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Confessionalism of the Missouri Synod.

1. INTRODUCTORY.

From the history of those conflicts our descendants will have to form their conviction as to which side had a right to shout, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!"

PRESIDENT P. BRAND, in *Opening Address at Brooklyn, N. Y., May 4, 1898.*¹⁾

A current definition of confessionalism runs: "Confessionalism is a strict adherence to the confessions of some particular church or sect; it is the conforming in teaching and preaching with scrupulous fidelity to the letter and spirit of the confessional writings of some particular division of the Christian Church. Lutheran confessionalism is the strict adherence to the Lutheran confessions in letter and spirit."²⁾ But for the omission of "and practise" after "teaching and preaching" the definition would be altogether satisfactory. This omission accounts for an illogical division of the subject of "confessionalism," or rather of "confessionalists," to which we shall refer later.

Men of judgment and extensive observation outside of the Missouri Synod, when asked to name the one feature which distinguishes this Synod from others, will invariably name the peculiar type of confessionalism that controls the activities of this body. Not infrequently the statement about the Missouri Synod's confessionalism is qualified by some such phrase as "hyper-" or "extreme." There are situations which few Missourians, if any, are spared, when it is anything rather than a joy and delight to be a Missourian. For to be a Missourian often means to be declared an ecclesiastical and social misfit, to be forced into isolation, and — insult being added to injury — to be told that the isolation was

1) Eastern Dist. Rep., Mo. Syn., 1898, p. 14.

2) Dr. J. Nicum, in *Luth. Cyclop.*, p. 129.

Organic Union of Protestantism.

The *Continent* (Chicago) some years ago satirized the prevailing method of laboring for union of the churches. It contained an imaginative report of the meeting of a mythic body, the "Christotheists," in which the following platform for a proposed union of churches was adopted: "1) We believe union to be highly desirable. 2) We recognize the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. 3) Everybody ought to be good. 4) All Christian bodies must recognize in their divine appointment the central principle of the Christotheists." This quadrilateral is adopted, the doxology is sung, prayer is offered to God for His blessing on the movement, and the convention adjourns, after appointing a body authorized to treat with all other denominations. One by one these bodies meet. They receive with dignified courtesy the official overture from the Christotheists, and the following resolutions are adopted: "*Resolved*, That we have received with great gratitude to God and sincere appreciation of the brotherly spirit shown by the Christotheists, the foregoing resolutions and believe that they present a nearer approach to possible Christian union than anything we have previously considered. *Resolved*, That we

heartily accept propositions 1, 2, and 3, but believe that some slight modification of No. 4 would be necessary before this denomination, as a whole, could accept it. *Resolved*, That we sincerely hope these negotiations may not terminate, and we appoint a commission authorized to confer further with the Christotheists and other Christian bodies in the sincere hope that these negotiations may not end until all the churches of our country and of the world become united in essential unity." Whereupon they sing the doxology and adjourn, and something like unto this happens in each of the other denominations, as they consider it one by one.

Undeniably clever as this parody is, the movement for organic union is not to be dismissed with a sarcastic fling. The perils which attend the prevalent mania for union touch the very life and purpose of the Church. Hence, wherever there is an appreciation of the basic essentials of Christianity, voices of warning have lately been raised against the drift towards a corporate union of denominations. The *Watchman-Examiner*, speaking for the conservative wing of the Baptists, says: "There can be no organic union without shameful compromise. Better a half dozen churches in a village than a single church composed of those who believe one thing and practise another." Dr. Amory H. Bradford has said: "Until there is unity of spirit, unity of form will be worse than useless. If men are not agreed, no good can come from welding them together. Compel the Puritan to worship like an Anglican, and the Anglican to worship like a Quaker, and what is the result? Make the Church a gigantic organization with numberless bishops, one being supreme, whatever the name, and there will be one body, but there will be no life, no divine fire. Where there is unity of spirit, unity of form may be desirable, and not till then. . . . Where the spirit is, there will be essential unity." Rev. Eugene Bell (Southern Presbyterian) protests against the unwillingness of some churchmen to insist upon the same degree of loyalty in matters of faith and practise which is demanded of citizens in time of war: "When the same vital question is raised in ecclesiastical matters, it is politely waved aside, and we are told simply to behold how lovely and beautiful it is 'for brethren to dwell together in unity.'"

As for the claim that some creedal basis might be found which would embody those tenets which are common to all denominations, Dr. Benj. B. Warfield had this trenchant comment in the *Presbyterian* (1916): "There are some people who suffer under the remarkable illusion that what is best in Christianity is common to

all who call themselves Christians. On the contrary, what is common to all who call themselves Christians is so little the best that is in Christianity that it is scarcely Christianity at all. What is common to all who call themselves Christians is, of course, precisely what is held by the least Christian body among all those who call themselves Christians — that, and nothing more. For if it were a single thing more than just that, it would not be common to *all* who claim the name Christian: it would not be held by the body that was least Christian of them all. The profession of 'common Christianity,' as men call it, is therefore the profession of minimum Christianity. If you want real, true, operative Christianity, you will have to go not to minimum, but to maximum Christianity. And the name of that is Evangelicalism, or more specifically, Calvinism; Protestantism, or more specifically, Presbyterianism. For these are not particular kinds of Christianity, standing by the side of other kinds, between which and them only individual taste is to decide. They are the names we give to Christianity in its purity, at its maximum, when really *itself*."

Dr. Warfield speaks as a Presbyterian, but the principle which he announces is true, and is, moreover, so self-evidently true that any movement for organic union which demands less than a full assent to apostolic doctrine is deprived thereby of every claim to consideration by conscientious Christians.

The Presbyterian Church in the United States has come, through an overture on organic union submitted to this year's General Assembly, to the fork in the road. The overture in question originated through a resolution of the Assembly of the year 1918. This convention of the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. (North) invited representatives of all Protestant bodies to a meeting on organic union, which was subsequently held at Philadelphia on December 4 of the same year. About one hundred representatives from seventeen denominations attended, though of this number some were not official delegates. The object of the conference was to take steps "for the purpose of formulating a plan of organic union" of the Evangelical churches of America. As to the general question, whether the time had come for a great merger of churches, opinion at the conference was divided. The convention compromised on a plan of Federal Union, the denominations to maintain their corporate entities under a "central constitutional authority." An Ad Interim Committee was appointed to draft a plan of union, and this Committee reported to the Interchurch Council of Organic Union at Philadelphia, February 3, 1920. The

report had two parts, a Doctrinal Preamble and an Administrative Plan. The Preamble reads as follows:—

“Whereas, We desire to share, as a common heritage, the faith of the Evangelical churches, which has, from time to time, found expression in great historic statements; and

“Whereas, We all share belief in God, our Father; in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Savior; in the Holy Spirit, our Guide and Comforter; in the Holy Catholic Church, through which God’s eternal purpose of salvation is both to be proclaimed and realized; in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as containing God’s revealed will, and in the life eternal; and

“Whereas, Having the same spirit and owning the same Lord, we none the less recognize diversity of gifts and ministrations for whose exercise due freedom must always be afforded in forms of worship and in modes of operation.”

Then is set forth the plan of union, which briefly is as follows:

The Plan: The plan provides for a council made up of representatives of the constituent churches, with an equal number of ministers and lay members. The plan maintains, *for the present*, the autonomy of each denomination in its own affairs, creedal statement, form of government, and mode of worship.

The constituent churches are to act through this council and its executive and judicial commissions. The council shall convene every second year, and shall be made up of representatives composed of equal numbers of ministers and lay members. This council shall make its own rules, define the functions of its officers, the mode of their election, and their compensation. It shall apportion its budget among the constituent bodies. The decisions of the council shall be carried out by the supreme governing or advisory bodies of the constituent churches. The council shall harmonize and unify the work of the churches, and shall consolidate churches and boards in harmony with the laws of the State and of the churches affected. It shall undertake inspirational and educational leadership in evangelism, social service, religious education, and the like.

While this, at first reading, appears like a close federation of churches, and not an organic union, the plan has a final objective which goes much farther than simple cooperation. The consistent working out of this scheme will bring into being a new ecclesiastical body, rising on the *débris* of the denominations. The report of the Council distinctly says: “In taking this step, we look forward with confident hope *to that complete unity* [italics ours] toward which we believe the Spirit of God is leading us.

Once we have cooperated whole-heartedly in such visible body in the holy activities of the work of the Church, we are persuaded that our differences will be minimized and our union become more vital and effectual." The ultimate objective is stated quite completely in the report of the Ad Interim Committee. It says: "In order to progress, the first step must be taken in the right direction. . . . That after we have been in operation for a term of years, the importance of divisive names and creeds and methods shall pass more and more into the dim background of the past, . . . and the churches then will demand a more complete union."

Even as it stands, the Administrative Plan gives to the council the bulk of the work hitherto done by the denominations and their agencies. The council is to carry on inspirational work and educational leadership in the field of evangelism and religious education; has authority to unify and harmonize the work of the churches, both in home areas and in the mission-fields, (thereby depriving the respective churches of their autonomy); and the council may make its own rules, elect its own officers, determine its own budget, — the churches to foot the bill. (This looks much like the arrangement under which the now dead Interchurch Movement proposed to administer the affairs of Christendom.)

As for the Preamble, there are, to begin with, some noteworthy omissions. There is not a word about the atonement for sin, the forgiveness of sins, the regeneration by the Spirit, the resurrection of the body, not a word about the ascension and the return of our Lord, nor about heaven or hell. The definite intention to make this platform broad enough to include all rationalists, so long as they bear the Christian name, became evident when the word "Evangelical" was eliminated by the Ad Interim Committee, and in its stead the more general word "Christian" was substituted. "This," said the *Presbyterian* of February 19, 1920, "is the most radical decision and the most violent and hurtful stroke ever directed against Protestant evangelism by its professed friends. It is a complete surrender to rationalism."

That only extreme rationalists, possibly the Monists and the liberal wing of the Unitarians, would be excluded from fellowship in the contemplated Federation, will become clear if the credal statements of the Preamble be scrutinized. To begin with, "share as a common heritage" is not the same as saying, "accepting as true" the Christian symbols. "God, our Father" — is not specifically Christian. "Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Savior": In what sense Son, and in what sense Savior? Jesus is called "our

Savior" again and again by old Socinians and by American Unitarians, every one of whom believes in Jesus only as in a teacher or example. The Racovian Catechism of the Socinians calls Jesus "the only-begotten Son of God," as does Channing, likewise W. G. Eliot, and James Freeman Clarke, who even calls Christ the God-man, because Jesus was "a man indwelt fully by God's Spirit." Even vaguer is the third phrase, "The Holy Spirit, our Guide and Comforter." Neither the deity nor the regenerating work of the Spirit is here asserted. The statement regarding the Church is couched in words which have lately received an almost infinite variety of definition. As for Scriptures "containing God's revealed will," even a Mohammedan will subscribe to that. Any one who accepts as God's revealed will only a single sentence in the Bible may subscribe to this creed.

The Baptists (North and South) have voted against organic union, as have the Dutch Reformed, the Reformed Presbyterians, and at least the Southern Methodists. The General Assembly of the Northern Presbyterians "heartily recommended" adoption of the Plan, and an overture authorizing the next General Assembly to enter into the proposed general body is being voted on by the presbyteries this winter. The conservative organs of that body strongly oppose adoption. The *Presbyterian* has pointed out the weaknesses of the Preamble and cautions that "the organization of any kind which is not clear and explicit in the statement of its principles cannot endure, and the Church which timidly conceals its testimony in the interest of power and bigness is doomed"; that any Church adopting this Plan will have destroyed its power for testimony against error and heresy; and calls the entire venture "another case where we have left off production to indulge in great schemes."

Representatives of the various Protestant denominations in Australia recently met at Sydney to hear a report on the movement for organic union. For many years negotiations had been carried on for union between the different denominations, and although the Anglicans soon dropped out because of opposition to their demand that all the clergy of the uniting churches should be reordained, some hope remained that the non-episcopal Churches might find a common basis. The meeting at Sydney brought disillusionment. It developed that the Baptists could not go in because they refused to accept Infant Baptism. And while the proposed Basis was adopted by the Presbyterians, other bodies had

demanding no less than 179 amendments to this document, and organic union again seems far off.

What, one is prompted to ask, is the driving force behind these big union movements? We may supply the answer from an article in the *Hibbert Journal* of October, 1920. The article, discussing the union movement in Australia under the caption "Protestantism in Australia," points out the salient fact that all the denominations involved "admit that their spiritual life is weak. Each seems to be hoping that the other will give him something he does not himself possess." Now, the author of the article, Rev. A. R. Osborne, of Melbourne, says: "It may be taken as an axiom that vigorous life in a Church can only come when the members of that Church believe with all their heart and soul that they have a gospel for humanity which has been entrusted to them in order that they may proclaim it. When Luther nailed his theses to the church-door at Wittenberg, he felt that the very essence of the Gospel was at stake, and he was prepared to maintain his case or die." Well said, and very true. Our author continues to say that in time past each Protestant Church believed that it stood for the truth; "to them their creed and polity were matters of principle, and they prepared to separate from others to maintain them." But to-day "there is no rallying-point such as Luther had when he proclaimed justification by faith." "There is not any outburst of zeal for the spreading of the Gospel." And while the Roman Catholic Church, in its schools, "with the scientific exactness of trained psychologists binds the scholars throughout their lives to the Church," nothing similar to this is found in Protestantism. Rev. Osborne then suggests, and here we part company with him abruptly, that a "second Reformation" is needed, and a new creed must be found which "embodies our conception of Christian truth in the language and from the view-point of our age," a creed in which religion is no longer conceived as based on authority, and in which "inherited beliefs and institutions" are discarded.

Christians by conviction — Rev. Osborne ought to be told that there are still such — will not be tempted to take the final plunge into apostasy which he suggests to the Churches. But his diagnosis is correct, and what he asserts about the Churches of Australia, that they are "slowly disintegrating," applies with equal truth in the United States. Helplessness, a sense of futility and failure, has begotten the modern "get-together" attitude. However, there is another motive, even less to the credit of the Churches, recog-

nizable in the colossal scope of the plans which have lately been promulgated for the union of the Church. That motive is — pride and the love of power. We shall quote, in conclusion of our article, an apposite reference to this factor from the *Presbyterian* of 1918:

“The present cry for internationalism and Church organic union is simply weak reassertions of the old effort after uniformity, the old imperialism and papacy. The root of it is the love of power. It is an ambition to achieve great external things by the use of force, rather than obtain great internal results by the power of an endless life. The more rapid the movement, the more dangerous it is. The higher it reaches, the greater will be its fall. If the lovers of organic union press it too fast and too far, it will split the Church in twain. One part will consist of those who live under conviction of the truth, who love life and liberty. The other part will consist of those who care little for truth, ever learning, and never coming to the knowledge of truth, and, with Pilate, ever asking, ‘What is truth?’ These will sacrifice liberty for power in administration and external achievement.” G.
