

FRATERNAL CORRESPONDENCE.¹

CERTAIN Northern Presbyterian prints are still bent upon persuading us to consort with their church, by arguing that we are involved as deeply as themselves in the sin of political usurpations. Their argument seems to be, that we should come together, because we are alike bad! To this "soft impeachment" we beg leave to demur. But the continuance of this pertinacious effort evinces the importance of reminding our people of the real issue of principle between ours and the Northern Presbyterian Church. It is often misconceived. The true nature of the usurpation committed by that Assembly was this: The Federal administration at Washington had created a political issue against the Southern States, which, in the dispensation of an offended providence, became irreconcilable. With this issue the Southern Presbyterian Church, as a church, had nothing to do, save anxiously to deprecate it; and individuals of our church, even when engaged in the civil service of their fellow-citizens, usually did the same, standing, as the South did, upon the defensive, and earnestly desirous to escape aggression. But the providential result, precipitated chiefly by the ruthless refusal of the triumphant faction to listen to any terms except abject submission, was, that a personal question between two competing allegiances, that between the claim of the Federal government—the creature of the States—and the claim of the original States themselves, was forced on individual Southern Christians. We had no option about meeting the question. But when this imperative claim was forced on us, nearly all honest Christians here decided that the right of their States to their allegiance was the prior and superior one. That their decision was at least not consciously wicked may be argued from the historical facts, that Virginia, the oldest of the Southern States, and their leader, had expressly reserved this right in 1788, in the sovereign act in which she acceded to the Federal

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compact, and had been cheerfully hailed as a member on these express terms ; that Mr. Jefferson, the founder of the Republican party, and Mr. Madison, " the father of the constitution," both expressly taught it ; that this superior claim of the States as against the Federal government to the allegiance of their own citizens was also admitted by the Adams party, the opponents of the old Republican party, by the mouth of their elected exponent, Gen. Harry Lee (Light-Horse), the father of Gen. R. E. Lee ; that it was expressly claimed by the ablest of the New England statesmen in 1814 ; that it was the avowed doctrine of both the political parties, and of nearly all the States, in the interval between 1815 and 1860 ; that it was expressly taught by Mr. Wirt, the legal member of Gen. Jackson's cabinet, even in the midst of the heated opposition of that administration to Mr. Calhoun ; that it had been roundly asserted by Chief Justice Chase, while governor of Ohio ; and especially, that it was enounced almost unanimously as the right doctrine by all that was virtuous, learned, patriotic and prudent, in the Southern bench and bar.

Well ; in April, 1861, by the dispensation of divine providence, and by no act of my own, this inexorable issue was forced on me for my personal decision. Mr. Lincoln claimed my allegiance and aid against my own State. Virginia declared him a usurper, and claimed my allegiance and aid against him. I had to decide between them, as conscientiously as I might. This was evidently a case for the exercise of the right of private judgment, so far as ecclesiastical control was concerned. The question did not turn on any spiritual principle of duty to Christ, but on historical and political facts. The question was not at all one between lawlessness and subordination, between rebellion or obedience to " the powers that might be." No Southern Christian dreamed of electing lawlessness and insubordination to constituted human authority. The sole question was between two rival authorities, which had come in a very peculiar and complicated form of government into competition : the older and prior sovereign-State authority, and the newer and derived Federal authority. This was precisely the point : Which must I, a Virginian, obey ? I decided as the fathers of the Federal constitution, as New England, as Chief Justice Chase, had decided : I obeyed my State.

Well; in May, 1861, the Presbyterian General Assembly in Philadelphia took upon itself to decide that this my Christian act, so anxiously, prayerfully, and piously performed, was *the sin of rebellion*, prohibited by the apostle in Romans xiii. and 1 Peter ii. They did this, though warned expressly that, in order to reach such a conclusion logically, the Assembly was bound to entertain ecclesiastically, to examine and adjudicate, this prior historical and political question—if it dared to say it had a right to do so. For obviously, the whole decision turned upon it. But the Assembly tyrannically refused to have this vital question argued; refused to hear evidence upon it; cut off every word of defence; and the well-known penalty upon any Southern member for exercising his sacred constitutional right in this behalf would have been to be torn in pieces by a frantic mob of those Philadelphians, who are now busy going through the sham of celebrating the centennial anniversary of the principles which they hate and have trampled down in mire and blood. Here was a usurpation, equalling in bald and ruthless spiritual tyranny, and in mischievous perversion of moral order, righteousness, and liberty, anything ever done by the Popes Gregory VII. or Innocent III.

Of course, all of that Assembly, except the *ignoramuses*, knew better. They knew that, ecclesiastically and spiritually, they had nothing to do with the question, unless they had had the righteousness and moral courage, in the exercise of their pastoral function, to speak up for the rights of conscience, and advise moderation and conciliation to their own aggressive people. Even Dr. Hodge instructed them, timidly, of their usurpation. But they would not hearken. What was their motive? It was to grasp that influence which, they supposed, the edicts of a powerful spiritual court so long venerated would exert over the consciences of Presbyterians, to aid and strengthen the greedy political faction to which these usurping ecclesiastics happened to be attached by their passions and supposed interests. Such was the real nature of the war legislation from 1861 to 1866.

Now, the Southern church, in fidelity to Christ, had no option but to resist. And as the radical Assemblies had perpetrated the wrong by invading the sphere of political rights, our church could meet and resist the usurpation only by following

them, for defensive purposes, into the same sphere. This is very simple. But hence has arisen a miserable quibble, which seems to have deluded the whole North, and to have embarrassed not a little many Southern minds. It has been argued that, if the radical Assemblies went out of their sphere in pronouncing the decision of Southern patriots to be the sin of rebellion, the Southern Assembly has gone equally out of its sphere, in pronouncing that it was not the sin of rebellion. "You," say they, "are as deep in the mire as we are in the mud." To a fair mind the answer is very clear. The one intruded into the secular sphere *for the purpose of invading* a right of private judgment, which is one of the rights all churches are bound to protect. The other only followed them, as far as their invasion necessitated, *for the purpose of defending* this sacred right. In fact, this clear distinction was faithfully observed by the Southern church. Never once did her Assembly say to any one: You shall go with the Southern patriots into the support of the Confederacy, or be adjudged guilty of the sin of rebellion. This would have been the exact, formal counterpart of the usurpation of the Northern Assembly. But the Southern Assemblies steadily held that the decision of this political question was a right of each Christian's private judgment; involving, of course, the inference, that he who decided for his own State could not be charged with ecclesiastical offence, where the same immunity was guaranteed to him who decided against his own State. This distinction has received a thousand illustrations. But there happens to be one so just that we cannot do better than present it. In the Old School Assembly of 1859, some enthusiasts memorialized the body to adopt the precept that the temperate use of anything alcoholic is *sin per se*, and to make total abstinence therefore a term of communion. The Assembly wisely, and almost unanimously, refused to do it. But in order to ground this refusal logically, the Assembly was obliged to hold and teach, that the temperate drinking of any alcoholic liquid is *not sin per se*. Of course. Now, did the Assembly mean, that it was one of her legitimate spiritual functions to *countenance temperate drinking*? Not at all. Let us suppose that some fanatic had said: "This decision carries an incidental encouragement to temperate drinking, in its implied sanction; it will be gleefully quoted by distillers and

whisky-sellers. This Assembly has therefore, to say the least, gone out of her sphere on one side, as far as the Delavan-Christian has gone on the other. If he is wrong, she is wrong." This nonsense would have embarrassed nobody; the answer would have been plain: that the Assembly was legislating aright, not in the positive interests of temperate drinking; but in the interests of Christian liberty, which it was her proper spiritual function to define and protect. The aggression attempted by the Delavan fanatic had made it necessary for the Assembly to follow him into the social question, for defensive purposes.

But your radical is a pertinacious animal; and this wretched sophism, thoroughly stuck to, and continually repeated to this day (see *Presbyterian and Princeton Quarterly*, April, 1876), seems to have confused some men's minds among us, until they are almost afraid to stand to the truth. For myself, as an ecclesiastical ruler, I clearly saw my duties to Christ and the spiritual rights of his people; and as a private citizen, I was not ashamed of that secular cause which was made glorious by the most intelligent, disinterested and heroic devotion to principle and liberty ever displayed by any people, and by such blood as that of Sidney Johnson, Jackson, and Polk. This clear distinction between the aggressive attitude of the Northern, and the defensive attitude of the Southern church, also justifies me in my references to the history of the political question, in what I design for an ecclesiastical discussion.

But again: as the Confederate struggle went on, slavery happening to be the incidental occasion (*not the cause!*) of the collision, the same usurpers in the Radical Assemblies bethought themselves of the expedient to strengthen their political faction still more, and to inflame the horrors of war against their "Southern brethren," by declaring slavery a *sin per se*, and the justifying of the relation of master and bondsman a "heresy" and a "blasphemy." True, they thus contradicted at once the word of God, the law of their own church as settled for all parts of it by their own Assembly of 1845, and the constitution whose integrity alone could give the North any pretext of right to rule or judge in the South. But these were no obstacles, when they saw this opportunity to heat up the declining fires of hatred and warfare. To these two usurpations, and to this heresy, and to this libel against our fathers and us, they still adhere in this

year of grace, 1876, while busily pretending to celebrate the centennial of those acts of the fathers embodying precisely the principles of State sovereignty, secession and liberty, which these men fiercely destroyed in 1865. These are the grounds not for our malice and revenge, but for our conscientious testimony and resistance. As to the civil government which has for eleven years, under the solemn and chastening ordinance of God, been permitted to establish its usurped authority irresistibly over my State, I submit peaceably, as to the "ordinance of God," just as Paul and Peter and Christ commanded private Christians to submit, in all things not unlawful, to conquering pagan Rome. I know what the chastising will of God is, in this particular, and bow to it. But as to the rights of conscience of my brethren and my children, I have no option to concede anything, any more than Peter and John had to concede when commanded "not to preach in the name of Jesus." The principles of Christ's kingdom are sacred and unchangeable—they are not antiquated with the lapse of eleven, or eleven hundred years.

But there seems to be an impression, that the true meaning of this issue has somehow passed away for us; that the overthrow of the constitution and the revolution in the government are complete and irrevocable; that these usurpations by the Radical Assemblies upon our rights of conscience, provoked by the dead Confederacy and dead slavery are wholly things of the past; and that therefore it is time for us to drop our testimony, and "let by-gones be by-gones." The answer to this feeble talk is that, unfortunately, the aggressors will not let by-gones be by-gones. What has happened since 1866, and what is now happening? We saw how the usurping ecclesiastics greatly inflamed and aggravated the horrors of war, hounding on the fiercest spirits of the invaders. They have steadily supported and encouraged the acts of oppression which are now filling many parts of the South with misery and destitution, and crushing several States under their own slaves. They are to-day wielding their whole influence in support of a system which destroys the liberties of the South, and which will probably destroy American institutions both North and South. I see these ecclesiastics, after eleven years, still glorying in all these iniquities, revelling in the spoils of the invasion, just as they did in

the hour of the first spoliation, and to this hour refusing to retract a single libel upon our sainted fathers and ourselves, whom they pronounced heretics, sinners, and blasphemers, for daring to defend the relation in which the "Father of the faithful" lived and died. It is by their sanction and eager advocacy that our widows and orphans, who in many cases were incapable of exercising even an active sympathy as non-combatants with what these men are pleased to call "rebellion," have been subjected, *and are to-day subjected*, eleven years after the end of the war, to spoliations and oppressions of *murderous cruelty*. I speak deliberately: these helpless victims, absolutely innocent even from the conquerors' point of view, have literally perished, and are now perishing under these cruelties. In all this I fail to see any ground for silencing our righteous protest. But especially is this false cry of peace preposterous in view of the distinct and clear declaration of the Radical Assembly at this time, that they do not mean to retract the usurpations of 1861-66. They expressly retain the claims. Doubtless this is done for a purpose intensely practical; and if there is to be any healthy struggle in American politics, not for State sovereignty, but for a return to sounder and better usages in the newly formed, consolidated empire, it will be found that these popish claims are reserved *for the purpose of being used* in the service of a political faction. Let us suppose a case, that may very naturally arise. Every honest and intelligent person, North and South, believes that universal negro-suffrage was a deplorable blunder, and is an experiment fraught at this time with peril to the whole country. Nine out of ten of the freedmen are wholly unqualified for the trust. Experience has given us a complete demonstration, that they abuse it to the advancement of men utterly unfit for public trust, selfish, unpatriotic, and designing. Who doubts it? Thoughtful men everywhere were greatly misdoubting whether universal white suffrage had not already extended the privilege of voting into too many incompetent hands: and the integrity of American politics was staggering under that load. But now the addition of hundreds of thousands of barbarous, alien, ignorant voters, where the case was already hazardous, makes the experiment fearful. Such is the state of this matter. Now let us suppose that many secular leaders at the North, far less rabid than these ecclesiastical factionists, should concur with many public men at the South, who, notwithstanding their enormous

wrongs, truly seek the best possible future for the whole of the consolidated empire, in inquiring after a remedy for this fearful peril. The only practical or practicable remedy would be what is known as "impartial suffrage." Nothing in the terms imposed by the conquerors of the South, or in the last so called "amendments" to the constitution, forbids our thinking of this. "Impartial suffrage" would make no difference between the negro and his former master, on the score of "race, color, or previous condition of bondage." Whatever were the qualifications enacted, it would exclude the unqualified white as much as the unqualified black. But let us suppose that when this remedy was proposed, it should suit the views and plans of your Mortons, Colfaxes and Blaines, to raise the howl, that the ascendancy of the Radical party was imperilled by "impartial suffrage," and to raise the cry: "Parsons, to the rescue!" Is it not every way likely that the Radical Presbyterian Assembly would again draw the sword of this popish usurpation, which they are preserving so carefully for future use? We should probably have them at their next meeting telling all the good people, by authority of the divine Head of the church, that "manhood suffrage" was involved in the Christian creed, and that this "rebel" invention of "impartial suffrage" was clear "sin, heresy, and blasphemy." It is not the least uncharitable to surmise this. For did they not deal just thus with the equally secular questions of Abolition, Free-soil, and State-rights, in past years? And has not a Radical Assembly, sitting in the name of Christ and speaking by his authority, already decided that righteousness demands the universal extension of suffrage to the freedmen? "That which hath been is that which shall be." Indeed, in the view of sagacious men, this Radical Presbyterian Church, with the Northern Methodist Church, are the two most serious and dangerous obstacles to the ascertainment of some safe and tolerably equitable basis for the government of the new empire; and if the formidable mischiefs which are now threatening the freedom and civilization of both sections alike remain unremedied, and finally work out their catastrophe, these two perverted religious bodies will be more guilty for it than any avowedly secular party in the country. It thus appears that, both in the spiritual and the civil aspect, their usurpation is a "living issue," as real as it is dangerous.