

The Present Situation in the Presbyterian Church

By the Rev. J. Gresham Machen, D.D., Litt.D.,

Professor of New Testament in Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia.

THE present situation in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. is only one phase of a situation that prevails in the Protestant churches throughout the world. Everywhere—in the countries of Europe and in mission lands—Christianity finds itself in a mighty conflict with an alien type of religious belief and life. This alien type of religious belief and life appears in many different forms, and expresses itself in many different ways; but at bottom it is everywhere the same. Disparagement of doctrine, decrying of controversy, sinking of doctrinal differences in a program of peace and work, the craze for organizational unions, the "interpretation" of the Bible and of the great Christian creeds to make them mean almost their exact opposite, the substitution of vague swelling words for a clear-cut proclamation of the Cross of Christ, exaltation of "experience" at the expense of God's written Word—these are everywhere the marks of one great and deadly enemy to the Christian faith.

The enemy is made the more dangerous because it is found within, rather than without, the Church. Definite opponents of the Christian religion could have been more easily met; but now as in ancient times Satan has preferred to labor for the most part in the dark. The change has come very quietly and very gradually. There have been few open breaks; there have been comparatively few open denials; good men, in their ignorance, have often become emissaries of unbelief. The Gospel has not been openly contradicted, but it has been quietly pushed aside. It has quietly faded away, as one picture fades away before another on the screen; and another gospel has assumed its place. Many men are quite unconscious of the change; they are made very angry by being told the truth. Others are not so completely blind; they know in their heart of hearts that all is not well. But they will do nothing unpleasant to preserve the purity of the Church; they preach the true Gospel themselves, they say, but let others in the same church preach what they will. God will ultimately honor the truth, they tell us; God will ultimately destroy error; but meanwhile let us above all have peace. Thus is Gamael cited as though he were a Christian saint; thus does a worldly urbanity masquerade under the name of love; thus has a polite optimism been substituted for the dread solemnity and exclusiveness of the Gospel of Christ.

The World-Wide Conflict

Upon this policy of palliation and compromise God has placed the signal marks of His disfavor in the modern world. Nowhere has that policy resulted in the advancement of the truth; everywhere it has led to more and more radical departure from the Word of God. Almost all the larger Protestant churches of the world today are dominated by men who are either hostile or indifferent to the great verities of the Faith.

We do not mean that the situation is one of unrelieved gloom. Nowhere in the world has God left Himself altogether without a witness. In Germany, in France, in England, in China, and in many other lands there are heroic groups of people who have not bowed the knee to Baal, who have not been afraid to witness for the Lord Jesus Christ. In Scotland, the heroic Free Church still raises its voice amid the sad defection of the larger bodies; in the North of Ireland, a courageous group, chiefly composed of laymen, is in revolt against the Modernist tyranny that there prevails. But these heroic efforts of individual men and women, and of smaller bodies, should not cause us to close our eyes to the general state of the Church. It is a fact, whether we like it or not, that the larger and older Protestant bodies have in their corporate capacity for the most part ceased to witness in any clear-cut way to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

To that assertion one, and perhaps only one, notable exception must be made. In one place only in the modern world have we a large church that is maintaining faithfully the full deposit of faith. The church to which we refer is the great free church of Holland, the "Gereformeerde Kerken." There at least we have a truly Calvinistic church—a church that is proclaiming the Christian religion, not in some feeble, inconsistent form, but as it is set forth on the basis of Holy Scripture in the Reformed Faith.

What is the reason for this resistance of the free church of Holland to the general drift? How has that church succeeded where other churches have failed? The answer is perfectly plain. It is simply that in Holland the issue was clearly faced, and faced in time. In the eighties of the last century, the Calvinists or evangelicals in Holland, under the leadership of a great Christian statesman, Dr. Abraham Kuyper, separated from the state church, and formed a truly Calvinistic church. They had the courage of their convictions; they set up

and maintained a true church discipline; they were perfectly ready to do unpleasant things that Christ's little ones might not be led astray; they demanded that the ministry of the church should proclaim no message save the message for the proclamation of which the church had its being. They maintained a great Christian system of education—Christian schools in grades high and low, and a great Christian university. Thus was established by the help of God a well-rounded ecclesiastical life, an educated ministry, a laity instructed in the Word of God, true worship and true service. Against such a church the forces of modern unbelief have proved to be powerless. The free church of Holland and its daughter, the noble Christian Reformed Church in America, still stand firm in the midst of a hostile world.

The example of those churches shows, if indeed it needed to be shown, that modern unbelief is not invincible, but that even in these days a church as well as an individual may be a true witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. Only, if it is to do that, it must be willing to pay the price. It must be willing to be called intolerant and narrow and unkind; it must be willing to do unpleasant things; it must be willing to practice exclusion for the sake of those for whom Christ died. But do we require modern examples to establish the need of separateness for the Church? Did not our Lord say that salt that has lost its savor is good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under foot of men; did not Paul say: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed"? Is not the whole of the First Epistle to the Corinthians devoted to a mighty contention of the Apostle against a paganism, both in life and in thought, that was seeking in subtle ways to establish itself in the Church? Really the Word of God here supports the lesson of all Christian history. A church that tolerates within its borders the polite paganism of the world, a church that cries "Peace, peace, when there is no peace," is a church that is ready to die.

Such is the deadly peace that has captured most of the larger Protestant bodies in the world today. Very lamentable is the condition of the Protestant Church. But need that condition be wondered at? Is it due to any weakness in the Gospel itself? Is it not rather the inevitable consequence of one fundamental error—of this disastrous notion that an individual or a church may avoid doing unpleasant things and yet maintain its power, may be

at peace with God without being in conflict with the world, may simply drift with the current and still be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ. A strange error that is, indeed. As a matter of fact, the Gospel now as always runs directly counter to the natural man, and can be maintained only through constant struggle. Let a church relinquish the struggle, let it cease to practice exclusion, let it decry controversy within its borders, let it assume that all is well, and soon the all-engulfing paganism will creep in and take control. Such is the lamentable state of the ecclesiastical world at the present time.

In view of this world-wide condition, we need not wonder that America too has drifted away from the Gospel of Christ. We are in little agreement with those who think that in American churches all is essentially well, that Modernism is just a foolish little aberration, and that the heart of the churches may be assumed to be perfectly sound. Those who speak so are really quite blind to that which is going on in the world today; they are living in the situation of fifty or seventy-five years ago, and have not the slightest inkling of the real state of the case. As a matter of fact, in this battle against Modernism in America we are engaging merely in one division of a world-wide conflict; here as elsewhere Christianity is battling against a mighty current of the age.

In this American phase of the conflict, the enemy is not yet in such complete ascendancy as in most other countries of the world; but certainly the situation even here is bad enough. Of the larger Protestant bodies very few are resisting with any vigor the general drift; very few are delivering any ringing testimony to the Gospel of Christ. Most lamentable of all, perhaps, is the condition of those churches that boast of their freedom from Modernism, and of the absence of controversy within their bounds; for that boast usually means merely that the churches that make it are relinquishing without even a struggle the great heritage of the Christian Faith. A deadly vagueness besets the teaching of such Churches. It is a feeble message which in these days arouses no opposition and causes no controversy; now as always the true Gospel would turn the world upside down.

The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

The Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. belongs in a slightly higher category; for the evangelicals in that church, though so far they have been defeated in their contention, have at least had faith enough to contend; and that is some gain. They have at least not treated the witness of the church as though it were an utterly contemptible and valueless thing, but have endeavored—unsuccessfully so far, it is true—to restore it before it is utterly destroyed.

Certainly the condition of this church, as of other American churches, is bad enough. The creed of the church remains, indeed, truly Christian; for every candidate for ordination is required to subscribe solemnly to the West-

minster Confession of Faith. But this creed-subscription is constantly being "interpreted" so loosely as to mean scarcely anything at all.

It would be instructive to trace the steps that have brought a church that was formerly so great into its present lamentable condition; but that can only very imperfectly be done. Here as elsewhere the destructive forces have been content to labor for the most part in the dark. Only now and then has some overt act served to reveal the extent to which the undermining of the church had progressed.

Such an overt act was the union with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in 1906—a church that was Presbyterian in name but certainly not Calvinistic in doctrine. The basis of union was simply the Westminster Confession of Faith; but since the adherents of the very different creed of the Cumberland Church were to be received without any change in their beliefs, it is evident that the ordination pledge in the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. was to be interpreted with a looseness to which scarcely any limits could be set.

After the Cumberland union, the destructive forces labored for a time in the dark. But they came to the surface again in the so-called "Plan of Organic Union," which was sent down to the presbyteries by the General Assembly of 1920. According to that Plan, the constituent churches in the proposed union were, indeed, graciously to be allowed to retain each its own creed; but what was really stamped as essential was contained in a Preamble couched in the vague language so dear to modern naturalism. Evidently something more than Calvinism was here at stake. In the Cumberland union the attack was upon the distinctive features of the Reformed or Calvinistic Faith; but here it was also upon those verities of the Christian religion about which even the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Churches agree with us.

The Plan of Organic Union was defeated in the presbyteries: but it received an enormous vote; and when one observes that it was presented to the Assembly by Dr. J. Ross Stevenson, the president of the most conservative seminary in the Church, and was advocated by Dr. Charles R. Erdman, another professor in that same conservative institution, one can readily see how very far the doctrinal consciousness of the church had been undermined.

The Auburn Affirmation

In 1923, the General Assembly at Indianapolis, in opposition to the propaganda of Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick in the First Presbyterian Church of New York—a propaganda that was hostile to the very roots of the Christian religion—issued an evangelical pronouncement to the effect that the Virgin Birth of Christ and four other verities of the Faith were essential doctrines of the Word of God and of our Standards. This evangelical pronouncement contained nothing distinctive of the Reformed Faith, and certainly it did not err on the side of too great detail. It merely enunciated certain great facts and doctrines

about which all the great branches of the historic Church are agreed. Yet it was attacked by about one thousand three hundred ministers in the Presbyterian Church in a document commonly called the "Auburn Affirmation," which declared that acceptance of not one single one of the five points mentioned in the General Assembly's pronouncement was essential for ordination in the Presbyterian Church. Thus according to the Auburn Affirmation a man may be a Presbyterian minister without believing in the Virgin Birth or in any other one of these great verities of the Faith.

In the ensuing ecclesiastical battle between the General Assembly's pronouncement and the Auburn Affirmation, between the evangelical and the anti-evangelical forces in the Presbyterian Church, the anti-evangelical forces have in the main won the victory. They encountered, indeed, some temporary setbacks in their triumphal march. In 1924, at Grand Rapids, Dr. Clarence E. Macartney, representing the evangelical forces, was elected Moderator of the General Assembly in a close contest with Dr. Charles R. Erdman, who, despite orthodox declarations made by him and for him, had the support of the Modernist-indifferentist party in the Church. But in the following year Dr. Erdman was elected over the candidate of the evangelical party in that year, and the Modernists and indifferentists resumed control. A Commission of Fifteen, appointed by Dr. Erdman in 1925, really gave the Modernists and indifferentists all that they desired—namely, the glossing over of the real conditions and time to tighten their control of the machinery of the church.

That control is at present practically complete. Four out of fifteen ministerial members of the Board of Foreign Missions and seven out of sixteen ministerial members of the Board of National Missions are actually signers of the Modernist "Auburn Affirmation," and those who have taken any clear and effective and prominent stand against what that anti-evangelical document represents are scarcely represented in these boards at all. Typical, too, of the prevailing conditions is the fact that the "Candidate Secretary" of the Board of Foreign Missions is a signer of the Affirmation. Thus this gentleman whose function is to interview candidates for the mission field, and who has it within his power to encourage them or discourage them in their plans for missionary service, is a signer of a formal document that is derogatory to the very roots of that Gospel for the proclamation of which, at home and abroad, the Presbyterian Church exists.

Side by side with this undermining of the doctrinal position of the Church, and with this weakening of its testimony, has gone an attack upon its form of government. In the interests of this latter attack the most effective step, perhaps, was the establishment of the "General Council," which has proved to be a powerful agency of centralization and a more and more serious menace to our ancient liberties. Year by year the General Council,

through the General Assembly, which acts altogether without debate, sends down overtures whose effect is to tighten the control of the central ecclesiastical machine. Some of them, as was the case with the overture of 1928 regarding the Permanent Judicial Commission, have been defeated. The fate of others, as of the amazing Overtures D and F of last year, are at the present time of writing still in doubt. But the menace is ever with us, and of the ancient Presbyterian liberties, if the process goes on unchecked, little will remain.

Destruction of the Old Princeton Seminary

The drift of the Church has been seen not only in the ecclesiastical machinery but also in the educational agencies. One and only one of the theological seminaries, that at Princeton, was until recently engaging in a really vigorous and effective battle against the destructive forces that were so mightily at work. That seminary, indeed, up to the spring of 1929, stood at the very height of its influence; its student body had increased greatly within recent years,¹ and it was honored by all those throughout the world who in the face of the prevailing Modernist tyranny cherished Presbyterian liberty and the glories of the Reformed Faith. Evidently, from the Modernist-indifferentist point of view, such an institution constituted a serious menace, and had to be destroyed. So destroyed it was in 1929, after a three-years' fight. Princeton Theological Seminary now stands under a board of control that has two Auburn Affirmationists in its membership and is quite out of accord with the doctrinal position that the institution has hitherto maintained.

This destruction of the old Princeton was furthered by representatives of the ecclesiastical machinery who were within the councils of the seminary itself. President J. Ross Stevenson and Dr. Charles R. Erdman, the two advocates of the reorganization who were members of the faculty of the seminary, are both of them members of the Board of Foreign Missions, Dr. Erdman being its president. Dr. Robert E. Speer and Dr. John McDowell, the former being a secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions and the latter of the Board of National Missions, took a particularly vigorous part in the reorganization movement; and Dr. George Alexander and Mr. W. P. Stevenson, members of the Board of Foreign Missions, also were concerned in it, the former being a member of the board of directors of the Seminary and the latter a member of the board of trustees. What we have essentially in the change at Princeton is the crushing out of the distinctive features of the seminary by the

¹ The attendance in successive years at Princeton Seminary from 1918-1919 to 1929-1930 inclusive has been 114, 156, 163, 195, 215, 215, 224, 238, 222, 253, 255, 177. In the first few of these years, the effect of the war was felt. The drop of 78 (30 per cent) from 1928-1929 to 1929-1930 was of course due to the reorganization. The student body during the last year of conservative control numbered 255; it numbered 177 during this first year under the new Board. Not improbably it may begin to increase again as a different type of students is attracted to take the place of the devotedly evangelical students who have been repelled by the change in control.

general administrative machinery of the church. Princeton Seminary has simply been made to conform to the general doctrinal drift.

That doctrinal drift is also practically in complete control of the agencies of public discussion. The official organ of the church, *The Presbyterian Magazine*, is actually under the editorship of a signer of the Modernist "Auburn Affirmation" itself; and of the older unofficial organs not one is supporting a clear-cut evangelicalism. The only one which was formerly doing so, *The Presbyterian*, has removed its former editor, Dr. S. G. Craig, because of the courageous, though always courteous, way in which he presented the real issue in the Church; and now it is an organ of the conventional "middle-of-the-road" or pacifist kind. From February 1, 1930, up to the appearance of this first issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY the evangelical party was without any real organ of publicity in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A.

The Present Duty of Evangelicals

Under these discouraging circumstances, what ought to be done by the sound elements in that church? About the answer to this question there may be differences of opinion in detail; but some things, we think, can hardly be in doubt. There are some things at least which we certainly ought to do.

1. We ought to face the facts. Nothing is more enervating today than a foolish optimism about the state of the church. Let us get rid of this ecclesiastical Couéism which seeks comfort from a parrot-like repetition of the assertion that the church is "essentially sound." Rather let us spread the real facts unreservedly before God in prayer, and seek our help from Him.

2. We ought to avoid paring down our ecclesiastical program to suit undecided or timorous persons on the outskirts of our camp. Nothing has been more effective in preventing any brave or generous action on the part of evangelicals in the church than this continual fear of "losing support" for our movement if we speak out bravely for the Lord Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, our movement will greatly profit by losing some kinds of support. When our army is reduced to Gideon's three hundred men, then God may be pleased to give us the victory in the fight.

3. Let us support our new evangelical organ with all our might and main. It certainly deserves our support. Dr. S. G. Craig, the Editor, needs no introduction to men of evangelical conviction wherever they may be. His noble voice in *The Presbyterian* brought comfort and guidance to thousands who were seeking the truth. His very opponents do him credit. Never was there a man who could say more justly to those who opposed him: "Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?" In CHRISTIANITY TODAY, he will speak with even greater power; and he will have associated with him, as Managing Editor, the Rev. H. McAllister Griffiths, whose

splendid talent for journalism will be put to the very highest use. Such a paper can be relied on never to be dull. And never will it fall into the fault of so many church papers of keeping silent about the really great issues and emitting a smoke-screen instead of light.

4. We ought to support Westminster Theological Seminary, which has been born in prayer and has been supported by the devotion and self-sacrifice of those who love the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Certainly we who are serving in this work in the faculty are far from perfect; and certainly we are the first to recognize that fact. But there can be no doubt but that the work itself is of God. Sweet water cannot be obtained from a bitter fountain; and if the preaching of the Gospel is to go on at all in the Presbyterian Church we must have a truly evangelical and truly Presbyterian source of ministerial supply.

5. We ought to keep the banner flying in the councils of the church. About our immediate duty in detail there may be some doubt. But one thing at least is clear—there can be no peace, save a shameful peace, between the Christian religion and that which the Auburn Affirmation, for example, represents. If the latter is really in permanent control of our church, then a new church should be formed to be a true witness to Jesus Christ. Meanwhile the banner of the Gospel cause should be kept flying at the General Assembly and in all the councils of the Presbyterian Church. Dr. S. G. Craig has been mentioned in the daily press as a possible Moderator of the General Assembly of this year. We do not know whence this suggestion originally came. But certainly we commend it with all our heart. He may not like our doing so in the columns of CHRISTIANITY TODAY. But we beg him not to mutilate our article at this point. There could be no finer standard-bearer than this one who has done so much and suffered so much for the cause of Christ. And to have no standard-bearer at all—to elect by acclamation some candidate of the Modernist-indifferentist party in the church—this we think would be simply to be unfaithful to a great trust.

6. We ought not to despair. The world may look dark to him who loves the Gospel today. But let us reflect that this is not the first gloomy time in the history of the Christian Church; and sometimes the darkest hour has just preceded the dawn. Even now God has by no means left Himself without a witness. We who have been at Westminster Seminary, for example, have learned through contact with our splendid company of students, as never before, how truly blessed a thing is Christian fellowship in the midst of a hostile world. No, there are still many today who love the Lord Jesus Christ as He is presented to us in God's Word. But the true ground of our confidence is found in the great and precious promises of God. Who can say? Perhaps God has brought us into these troubles in order that we may cease to have confidence in men and may rely more completely upon Him.