doctrinal and ecclesiastical, provides a sufficient basis of union between the two Churches. If any of these differences affect seriously our furnishing for doing the work of the Lord or our well-considered modes of prosecuting that work, they become obstacles to union of very considerable gravity. It is better that the work of the Lord should be done than that the Churches should unite; and we surely ought to stop at the threshold of a proposition looking to union to consider very carefully whether the union proposed will really advance the work of the Lord which the two denominations are set separately to do.

But in the frank statement of our misgivings we must go a step further. We have deep misgivings whether a simple adoption of our doctrinal and ecclesiastical Standards by our Cumberland brethren affords adequate assurance of that unity of faith between them and us which is the indispensable prerequisite of union.

It is distressingly easy for signatories of differing traditions to attach differing interpretations to documents they sign in common. It has accordingly not been the custom of our Church to act on the assumption that its internal unity and peace would be sufficiently assured by willingness on the part of those whom it would fain receive into its ministry to signify their acceptance of its doctrinal and ecclesiastical Standards. Ordinary prudence and all experience alike have taught it that the same documents may be very variously interpreted by different persons, who look at them from different angles and out of the mists of different kinds and degrees of education; and that it is therefore not safe to commit the great interests put under its charge to the chances of such misunderstandings as must necessarily arise under a system of simple subscription. It has therefore felt in duty bound to take adequate measures to make sure that those who signify their acceptance of its Standards attach the same sense to those Standards, and attach the same meaning to the formula by which they are adopted and to the act of adopting them, which itself does. It has accordingly jealously retained the final decision upon the acceptability of every act of subscription in the hands of its own courts, upon which it has laid the duty of ascertaining, by means of examination or some other competent mode of inquiry, both the knowledge of the truth possessed by applicants to its ministry and the interpretation they put on the Standards they propose to adopt. Even when one of its own ministers is merely transferred from one of its Presbyteries to another, the right of the receiving court to inquire anew into his knowledge and "soundness," as it has come to be popularly spoken of, has been steadily maintained and re-

peatedly exercised. And when the applicant has come from another denomination, and especially from a distant land, this right has been transformed into a duty. Only so, the Church has always thought, and found, can it safeguard its own unity and secure its own internal peace—preserve itself from steadily building up merely “a great house over a divided family.”

Such being the settled practice of the Church, founded in wise considerations of duty and supported in its prudence by long experience, can we be blamed for feeling the deepest misgiving when we are called upon to face a proposition to admit into the ministry of the Church a body of nearly two thousand ministers at once—and they, formed under widely different traditions from our own—without any of the safeguards which have been considered requisite in the incorporation of single ministers? Surely such a proposition, as the French say, *donne juricusement à penser*. On a *prima facie* view it looks like a revolutionary proceeding, amounting to little less than a stultification of our entire history and our whole system. If such a proceeding is safe in the present case, one would think it would be *a fortiori* safe in the incorporation of single ministers: if it is felt to be unsafe in their cases, is it not *a fortiori* unsafe in this much greater instance? The question that is brought to issue here is nothing other than whether the internal unity and peace of a Church is sufficiently secured by a bare, formal acceptance by all its ministers of common Standards: or whether it is not requisite to take adequate measures to assure a common understanding of the Standards accepted. It is no reflection upon our Cumberland brethren to suppose them possibly liable to the same misapprehensions to which other men are found to be certainly liable; and to ask of them some such assurances as are uniformly asked from others. And surely they are as much interested as we are in making it clear that the common Standards, under the protection of which we alike propose to live in case the contemplated union is consummated, are understood alike by us all. Otherwise we shall be just as disunited under them as we were before we go through the—in that case meaningless—form of establishing them as the bond of our union and the pledge of our peace.

It is barely possible that the minds of some readers may revert at this point to the terms on which the Old and New School branches of the Presbyterian Church came together, under the impression that there was created by that transaction a precedent for union between Churches on the basis of bare adoption of common Standards, “pure and simple.” A moment’s thought will convince us, however, that no analogy can lie between that case and the one which is at present engaging our attention. The Old and New School Churches were adherents of common Standards. Every office-bearer in both Churches alike had received his commission as an office-bearer only upon adoption of those common Standards under the same safeguards of exami-

nation and approval by Church courts organized under the same sanctions and operating under the same fundamental laws. Each instance of adoption of the Standards was in both Churches alike a tested and approved subscription, in the reception of which safeguards to preserve internal unity and peace had been observed. The union of the two Churches on the basis of their common Standards, "pure and simple," involved in these circumstances little more than a recognition on the part of each of the honesty and due care of the sister Church in carrying out provisions common to both. There was no question in the consummation of this union of the "adoption" of common Standards: it was a union between two Churches already organized under the same Standards. And though some question did arise as to the common understanding by the two Churches of these common Standards and the meaning attached by each of them to the act of subscription, the materials for arriving at a good understanding on these matters became rapidly too abundant for them to stand in the way of consummating a union on the basis of the Standards common to both. In all these particulars the proposed union with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church presents conditions diametrically opposite. It is in the fact, indeed, thus thrown into prominence, that our strongest misgivings as to the sufficiency of a simple adoption of our Standards on their part as a basis of union are rooted. All the antecedents of our Cumberland Presbyterian brethren, so far from going to assure us that in adopting our Standards they put the same sense upon them and on the act of adopting them which we do, combine rather to raise the gravest doubts in our mind whether it is not necessarily only upon some serious misapprehension of the sense of the Standards and the meaning of the act of adopting them that they can bring themselves to adopt them at all.

For the fact above all other facts deserving our most careful attention is that our Cumberland Presbyterian brethren do not come to us out of the sky, as it were, with no past behind them, with no present accompanying them—with only a future lying before them and us. They come to us with a history behind them, an eminently consistent history, through which—by means of which—they have become what they are; and it is difficult to think—it is difficult to believe they wish us to think—that in coming to us they mean to repudiate this history. And they come to us with a Creed in their hands and, to all appearances, up to the moment of their coming to us, with this Creed in their hearts: and it is difficult for us to think—or to believe that they wish us to think—that in coming to us they mean to disavow this Creed. We cannot profess to be unacquainted with the nature of this history, or to be ignorant of the character of this Creed; and we certainly cannot reproach our Cumberland Presbyterian brethren throughout the whole past, at least,

with seeking to hide from us either the one or the other. But the facts cannot possibly be blinked that the whole history of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church from its foundation up to the present moment has been a protest—sometimes a violent and unmeasured protest, at all times a steady and unbending protest—against our historical position as a Calvinistic Church: that the entire Creed of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church is a protest—a clear, sharp and uncompromising protest—against the system of doctrine embodied in our Calvinistic Confession of Faith. How, then, is it possible to hear that our Cumberland brethren are prepared to unite with us on the basis of our doctrinal and ecclesiastical Standards, “pure and simple,” without being filled with misgivings as to the meaning which they may be attaching to this act? It is very certain that the adoption of our Standards, “pure and simple,” means the repudiation of that whole element of their history which has been a continuous protest against Calvinism in doctrine and life; means a distinct disavowal of their hitherto professed doctrinal system as embodied in the Confession of Faith at present in use among them. But the doubt rises persistently in our minds, and will not be stilled, whether they fully apprehend this in proposing to adopt our Standards; whether they may not be acting under some fatal misapprehension of the meaning of their act. If this be in any degree true, it supplies, on the one hand, an astonishingly clear and forceful illustration of the danger of committing important interests to the bare adoption of articles of faith without the exercise of due care to secure that they be apprehended and adopted in the same sense; and it imposes, on the other hand, a duty on us, greater than which we have no duty in the premises—the duty of undeceiving our Cumberland brethren in a matter of so great importance both to them and to us.

This duty is rendered especially imperative by the occurrence of a somewhat obscure clause in the first of the “Concurrent Declarations” proposed to the Churches by the Committees. In this clause the Churches are asked to declare that “it is mutually recognized that such agreement now exists between the systems of doctrine contained in the Confessions of Faith of the two Churches as to warrant this union.” Precisely what is declared by this clause to be recognized it is no doubt somewhat difficult to determine. What, for instance, is the reference of the word “now”? Is it to the future, so that what is declared is that a sufficient measure of harmony already exists to warrant union, and therefore no further waiting and no further efforts to induce harmony are necessary? Or is its reference to the past, so that the meaning is that by some recent change—say, for example, the revision of our Confession in 1903—a sufficient measure of harmony to warrant union has been at length induced? And how shall we determine what the measure of harmony is that is recognized by the Committees and is to be recognized by the Churches as necessary before union is

warranted? Certainly not mere community in teaching and defending "essential evangelical doctrine," we are glad to observe. For that the two Churches are united in common devotion to essential "evangelical doctrine" is made in the next clause the subject of *additional* recognition: "mutual acknowledgment *also* is made." We say we are glad to observe this, because if what the Churches were asked to recognize were **that** community in "essential evangelical doctrine" constitutes sufficient agreement to warrant union, it would be perhaps the most remarkable recommendation ever made to a Church by a joint Committee. For in that case the recommendation would amount to nothing less than this: that the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America should by a mere declaration of the Assembly vacate its entire doctrinal position, entrenched as that doctrinal position nevertheless is in doctrinal Standards unalterable save by a long and complicated constitutional process; and that, at the very moment when these Standards are being "adopted" as the bond of union between two contracting Churches.

It is so clearly *ultra vires* for the Assembly to declare in such a deliverance that the Standards are to be taken in this reduced sense, and such a declaration would be so clearly a *brutum fulmen*, that it would be impossible to believe that the Committees intended to imply by this confused and confusing clause that the agreement of the two Confessions in evangelicalism is sufficient agreement to warrant union, even had we not the subsequent clause to forbid the imposition of this sense upon it. It must be confessed, however, that it is not clear that any deeper agreement exists between the two Confessions, which we are here apparently recommended to declare to agree sufficiently to warrant the union of the two Churches professing their respective faiths by their mediation. Possibly there has been a slip of the pen in the framing of this clause, and what is intended to be recognized is only such an agreement in faith between the two Churches as to warrant union, rather than any agreement "between the systems of doctrine contained in the Confessions of Faith of the two Churches." Meanwhile it must be exceedingly evident that as a measure to produce a good understanding this section of the "Concurrent Declarations" is foredoomed to the saddest failure; and that it is exceedingly liable to interpretations which make it ask the Churches to propound declarations that are directly contrary to the facts. It would be directly contrary to the fact to declare that an agreement between the systems of doctrine contained in the two Confessions so far as this, *viz.*, that both teach the essential doctrines of evangelical religion, is sufficient agreement to warrant union. The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, by the mere fact of maintaining its distinctively Calvinistic Standards and by them separating itself from other evangelical but non-Calvinistic bodies—Lutheran, Wesleyan and the like—bears constant testimony to the contrary; and has

entrenched this testimony behind elaborate constitutional safeguards, which no declarative act of any Assembly can destroy or weaken. And it would be equally directly contrary to the fact to declare that any deeper agreement than is involved in the common teaching of "essential evangelical doctrine" "exists between the systems of doctrine contained in the Confessions of Faith of the two Churches."

The possibility of imposing such intolerable interpretations upon this unfortunate clause, quite apart from any question whether either is its intended meaning—as surely neither can be—renders it imperative that the actual relation of the two Confessions to one another should be made perfectly plain.

The systems of doctrine taught in these two Confessions do not stand related to one another as more and less clear, or more and less full, or more and less consistent, or more and less genial expressions of the same system; but as precise contradictories. The one is a clear, full, consistent and genial expression of the Calvinistic system. The other is an equally clear, full, consistent and genial expression of the Arminian system. We are not unaware that our Cumberland brethren do not affect the name of Arminians, and desire to be understood rather as occupying, or at least as seeking to occupy, an intermediate position between the two great systems. Nor are we unappreciative of the fact that in a few items of doctrine they separate themselves from the type of Arminianism ordinarily taught by the theologians of the great Methodist bodies, whether of Britain or America, whether of the earlier or later generations of Wesleyanism. But Wesleyanism and Arminianism are not absolutely equipollent terms; and despite the minor differences that may exist between the structures raised on the fundamental Arminian principles by varied types of Arminianism, no one of these types can cease to be Arminian so long as its organic principles are the Arminian fundamentals of human autonomy and universal grace. And the system set forth in the Cumberland Presbyterian Confession is as pure a development of the principle of universal grace—"divine influence" it is called here—as that developed by any other typical form of Arminianism—Dutch, Jesuit or Wesleyan. We designate the Confession of Faith of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church an Arminian document, not as wishing to affix a term of reproach upon it, but merely as wishing to describe it intelligibly by assigning it to its proper class. It is, as a matter of fact, not only a typical Arminian document, but one of the most consequent and consistent and, we may add, at once one of the most able and the most attractive of its class. Evangelical Arminianism has, in fact, reached as pure and concinnated an expression in it as has ever been given in a confessional document.

It could not indeed fail to be a purely Arminian document if it were

at all fitly to represent the movement out of which it grew. For this movement had as its governing principle precisely protest against Calvinism in its formative principles as enunciated in the cardinal doctrines of absolute predestination and irresistible grace. The "fathers" of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church represented their protest indeed to be against "fatalism." But whatever confusion between "predestination" and "fatalism," "fatalism" and "irresistible grace," may have troubled the minds of the "fathers," it speedily became evident on the emergence of the Church into separate organization that what was assaulted under this opprobrious name was just Calvinism. The entire literature produced by the Cumberland Presbyterian Church not only illustrates this fact, but demonstrates it to satiety. Everywhere throughout the whole of it, it is just predestination—as taught by Augustine, as taught by Calvin, as taught by the Reformed divines of every type and as embodied in the Reformed Creeds of every class—that comes up for criticism and reprobation: and everywhere a doctrine is opposed to it which makes the determination of God in the matter of the salvation of the individual soul wait on the prior action of the human spirit. But we need not go for proof beyond the credal statements of the Church themselves. What the "fathers" set themselves to do in the preparation of their first Confession (adopted in 1814) was not so prudently to define the doctrine of predestination as to exclude all implications of real fatalism, but just to excise the doctrine of predestination altogether. They themselves speak of their work no doubt as directed to "erasing from the old Confession the idea of fatality"; but the book is here to speak for itself, and what is erased is every faintest allusion to predestination, electing grace and effectual calling.* A long explanatory note is added, to be sure, to the third chapter, in which it is essayed to mark out an "intermediate position" between Calvinism and Arminianism; but in which rather the direct antithesis to Calvinism of the whole conception operated with is brought clearly out: "In a particular and saving sense, none can be properly called God's elect till they be justified and united to Christ." With this blossoming of the green tree the fruitage that has been borne on the dry is not surprising. The manner in which the Confession of 1814 was framed—largely by a process of elimination of the predestinarian assertions—left the positive development of the implications of the doctrine of universal grace incompletely worked out. The Church was therefore restless until an entirely new Confession was drawn up (adopted in 1883), in which, no longer satisfied with the mere elimination—as we are told in the Preface—of "the doctrine of universal foreordination and its legitimate sequences, unconditional election and reprobation, limited atonement, and divine influence

* The principal changes made by it in the Westminster Confession may be conveniently inspected in *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* for July, 1902, pp. 418 sq.

correspondingly circumscribed," it built up constructively a complete system on the Arminian principle of universal grace as its *principium*. It is probably the most elaborately developed, thoroughly compacted and completely concinnated Arminian creed in existence: everywhere set foursquare in opposition to what its authors call, with unnecessary opprobrium, "hyper-Calvinism." As a piece of constructive evangelical Arminianism it is worthy of much praise, and its difference from its predecessor of 1814 turns just on the fact that the earlier creed was merely destructive, while this successfully takes up the constructive rôle.*

We deem the matter of the Arminian character of this Confession of sufficient importance at the present juncture to justify entering upon it somewhat more in detail.

The clash of the Arminian and Calvinistic principles is always most sharply manifested in what is called, technically, the *ordo salutis*, or the enumeration of the steps or stages in which salvation is made the possession of the sinner. The Calvinistic scheme requires the following order: Regeneration, Faith, Justification, Sanctification, etc.: and all Calvinistic documents so give it. The Arminian scheme most naturally falls into the following order: Sufficient Grace, Faith, Justification, Regeneration, Sanctification, etc. It is, now, this Arminian *ordo salutis* which constitutes the core of the Cumberland Confession (§§ 38 *sq.*). To go more into particulars, the Cumberland Confession teaches with great explicitness that the saving work begins with a universal divine influence (§§ 38 *sq.*), by which the Holy Spirit, operating thus on every man without exception (§ 38), so acts upon man (§ 39) that it is made possible for all to be saved (§ 40), but not certain that any should be saved (§ 41). It is expressly denied that this influence is irresistible, and as expressly affirmed that it is rendered effectual only by the sinner's own act of faith (§ 41). This act of faith becomes thus the proper condition (§§ 46 and 49) on which all subsequent saving acts of God depend. Those that believe, accordingly, are justified (§§ 48 *sq.*), and then regenerated (§§ 51 *sq.*), and so on through the remaining stages. We need not stop to point out that this is Arminianism in its purest and most irreducible expression, and is the precise contradiction of the entire Reformed system.

It may be worth while to indicate, however, how the necessary corollaries of this *ordo salutis*—which include the denial of all the elements of the Reformed system—emerge in the Cumberland Confession. The so-called "five points" against which the original Remonstrants protested in the Reformed system concerned the doctrines of absolute predestination, particular redemption, original sin, efficacious grace and

* For the origin and character of the Cumberland Presbyterian Confession of 1883, see *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* for July, 1902, pp. 424 *sq.*

perseverance. (1) The hinge of the Reformed system, and the central point of the Arminian assault alike, is the doctrine of efficacious grace. And we have already seen that the Cumberland Confession explicitly rejects this doctrine: it denies in terms that the grace of the Holy Spirit saves by its own power—it only renders it possible for man to save himself (§ 40); it roundly asserts that this grace is “not irresistible” (§ 41); and as roundly declares that it is rendered effectual only by the improvement of it by the sinner (§ 41). This is not only a decided but a polemic rejection of the Reformed principle at its centre. (2) Now this rejection of efficacious grace not only leaves no place for but definitely excludes the Reformed doctrine of predestination. Accordingly the sections on the Decrees of God (§§ 8 and 9) carefully confine predestination to God’s own acts, to the exclusion of all acts of other agents, which are thus left “free”; and the other doctrines are throughout the Confession carefully adjusted to this exclusion of all “election.” For example, in § 17 the Covenant of Grace is given its distinctively Arminian form as establishing a new gracious probation for all men: that is, the parties to it are conceived not as God and Christ, nor as God and Christ as the Head of His people, nor as God and Christ’s people in Him; but as God and all men indiscriminately, who are offered now a new and easier probation than Adam enjoyed. Again in § 95 the invisible Church is made to consist, not of God’s elect (known to Him prior to any foreseen action of their own), but only of those who have already believed—that is to say, is confused with the visible Church. (3) Similarly the doctrine of original sin is taught in its complete Arminian form, that is, as a theoretical postulate, set aside practically in the case of all men alike by a new “gracious probation” under the Covenant of Grace (§ 17), that is, by a manifestation of the spirit to every man, rendering it now possible for them to be saved (§§ 40, 41). This is the precise doctrine of Arminian “gracious ability,” as distinguished from the Pelagian “natural ability.” It is to be noted, however, that the Cumberland Confession, in taking its position here with the evangelical Arminians, does not wholly escape a Pelagianizing tendency in its doctrine of sin. This comes out more prominently, however, in its doctrine of the original state of man (§ 11; cp. § 18), which it studiously speaks of as a state of “uprightness” and “innocence,” to the neglect of the positive “righteousness and holiness” which is the essence of the Reformed doctrine; and also in its equally studious exclusion of all confession of a doctrine of “imputation” of sin. (4) The Reformed doctrine of “particular redemption,” it goes without saying, is directly and repeatedly antagonized. It is the fundamental contention of this Confession that in all that God does toward saving the sinner—whether in the gift of a Redeemer, or in the gift of the applying Spirit—He has all men indifferently in mind (§§ 27, 31, 33, 38, 40, etc.). The exclusion of all particularism in the process of salvation might indeed be said to be the chief purpose of

this Confession. (5) Of the five "points" there remains only that of the "Perseverance of the Saints," and this the Cumberland Confession, with utter disregard of the logic of its own system, inconsistently preserves (§ 60). Of the "five points of Calvinism," so called, therefore, this Confession is in a polemic attitude toward four and retains a single one, doubtless through historical, since it cannot be through logical, consistency. It would be easy to go on and show that the whole fabric of the Confession is determined by its Arminian standpoint, and that it is through and through an Arminian document with a sharply polemic edge turned against the Reformed system. Surely, enough has been already said, however, to exhibit the fact that it is simply the contradictory of the Reformed system.

It follows, of course, that no harmony can be instituted between the Cumberland Confession and the Westminster Confession: you cannot harmonize precise contradictories. It is impossible to hold the one Creed in one hand and the other in the other, except on the expedient of not letting the right hand know what the left hand is doing. To profess to accept both is saying yes and no in the same breath. The acceptance of one is *ipso facto* the disavowal of the other: standing side by side they do not modify one another, but obliterate one another in their entire systematic development. How, then, can we hear those who have hitherto been apparently sincere adherents of the one, without express disavowal of it proposing to "adopt" the other, without experiencing the most serious misgivings as to whether the meaning of the act is fully appreciated?

These misgivings are certainly not allayed by the appearance in the fabric of the Committees' recommendations of yet further clauses, besides those already mentioned, which we cannot help fearing either may be indications of, or at least may prove in the future causes of, very grave misapprehension. These are clauses which may possibly be read as implying that something in the revision of its Confession of Faith completed in 1903, may operate essentially to alter either the Confessional doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America or at least the relation in which that Church stands to its Confession. Nothing, of course, could be more mistaken; and we should be ashamed to speak of so gross a misapprehension as possible, did we not have to reckon, when dealing with popular impressions, with the reckless misrepresentations of the public press, which too often seeks to create a sensation at the cost of all regard for exactness of statement; and did there not occur, as we have said, certain clauses in the recommendations of the joint Committees which may seem to some to give color to such misapprehensions. In these circumstances we feel bound to advert formally to the matter.

In the proposed formal basis of union itself we read: "The union shall be effected on the doctrinal basis of the Confession of Faith of

the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, *as revised in 1903*"; and this phrase "as revised in 1903" is repeated elsewhere, as if it embodied a qualification of importance. Attention has already been directed to the odd "now" occurring in the opening sentence of the first "Concurrent Declaration" as liable to a similar interpretation: "It is mutually recognized that such agreement *now* exists between the systems of doctrine contained in the Confessions of Faith of the two Churches as to warrant this union." Further on in the same Declaration specific appeal is made to the Declaratory Statement of 1903, apparently as if in some way it secured to the signatories of the Confession greater "liberty" than was enjoyed before. Even the subsequent allusion to the "Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith," although altogether impertinent, inasmuch as that document is no part of our Standards, may possibly operate to strengthen the impression which these other clauses make, that the revision of 1903 is felt to have in some way essentially changed the doctrinal basis of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

It is possible, of course, that all these clauses are intended only to suggest that the revision of 1903 removes some misapprehensions as to the teaching of the Confession, hitherto cherished by our Cumberland brethren, and to that extent renders it more acceptable to them. Let us hope that this is what is intended. Meanwhile it is difficult to avoid fearing that more significance has been attached to them by our Cumberland Presbyterian brethren, and is in danger of being attached to them in the future; and that the repeated reference in them to the revision of 1903 indicates that it is vaguely felt by our brethren that that revision in some way or other so modified our Confession that adherents of the Cumberland Confession can now with a good conscience subscribe our Confession also. If there is any danger of such a misapprehension existing or coming into existence, it is at once made our duty to say with all emphasis that the revisions and enlargements entered into the Confession in 1903 in no way affect the radical disagreement between the Confessions of Faith in authority in the two Churches, and do not make it one whit more possible to hold to them both in common. With these revisions and enlargements as without them, the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America is and remains a soundly, explicitly, emphatically Calvinistic document; under the ægis of which nothing but clear and consistent Calvinism can legitimately find refuge.

It certainly would be strange if it were otherwise. In appointing its Committee to formulate amendments—whether in the form of modifications of the text or of Declaratory Statement or of additional statements—the Assembly strictly instructed it to propose no revisions which should in any way "impair the integrity of the system of doc-

trine set forth in our Confession and taught in the Holy Scripture.”* Working under these instructions, nothing was more emphasized by the Committee itself or by the friends of the proposals made by it, throughout all the debates which ended in the adoption of these proposals, than just that they “in no way impaired the integrity of the system of doctrine set forth in our Confession.” It surely would be a sad miscarriage if, nevertheless, they have so impaired the integrity of that system as to make way in the revised document for its precise contradiction. Even the most cursory examination of the matter introduced by this revision will suffice, however, to show the absurdity of such a supposition. We have not the happiness to count ourselves among the admirers of the revision of 1903. But it is impossible to contend that that revision in any way modifies the system of doctrine taught in our Confession, or in any degree lowers the clearness or emphasis with which it is taught. The sections introduced by it are, in our judgment, needless excrescences on the Confession of Faith, and the Confession would, in our opinion, be better without them. But taking their place in the fabric of the Confession, they enter harmoniously into its system and modify that system in no single particular.

It is quite possible, to be sure, that one whose ideas as to the teaching of the Confession have been derived not from that document itself, but from polemic allusions to it current in circles inimical to it and to the system of doctrine which it teaches, may not recognize in the clauses of the Declaratory Statement adopted in 1903, for example, elements of truth which he has been accustomed to think of as provided for in the Confession or as capable of finding a place in the system taught in it. But this would be his fault, not the fault of the Confession or of the Calvinistic system taught by it. It is safe to say, on the other hand, that no one ever held the doctrine of God’s Eternal Decree as taught in the Confession, who did not hold it in harmony with the love of God for all mankind and the other truths set forth in the Declaratory Statement. For this very reason, many of us thought that it was entirely unnecessary to make a Declaratory Statement for the purpose of asserting that the doctrine of the decree taught in the Confession is in harmony with these precious truths; and that the very making of such a Declaratory Statement would be liable therefore to such misapprehension in imperfectly informed circles as may possibly be exhibited in the clauses now under discussion. But for this very reason again the making of this Statement introduces absolutely nothing new and in no way alters or modifies or affects the doctrine of God’s Eternal Decree, which is quite truly, and quite superfluously, reasserted in the Declaratory Act to be in harmony with these precious truths. It would be a delusion of the most serious character to fancy that because this harmony.

* *Minutes* for 1901, p. 206; for 1902, p. 87.

universally, not admitted but asserted and demonstrated, by all the adherents of the Confession, is thus thrown into emphasis in a Declaratory Statement for the sake of those who, being without, have persistently misrepresented the facts, the Confession may now be legitimately adopted as their own Confession by men who passionately deny the truth of one of the doctrines the harmony of which is here asserted; and that, on the precise ground that this harmony does not exist and cannot exist.

What is true of the Declaratory Statement is true of the other elements of the revision of 1903. We may like them or not like them—we happen to be of the number of those who do not like them. We may think they improve the Confession or mar it—we happen to be of the number of those who think they mar it. But no man can justly attribute to them either the intention or the effect of de-Calvinizing the Confession and rendering it a document which our Arminian brethren may legitimately adopt.

What has been thus said of the possible notion that the “revision of 1903” may render our Confession easier of adoption by adherents of the Cumberland Presbyterian Confession must be repeated in effect of the parallel notion that the Declaratory Act of 1903 in any way enlarges the dimensions of the liberty enjoyed by our office-bearers under their ordination vow. Quite possibly the purpose with which the clauses of the Declaratory Act which recite the ordination vow are quoted in the “Concurrent Declarations” is not to suggest that the “liberty of belief” enjoyed by the officers of the Presbyterian Church is enlarged by the Act. Possibly what is intended is only to take comfort from the fact that this “liberty of belief” is more firmly secured to office-bearers by its recitation in the Declaratory Act, inasmuch as it is thus incorporated in the Confession of Faith itself, and not left merely to the provisions of the Form of Government. Let us hope that this is the case. Meanwhile it must be allowed that the manner in which the Declaratory Act is cited here gives some color to the notion that it may be thought to enlarge the dimensions of the liberty enjoyed by Presbyterian office-bearers; and it is quite possible that some may so read it. In the face of this possibility it becomes incumbent on us to see that such a misapprehension does not take root.

It is not in the least true that the Declaratory Act enlarges the dimensions of our “liberty of belief.” In quoting the ordination vow it quotes it as it lies on the face of the Form of Government, and it does not in the least modify it in quoting it. It does indeed say that the ordination vow demands nothing more than it demands, but that was certainly true before it said it. It leaves the ordination vow (which it merely quotes) precisely as it was when it found it, viz., a vow demanding of all who accept our Confession of Faith that they accept it as a system of doctrine;

and that they affirm by their acceptance of it that this system of doctrine is the system of doctrine that is taught in Holy Scripture. We cannot deem it possible that any one will seriously contend that the words "only as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures" can legitimately be interpreted as meaning "only *so far* as containing, etc." If any such exists he must undeceive himself at once. The sense is nothing other than, "only in this sense, namely, as containing the *system* of doctrine"—that is to say, not in its every proposition or mode of statement, but only in the system of doctrine it contains, to wit, the Calvinistic system. There is, so far as we know, no difference of opinion as to the import of the ordination vow in our Churches: it is everywhere understood and administered as binding those taking it merely to the system and not to the detailed manner of stating that system; but as binding them strictly to the system in its integrity and in its entirety. As such it has been justly lauded as combining in itself all reasonable liberty with all reasonable strictness—binding as it does to the great system of doctrine expressed in the Confession with absolute strictness, and yet leaving room for all possible individual preferences in modes of conceiving and stating this system. Under this combined strictness and liberty every genuine form of Calvinism has an equal right of existence under the Confession. The Realist can accept it with as good a conscience as the Federalist; the Amyraldian with as good a conscience as the Cocceian. But beyond the limits of generic Calvinism the right of adoption ceases. Our vow of ordination is not a solemn farce: and the terms of our adoption of the Confession are not so phrased as to enable us to seem to adopt it while not adopting it at all.

Such, then, are some of the misgivings we have felt as we have contemplated the terms of union between the two Churches which the joint Committees have agreed upon as proper to propose to the approaching Assemblies. It may be that we have exercised our soul unnecessarily. It may be that in consenting to unite with us on the basis of our own doctrinal and ecclesiastical Standards, our brethren of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, resting under no fatal misapprehensions as to either the sense of these Standards or the meaning of the act of adopting them, intend to say that they have come in the process of time to see eye to eye with us, and now wish to join with us in confessing the great truths of God to which our common ancestors, centuries ago, gave their testimony, even unto blood—that great system of doctrine known to the modern world as Calvinism, which is just the thetical expression of evangelical religion in its purity. Who could rejoice over such a consummation more than we? Except, indeed, our Cumberland brethren themselves, who would be thus, after so many years of misapprehension, and separation based on misapprehension, returning not only to the fold whence they went forth, but to the riches of that body of truth

which is for the salvation of the world. Even in that case, however, it cannot be that we have spoken in vain. In any case, there is nothing so good in negotiations of this kind as a good understanding: and a good understanding that we agree is surely as good as a good understanding that we differ. In any event, therefore, let us come to a good understanding—an understanding so good that no lurking misunderstanding remains possible. If the two Churches are really at one—one in faith as in order, one in doctrine as in devotion; and if it be best for the interests of which they have severally in their separated states come to be the supports and stays: why, then let them become also one in form as already in fact. If they be not really one, let them clearly recognize it, and not seek to force themselves into some artificial external unity which cannot in those circumstances fail to wound consciences and injure vested interests. There is something better than “organic union.” Mutual regard and brotherly spirit are better: and it is assuredly better that these should persist without “organic union” than that “organic union” should be built up on their ruins.

Princeton.

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