

THE SOUTHERN CHURCH AND THE PRESBYTERIAN ALLIANCE.¹

I HAVE good a reason for wishing that your paper were read by every Presbyterian in the Southern States. It is this: I wish to reach them with a few plain views touching that "passage" in the last General Assembly at Knoxville, in which the majority refused to define the presence of our church in the Presbyterian Alliance at Edinburgh. If I may judge by appearances at Knoxville and since, I have little chance of being allowed to speak to my brethren on this subject, except through the columns of our newspapers. At least, that chance appears so "slim" that I do not intend to run the risk of refusal by asking for it.

The facts of the case are contained in the Minutes of the Assembly of 1878. This is the outline of them: That the churches composing virtually the body and weight of the Presbyterian Alliance, namely, the Presbyterian Church of Canada, the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, the Established Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the New School Presbyterian Church of America and the Old School Presbyterian Church of America (now fused into the great *omnibus* church of the North), had at different times reviled and condemned us for having slaves as virtual "men-stealers," as worthy to be classed with "murderers of fathers," as having on us a "dark and deadly stain," as being morally bound to the immediate duty of emancipation in all cases and as being guilty of "heresy and blasphemy" in our doctrine about slavery. To these the two Northern Presbyterian Churches added the accusations of "treason" against the best and noblest of our brethren, because they exercised their right of conscience in obeying their State governments as to the Confederacy; and

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those churches formally and earnestly demanded of the conquerors the murder of these beloved brethren of ours on the gallows.

The next important fact is : that the Assembly of 1848, then including all the Old School Presbyterians in the North itself, almost unanimously resolved that these libels were so unjust and unscriptural that our church never should, and never could, have anything more to do with the bodies making them, until they were withdrawn. The Assembly of 1845—two-thirds of it in the North—had meantime made that decision, which will forever remain impregnable truth, that while the church has no business to legislate either for or against civil institutions not sin *per se*, and while it should always rebuke the abuse of any relation by cruelty or injustice, it could not scripturally make mere slave-holding a sin *per se*, or a bar to communion, because God allowed it to his people in the Bible.

The next important fact is : that our Assembly in 1865, after the fall of the Confederacy, declared that, while on the one hand it was the duty of Southern Christians to submit peaceably to the act of the conquerors, in depriving them of their lawful property in the labor of their bondsmen ; yet, on the other hand, the success of violence could not affect in the least the right or the wrong of the relation, and that the truth was just what it was before.

The next important fact is : that in 1866, the Northern Presbyterians in their Assemblies, while fiercely renewing their libels, expressly touched upon the declaration of our Assembly ; declared that this made our position just as wicked as if we still had the slaves ; that our being kept from holding them merely by Federal bayonets did not make us one whit less wicked ; and that consequently we are not to be forgiven until we had taken this position back, and professed repentance for uttering it. Now, had the relation ever been sinful, the Northern Presbyterians would have been obviously right in this ; for a church is a spiritual commonwealth ; has concern with opinions and principles as well as overt acts ; and ought to require sinful men to give up the love of sin in their hearts, as well as hold back their hands from it when compelled.

The next and all important fact is : that our Assemblies did, from 1870 to 1876, in various ways, and with the most perfect

uniformity and unanimity, declare that, while we ought to try to be forbearing, patient and forgiving under wrong, our duty to truth and to ourselves made it impossible for us to enter into formal relations with these accusing church-courts until these dreadful libels were withdrawn. Is there a man in the South, worthy of the name of a man, who did not say that our Assemblies were right in this?

But between 1875 and 1877, the project of a Pan-Alliance of Presbyterians was ripened, and its projectors, and its authorities, as soon as it came to have any, volunteered an invitation to our church to enter. It saw fit to do so in July 1877, through the Assembly's appointed commissioners, in the first council of the Alliance in Edinburgh. But the churches, so lately our accusers, did not retract their charges of "men-stealing," "heresy," etc., nor did they make any allusion to them.

Remembering that the invitations to us to enter the Alliance came from them, I could only see two possible constructions of their conduct: they extended this invitation with a perfect knowledge of our unchanged defensive position; hence, the construction honorable to them and to us is, that in doing so they tacitly, but by distinct inference, withdrew so much of their former denunciations as attacked our fair name and decent reputation as a body of Christians.

The only other construction of their unsought advances to us is so insulting to them that I am unwilling to ascribe it to any body of Christians. It would be to charge them with embracing, for mere policy, men whom they believed they had hitherto righteously rejected for odious sins, only because force had stopp'd the further perpetration of them, while the sinners' hearts were as foul as ever. Hence I believe that our church is fairly entitled to assume the more charitable and honorable construction, and thus improve a happy juncture to reinstate our good name and heal a lamentable scandal and schism. Hence, I ventured to move the Assembly to declare, in most courteous terms, that it was upon this construction, honorable to all parties, it appears as a member of the Alliance. And whilst I drew up a statement and resolution, I expressly said to the members that this was only done as an expedient for presenting the case distinctly, and was in place of a speech, (for I made almost none). I invited them to consider the proposal,

to disregard my statement of it, and to shape any action which would be just to the truth and our church in their own way, and not in mine.

The Minutes of the Assembly will show the result. The majority determined that they would not listen to our proposal, would not confer with us about this point of our common church's right and good name, would not debate it and would not permit the Assembly to act upon it. Hence, when we, with generous courtesy, waived all debate in order to get a simple expression of the Assembly's mind on the proposal, the majority choked the request with the undebatable motion to "lay on the table" by a vote of 69 to 41. We, of course, protested. The majority first raised a committee to prepare an answer to this protest, and then, by formal motion and vote, actually forbade it to attempt to answer the argument of the protest, except upon a trivial technical point! It is surmised that this is the first time in the history of our Assemblies that such a wonderful thing was done.

The plain reader will doubtless have this obvious question in his mind: If the arguments of the paper and protest were so unanswerable that the majority had actually to forbid their own able committee from attempting the perilous task, would it not have been better to accept them? If personal triumph had been the object of the protestants, instead of the honor of the church, they certainly had enough to satisfy them in thus reducing the majority to the helpless condition of the Israelites before the expostulation of Elijah, "And they answered him not a word."

Now, what I affirm is that this majority erred; that the next Assembly ought to retrace the fatal misstep, and that the church ought to speak so as to put necessary nerve into the commissioners of the next Assembly to ensure their doing so.

1. I assert this, first, because that majority sacrificed their friends to their recent enemies and slanderers. The only motive which could be gleaned from their unfraternal refusal even to advise with us about the honor of our beloved Zion, was the fear of giving offence to their newly formed allies in the churches so lately reviling us. But they were willing to wound our most loyal and sensitive affections for the truth and good name of the church, and to refuse us a precious right of self-defence—

us, who are their brethren, who have been for long and weary years standing shoulder to shoulder with them, in defence of what they profess to hold as true and right.

2. I assert it, because their action involves an insult to these new allies of theirs, such as I, no friend to this Alliance from the first, could not find it in my conscience to fling at those accusers of my beloved church. It is this: the only ground of objection which could be extracted from the majority was, that our Assembly's adoption of any such action would certainly provoke the anti-slavery churches, now quiescent, to flame out again into denunciations of us as bitter as the old ones, and thus the present "happy" fraternization would be all spoiled. That is to say: the majority think so much more meanly than I do of these new allies of theirs—whose feelings they consult in preference to their own old friends—that they believe all their advances and their courtesies at Edinburgh to be hollow; they believe that those new allies, for policy's sake, were guilty of the moral obliquity of doing honor to men lately "men-stealers, heretics," etc., under the disgraceful pretext that just now we are forcibly estopped from overt men-stealing! A "happy" fraternization this, indeed! which its own artificers suspect to be thus hollow.

3. I assert that the majority did wrong by this *ad hominem* argument. That if this uncharitable suspicion of theirs were just, then our affiliation with such hollow allies would be degrading to our church, inconsistent with its whole past testimony, and a criminal betrayal of truth. We resolve invariably, ever since 1848, that we cannot lie under such a libel, and then we go to Edinburgh in 1877, and lie down beside the men who, as the majority suppose, have the same libel in their hearts.

4. I object to this action, because it forfeits a happy opportunity to assert the good name of our afflicted church, so long slandered, and of settling, honorably to all parties, a long-pending schism in Presbyterian Christendom. I do not think so ill of our recent accusers as to ascribe to them the *animus* imputed to them by the majority. In 1848, when the Scotch and Irish churches so foully slandered Southern Christianity, they knew nothing about it. Now they know us better. In 1866 our Northern accusers were burning with passion, and had sectional ends to win by blackening us. That passion has subsided; those ends are secured. Neither the European nor the North-

ern anti-slavery men really think of us as they once did. Time is a great teacher. This potent teacher is rapidly opening their eyes to the deadly affinity between abolitionism and communism. They are rapidly learning how absolute a failure their own once-boasted hireling society is as an organization of labor. We have, therefore, no call now to cower before this once-arrogant pharisaism. The time is rapidly approaching for truth to assert its victory and our vindication. Our timidity at such a time is gratuitous; it is short-sighted. Our wisdom, as well as our duty is, at this day especially, to stand boldly to our colors, renew the assertion of our good name, and thus aid the triumph of truth. Hence I lament this action, because it deprives our church of an easy vindication. The Alliance will not be so blind as overtly to reject the construction I tender them, so honorable alike to us and them, when the alternative is the avowal of a moral obliquity disgraceful to themselves. The Alliance will tacitly allow our construction, and that will be our vindication. They will not profess to like slavery; they will still say they think it a bad system, liable to many abuses; they will say that the British and New-England governments never ought to have forced either Africans or slavery upon Virginia against her perpetual protest (so say I); they will still denounce all cruelties upon the helpless, committed by evil masters. Let them do so; no Southern man objects. But they will not repeat the charge that the mere holding of bondsmen is *malum per se*, for they know it is in the teeth of the Bible; or that Southern Christianity was polluted with a "dark and deadly stain," for they know that it was and is as creditable as any other Christianity. We have an impregnable vantage ground in now assuming the position I advised, that they tendered the invitation to us to enter the Alliance. They tendered it knowing our position and unchanging testimony. This entitles us to assume that they proposed to meet us at length as equals, and not as polluted with a "dark and deadly stain." They cannot gainsay it without disgracing themselves.

5. I lament this action, because it is unjust to our honored commissioners in the first council. The present attitude of the Assembly leaves their presence in Edinburgh ambiguous, and exposes them to the charge—which is actually made—that by appearing there, they did virtually utter a "*peccavimus*" un-

authorized, and thus subjected us to all those enormous accusations.

Now, if our commissioners did this, they did a great wrong; one which should justly excite the hot indignation of Southern Presbyterians. Let the reader notice. It is not I who say they did us this foul wrong; BUT THE ASSEMBLY WOULD NOT LET THEM SAY THEY DID NOT, and this, when adversaries are publicly charging that they did! In this the Assembly is unjust and cruel to their own commissioners, who tried to serve them faithfully.

6. I object that the present attitude of the Assembly is wrong, because our accusers are perverting it to our defamation. I forewarned them in Knoxville that their course would be thus interpreted, and that to all hostile minds the interpretation would appear forcible. Thus, the Assembly is respectfully asked to say, by those who have a right to ask, whether or not it sent commissioners to Edinburgh to make an implied confession of judgment to the foul charges of their Edinburgh allies against their own constituency. The Assembly is silent—refuses to answer. Thereupon hostile minds will of course conclude “silence gives consent.” They will infer the Assembly is silent, because it knows that the appearance of its commissioners was a confession of judgment; but it is ashamed to say so “out aloud” as yet. “We abolitionists must not be too hard on the sinners, but give them time to eat dirt.”

Two newspapers among us said they thought the declaration needless, because they presumed the attitude of our church in the Alliance was not misunderstood. But the answer is demolishing—IT IS MISUNDERSTOOD. The construction shameful to us is publicly asserted. Before I had finished reading my prophetic protest in the house, a fulfilment appeared in the morning papers of the town, expressly and insolently asserting that construction. As soon as the *New York Evangelist's* reporter could get home, that paper published the same construction, boasting over faithful consistent supporters of the Southern church. It actually argued that the Assembly's position was unquestionably a surrender and confession of judgment, because otherwise “Dr. Dabney's paper was unanswerable.” The same construction has been taken up by other Northern papers (I know not how many), with insolent expressions of triumph, and a hurling of obloquy against the faithful defenders of the As-

sembly's professed principles—obloquy from which a just government is bound to defend its own servants.

Here is a literal statement of the position into which the reputation of us and our forefathers is thus thrust: I had a venerable father and mother, whose good name was as "ointment poured forth" among all, white and black, who knew them. They are now "with the Lord." They were born, lived and died slaveholders. Accusers charged that they were "men-stealers, worthy to be classed with murderers of fathers and mothers, heretics, profane, making a dark and deadly stain" on their profession. The Assembly of 1848, composed of a majority of Northern men, know that the slander was so wicked that they felt it their duty to protect my father's and mother's good name, and Bible truth, and did it by declaring that they would not hold ecclesiastical intercourse with the slanderers. Our Southern Assemblies all did the same up to 1874. But now the Assembly pursues a certain course, which some of the accusers say means a sanction of the charge. That is, these men publicly say that they understand our Assembly as virtually saying, with them, that my parents were men-stealers, etc. And with this assertion ringing in the public prints, the Assembly proposes to remain obstinately silent! How near does this come to allowing themselves to be made voluntary accessories to these foul slanders on my sainted parents? It is not becoming, perhaps, for me to give the answer. This view of the position is so ugly that an effort will, of course, be made to say, "There is exaggeration in it." Wherein? I challenge correction! No; it is the plain and unvarnished statement of fact. Instead of brethren indolently saying, "Oh! there must be exaggeration!" they had better open their eyes, brush away the dust of prejudice and timidity, and look their position honestly in the face. And now, here is the strength of this view: not that these slandered saints, "of whom the world was not worthy," were my parents, but that the honor and good name of the humblest man's parents in the Southern church are justly as dear to him as mine are to me. Mine were not the great of this world, but they were not blots on Christianity. No. And never shall this voice be silenced, by Assembly or abolitionist, from their righteous defence, and the defence of their Southern equals, until they and their slanderers appear with me before that unerring bar to which I appeal.

7. I object to this position of the Assembly, because the charge under which our church has been lying is not one about which men can honestly "agree to differ." There are accusations such as to necessitate, not strife indeed, but righteous self-defence. Henry VIII. charged that his Queen, Anne Boleyn, was guilty of infidelity to him. She asserted her innocence. In such an issue it would have been criminal for them to "agree to differ" and continue together. If the charge was true, he ought not to have remained a party to the infamous union. If it was false, it would have been treason to her good name and the honor of her sex to remain passive under it, and reward the criminal slanderer with her love. This difference between our anti-slavery accusers and us is equally inexorable, and there are but two ways to solve it without sin: one is our conviction, confession and reformation, if we are guilty of the charge; the other is its withdrawal, if we are innocent. There ought not to be a middle way; there cannot be, without criminality on one side or the other. If those churches were correct in formally charging me with "men-stealing," etc., and I am still unrepentant and unreformed, then they ought not to admit me to their communion. But I have declared that I am not repentant. The forcible confiscation of my property by others does not change my guilt. Were I left to myself, I should doubtless be holding my servants to-day (and a blessed thing it would be for them if I were). If this charge is not just, then it is a slander inflicted on me under the most formal and aggravated circumstances; and I cannot surrender my own vindication without treason to my good name and the credit of Christ's people among whom I am numbered. The issue is inexorable. The obligation of charity does indeed require me to forbear retaliation and revenge, and to render "good for their evil;" but to make it a pretext for betraying truth and righteousness merely because I happen to be one of the persons in whom they are assailed, is worse than confused logic; it is moral obliquity.

Last: I solemnly declare to the brethren of the majority that, in thus throwing away this critical and fortunate juncture for asserting our good name before the Presbyterian world, our church will be apprehended in all future history as having virtually fallen from its testimony, fatigued with the labor and insulation, and as having submitted to the foul charge fixed

on it by the major number of voices. The verdict of history will doubtless be that the loud and arrogant majority have triumphed; that our voice has been silenced by a tardily-awaking conscience, our testimony surrendered, and the infamous sentence of abolitionists submitted to. If we are silent now, we shall never again have a hearing at the bar of history. The protest against the unjust condemnation which I would have the church perpetuate is not only the *minimum* of defensive action which truth and manliness in us ought to tolerate, but it is the only protest which can be effectively uttered at all. While we sit silent, the traducers of us and our noble dead are still filling the ear of the world with their enormous slander. At the very hour when the representatives of these accusing churches were "wining and dining," psalm-singing and speechifying so unctuously with our commissioners in Edinburgh, their abolition partisans were still telling the world, in every form, in newspapers and political speeches, in histories and philosophies, in theological treatises and commentaries, in geographies and school histories, in novels and tales, in dramas and farces, in translations in thirteen languages, of the lies of Uncle Tom's Cabin; that Southern society was barbarous, Southern Christianity a blot, Southern Christians men-stealers, and our Lees, Davises and Johnstons indebted only to the magnanimous mercy of abolition Christianity for not ending their ignominious career on a righteous gibbet. Who is to speak effectively for us if our own church, "the pillar and ground of the truth," is silent? They say: "Let individuals of Dr. Dabney's sentiments write in reply." Have I not written? There stands my "Defence of Virginia and the South," whose arguments, founded on Scripture and facts, are as impregnable as the everlasting hills. But who reads it? The self-satisfied insolence of the pharisaic slanderers makes them disdain it—they never condescend to hear of it. I have no audience. But when our church appears in that Alliance, she has Christendom for her audience. Her circumstances compel the ear of the Christian world. It is her duty to her dead, to her children, to God, to speak. Her long-suffering dignity may forbid her to wrangle. It may even prompt her to appeal her cause to a higher judgment. But she is bound still to remind the accusers that she does not admit the infamous indictment nor confess

judgment. This is the least that self-respect or duty permits. Less than this will be the occasion of helping to fix on us and the men who died for our defence a historical estimate similar to that which we form of the Druse and Koordish masters and Arab slave-hunters.

But the error of the majority of Knoxville need not be like the law of the Medes and Persians, which changeth not. There is still time to save our duty and credit. Let the people at home, the eldership, all whose plain honest sense is not debauched, speak out, and say to the next Assembly: "Our good name is not to be betrayed by its own guardians." The next Assembly may "say, in a few plain words," to Presbyterian Christendom, what is true and right, and our honor is still saved. Let the Assembly say it in its own words: not in mine.

I do not conceive that in giving this advice, I am estopping myself at all from exercising my independent judgment touching the Alliance, of which our Assembly has made itself a member. I did not approve of it. I did not believe it was constitutional, or safe, or useful, or prudent. But I am not factious. The Assembly resolved by a majority to go into it, and far be it from me to seek to obstruct their rights as a majority. An honest subaltern, present in a council of war, advised against a projected expedition. He argued that it was neither lawful, nor strategically wise; but he was overruled. He did not become factious, nor did he desert. He stood faithfully in his obscure lot; and when he saw his countrymen entangled in the consequences of their misadventure, he pointed out the best way to extricate themselves, and to gain, even from the unwise expedition, the best results for his country which righteousness permitted. Having done this, must he therefore suppress his honest judgment that the adventure should never have been made? I think not.