

ADDRESSES

AT THE

CELEBRATION OF THE

Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary

OF THE

WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

BY THE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

OF THE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE U. S. A.

EDITED BY THE

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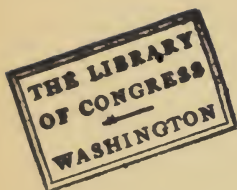


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THE WESTMINSTER POLITY AND
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MODERATOR, FATHERS, AND BRETHREN :

THE forces that make history are usually not conspicuous. The mightiest things are not those which appeal to the eye of sense. In this great world-drama there are actors behind the scenes far more potent than those that stand close up against the foot-lights. However insignificant they may have seemed in their time, and however small may be the space allotted to them by the mere secular historian, we now know that the battles fought in the Jerusalem Chamber were more significant than Naseby or Marston Moor. The business which the Westminster Assembly was set to do was to grapple with principles, by whose resistless force Cromwell and his Ironsides were pushed into immortal prominence. It was these principles and what it did with them, that made the Westminster Assembly the most important event of the 17th century.

The subject assigned to me has to do with the main purpose for which the Assembly was convened. That

purpose was to prepare such a form of church polity and worship as might bring about religious uniformity in the three kingdoms. This according to the order of Parliament, was to take the place of "church government by archbishops, bishops and their chancellors, commissaries, deans and chapters, archdeacons, and other ecclesiastical officers depending upon the hierarchy, which is resolved to be taken away."

I am sure I shall best serve the interests of this day and hour, not by exploiting the superiority of the Westminster polity and worship, nor by going minutely into their history, but by emphasizing the great principles for which the Westminster divines contended in formulating a system of government and worship for the Church. Regnant in their thought, first, last, and midst, was the cardinal principle of the alone Headship of Jesus Christ. It colored all their discussions and directed them to all their conclusions. As the sovereignty of God was the formative principle in their theology, so the sovereignty of God, the Son, was the shaping principle in their system of government and worship. The key in each case was the same. When they passed from doctrine to polity, or from polity to doctrine, or from both to worship, there was no break in the harmony.

They found their authority in the Word of God. What the Bible said was final. They were guided by the Book; and in obedience neither to tradition,

nor to the light of the inner consciousness, would they go beyond the record. They conceived that their business was not to adjust the Bible to man, nor to cut and clip the Book to fit human prejudice and accommodate human conceit, but to faithfully adjust man to the Bible. From their point of view it was not for them to amend the chart, but to steer their course according to its directions, reach what port they might.

Accordingly, with a clearness never to be misunderstood, with a conviction that could not be shaken, with a heart for any fate, they declared that "Christ, who is Prophet, King, and Head of the Church, hath fulness of power, and containeth all other offices, by way of eminency in himself."

Again, in briefer phrase, they affirmed that "the Lord Jesus Christ is the only King, the only Head in Zion." There they stood, firm as a rock on a storm-beaten shore. From that position nothing could dislodge them. No Erastian modification whatsoever could be allowed. The crown rights of Jesus Christ were not to be seized, or in any large or small degree shared by another. There was room for but one on the throne of Zion. To him civil and ecclesiastical rulers alike must give place. By logic as unanswerable as the Bible, and by arguments that left the Erastian brethren not a leg to stand upon, they upheld the kingship of Jesus, "brought forth the royal diadem, and crowned him Lord of all."

This kingship of our Lord, in all matters ecclesiastical, seems simple enough to us to-day, living under the free skies of America—so simple that it is apt to be passed over rather lightly. How could a truth so self-evident ever have been disputed? But it was no simple thing two hundred and fifty years ago. It raised momentous issues. To stand for the unqualified sovereignty of Christ over his Church, as those men stood at that time, was radical and revolutionary. It involved the overthrow of many a cherished idol and a new-making of society. Only strong, brave, heroic men would have dared to announce and defend such a principle there and then. After the Restoration, when the tide had turned and sought to sweep them again upon the coasts of prelacy, rather than conform and bow the knee to Baal, they proved their earnestness and courage by the clear testimony of suffering.

The avowal of this principle was a challenge both to Cæsar and Rome, both to politician and prelate, a notice served upon them to quit-claim the sovereignty of the Church of God. Both were usurpers; both were exercising lordship where they had no right; and this fearless stand for the sole Headship of Christ was a writ of ejection. Elder Lord Warriston put it with telling terseness when he said before the Assembly "that Christ lives and reigns alone, over, and in his Church, and will have all done therein according to his word and

will, and that he has given no supreme headship over his Church to any pope, king, or parliament whatsoever." There spoke the spirit of the Covenanters. That ringing utterance, vigorous and fresh as a blast from his own northern hills, could not be mistaken. He meant to be understood, and he was. This cardinal doctrine, so constantly insisted upon, was the great mother-lode of the range. Out of the rich ore it yielded was minted the following, whose image and superscription Presbyterians know so well: "the Lord Jesus, as King and Head of his Church, hath therein appointed a government in the hands of church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate." That looks very innocent now as it stands in our Confession of Faith, at the head of the chapter on Church Censures. But nothing else so stirred and aroused the Assembly. It was the Church's Magna Charta, a Declaration of Independence that contained in it the seed-stuff of other declarations further on. It affirmed the autonomy of the Church, and so brought on the tug of war.

Admitting that Christ is King in Zion, has he appointed a government therein? That was first to be settled. The appeal was to the Word of God, and the question was answered in the affirmative. But then came the further question, What is that Government? And in answering it, all the powers of the gifted leaders of the three classes that composed the Assembly were brought into play. One would like

to have heard them. No pygmies contended there. It was a battle of Titans. The High Church Presbyterians of the Cartwright School, backed by the Scotch Commissioners, argued with splendid ability and genius for the Presbyterian form of government and the divine rights of Presbytery. They resorted to no quibbles, or sophistries, or intrigues, inside or outside of the Chamber, to gain their ends. They drew their weapons from the Word of God, and wielded them with a skill and mastery which the opposition, with Parliament on their side, could not overcome.

The Independents fought them at every step; fought them on the question of Ruling Elders, on the Subordination of Church Courts, on the Power of Ordination, on the Jurisdiction of the Presbyteries and Synods—fought them all along the line. In the matter of excluding or suspending scandalous persons from the Lord's table, however, their chief opponents were the Erastians. With slight concessions here and there the Presbyterians triumphed; and I think the fair-minded reader must conclude that their victory was due, not to their voting majority in the Assembly, but to the force of their arguments and the impregnable strength of their position. They stood on the Word of God, and they who stand on that rock are not easily moved.

But by far the hottest contest in that historic debate raged around the last clause of the proposition, "distinct from the civil magistrate." On this point

the heavy guns were trained. Selden, Lightfoot, and Coleman attacked it with all the force of their ponderous Hebrew learning. These were the Erastian leaders in the Assembly, and they brought the whole weight of their vast scholarship to bear against the proposition. In their rebound from prelatical tyranny, which was natural enough, they swung away over to the other extreme. The genius of Presbyterianism leads always in the middle of the road, and so avoids Scylla on the one hand and Charybdis on the other. But that genius these great leaders had not caught. The idea of any sort of spiritual jurisdiction was intolerable to them. Of that they had had a surfeit. They were afraid of it. Hence they contended hotly and eloquently, and with all the wealth of their prodigious learning, for the ecclesiastical supremacy of Cæsar. They fought for a blended polity, one that would make the Church only a department of the State, with the power of the keys in the hands of the civil magistrate. Convinced that the result of a government within a government, such as the Presbyterians proposed, would be a continual spiritual lordship over the conscience, they combated it with might and main. The thought was abhorrent. That a political tyranny over the conscience might be quite as bad if not worse than any tyranny of an ecclesiastical sort, was something they seem not to have considered.

So the battled raged; and in that great conflict

the Erastian leaders found foemen worthy of their steel. Memorable especially was that day when the Jerusalem Chamber was thronged to hear Selden on Excommunication. It was one of the greatest efforts of his life. He fairly dazed the spectators and the Assembly with his astonishing learning. Excommunication he held to be a purely civil function, to be administered alone by the civil magistrate; and to prove his position he amazed his hearers with his surprising display of rabbinical lore. Two members undertook to reply, Herle and Marshall; but their speeches fell flat. Then Samuel Rutherford turned eagerly and appealingly to young Gillespie, and said, "Rise, George, rise up, man, and defend the right of the Lord Jesus Christ to govern by his own laws the Church he has purchased with his blood." George rose, calm, steady, and confident. It was a tremendous hour and a tremendous undertaking for a young man of thirty-one to answer Selden. But the stripling knew what he had in his sling. He answered Selden so effectually, so crushingly, that the giant was silenced. He is reported to have said, "That young man has by a single speech swept away the learning and labor of ten years of my life."

But let us not lose sight of the fact that behind all the Presbyterians contended for, the principle to which they clung with characteristic tenacity was the Headship of Jesus Christ. Though they did not succeed in cutting off Erastianism entirely, and only partially

won the fight, yet they were so far victorious that the polity finally adopted by them meant the ultimate and absolute divorce of Church and State.

For, mark you, embedded in that polity, and growing out of its cardinal principle of the Headship of Christ, as the branch grows out of the tree, was the doctrine that "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it in matters of faith and worship." Pope, prelate, and magistrate alike were cut off by that principle from all interference with the rights of the individual in his relations to God. No one claims that the Westminster divines were free from intolerance. It is frankly admitted that they partook of the spirit of the times in which they lived. Everywhere in that day there was a disposition to persecute and repress. Cromwell, speaking to the House of Commons, said, "Is there not yet upon the spirits of men a strange itching; nothing will satisfy them unless they can press their fingers upon their brethren's consciences, to pinch them there." Even the Protector himself did some pinching of this sort. To men of intense earnestness in any age the easy-going Laodicean quality of half-heartedness is abominable; and it was particularly so to the men who figured and fought in the mighty liberating movements of the 17th century.

Great ideas at first are like streams far up the

mountain slopes. It takes time for them to work their way down into the valleys, around ledge, and crag, and cliff, until they spread out over the plain and cover it with waving harvests. However much the Westminster divines may have failed to practice the toleration involved in the sacred truth, that "God alone is Lord of the conscience," let us give them full credit for affirming the doctrine itself. The men who asserted that principle in all its plenitude and set it down in enduring form were among the greatest benefactors of mankind. Conscience must not be coerced by any civil or religious power. Absolutism must stand aside. There is but one Sovereign over the Church and one Sovereign over the soul. All honor to the men who said that, and who say it still.

No church with that doctrine upon its banners can ever be enslaved. No people with that fertilizing principle in their hearts can ever submit to despotism, political or religious. Thrilling and sublime for evermore was the effect of it after the Restoration, when prelacy was again in the saddle, booted and spurred. Rather than yield their rights of conscience, 2000 English Presbyterian ministers, on St. Bartholomew's Day, 1660, showed the stuff they were made of by leaving their churches, their support, their homes, their weeping flocks, and becoming strangers and wanderers in their native land. It was this doctrine that put into the Presbyterians of

Scotland the strength and stability of their own granite hills. Claverhouse and his dragoons were powerless to trample out the fire it kindled. They might as well have hurled their wrath at Ben Nevis. That fire flamed forth brighter and brighter. See the effects of it there in Edinburgh, just two centuries after the calling of the Assembly! It inspired 470 of the Lord's freemen, headed by the immortal Chalmers, to cut all connection with the State, to give up their churches, their manses, their stipends, and go forth into the liberty of the sons of God. The spirit of Knox, and Henderson, and Rutherford, and Gillespie—the spirit of freedom, of independence, and above all, of loyalty to the great Head of the Church, burnt in them, and sent its light, and warmth, and power out over the Scottish hills and on to the ends of the earth. Happy will it be for our denomination if this day shall kindle something more of that spirit in us, and send us to our homes and our people to pass it along.

Be it observed, moreover, that this principle of the sole sovereignty of Jesus Christ was uppermost in the mind of the Assembly when it formed the Directory of Worship. All human inventions, all ritualistic addenda, all ceremonial pomp and pageantry, everything not warranted by the Word of God must be abolished. Over the Rock of Salvation had grown accretions of priestly forms, and liturgical superfluities, and prelatical rubbish without end—piled up

until the Rock was hidden from view. That rubbish must be brushed away so that the Rock might appear in all its glory, and draw the sinner to the refuge of its riven sides. The Church was so filled with ecclesiastical bric-a-brac that the Church's Lord could not be seen. Under the mass of rubrics, and rites, and formularies imposed by prelacy, spirituality lay stifled, choked, dead. The burden had become intolerable. Jenny Geddes' bold fling of a stool at the priest's head, in old St. Giles' church, showed what stirring events were in the wind. "All Edinburgh, all Scotland, and behind that, all England and Ireland," says Carlyle, "rose into unappeasable commotion on the flight of that stool of Jenny's." The screw had been twisted one round too far. Things had come to such a pass that in the estimation of the prelates the Service Book was everything, the Word of God nothing. Man-made liturgies encouraged an idle and unedifying ministry. Forms were made ready to their hands, which they followed with lazy and droning stupidity. The people were fed on chaff blown into their faces from the prelatical mill, and the wretched fare maddened them.

Such, briefly, were the conditions that prevailed when the Westminster divines set themselves to prepare a Directory of Worship. It was soon done and adopted with great unanimity. As it came from their hands, and as it stands to-day, it is charac-

terized by strength, simplicity, spirituality, scripturalness, and, above all, by the supremacy it gives to the Lord Jesus.* While the Directory insists upon order and dignity in the conduct of divine service, it encourages freedom, and leaves abundant room for the play of individuality. To neither set forms on the one hand, nor to unstudied effusions on the other does it give any countenance. It is intended not to be mandatory, but suggestive; not to lay down fixed rules, but to supply help and furniture; not to be inflexible and unadaptable, but simple and elastic, suited to all emergencies and all classes and conditions; not to spare the minister and relieve him from exertion, but to stimulate him to efforts worthy of his high calling.

But particularly noticeable in it is the pre-eminence it gives to the Son of God. Wherever the light falls, it is seen to proceed from that radiant center. If the Directory emphasizes the preaching of the Word, it is because it is the King's law. If it sets the Bible in the front as the only rule of the kingdom, it is because it is the King's book. If it enjoins the sanctification of the Sabbath, it is because it is the King's day. If it excludes all priestly and idolatrous notions from the sacraments, it is because they were instituted by the King, and become efficacious

* And these qualities our Church, if she is wise and true to her grand history, will zealously conserve; she will set herself like a wall against all tendencies toward ritualism.

only by the King's blessing and the working of the King's spirit.

Westminster divines built upon the fundamental fact that Christ is not only the Church's Lord, but the Church's Life. Through all the system of polity and worship which they adopted, determining its spirit and character, runs the cardinal principle of the Headship of Jesus. And out of this flow the great subordinate principles upon which I have touched.

These principles are not dead. Principles that involve the glory of the Son of God, the independence of the Church, the infallibility of his Word, the freedom of conscience, the spirituality of worship, can never die. They are the most living issues of this present hour. To-day they need ringing out more faithfully than ever. It is not for me to preach to this Assembly; but in a closing word, I may be allowed to declare my own convictions. In doing so I strike no note of pessimism. I conjure up no unlifted shadows, but simply indicate what seems to me to be the supreme need of our Church as we stand facing the new century.

What we need to multiply conversions, to make our preaching mighty, to kindle our missionary fires, to set every Board free from the incubus of debt, to bring us together, North and South, to unite the entire Presbyterian family, and send us forth upon a new career of conquest and glory, is a revival of

loyalty to our King. What is needed is to get away from side issues, away from the catching themes of the hour, away from themes literary, and themes political, and themes social, and themes exploited by the daily press, and lift up the name of our King, and make it pre-eminent above every name. Unless this is done, agnosticism and materialism will win the day. Unless this is done, the pulpit will go into eclipse. It is great themes that make great preaching. So far as I am able to read the signs of the times, I believe it is the exalted Christ or defeat. Nothing but the enthronement of Jesus will avail to break through the thick-crusted indifference of our times. This and this only will keep irreverent fingers from mutilating the Word of God. This and this only will solve the labor problem, beat back the rum power, inspire the philanthropy that will plant churches on our frontiers, in the midst of the teeming population of our cities, and send the gospel away into the darkest and remotest fields of human life. There is no vitalizing, no aggressive, no conquering power in Christianity that does not come from the exalted Christ. If we are to win, and break down strongholds, and hasten the latter-day glory, it will only be by the charm, the music, the magic, the power of that matchless name. We shall have to lift him up as the fathers did in the days that tried men's souls. Let the sublime doctrine of the sovereignty of the crucified and risen Christ, central in our polity and

worship, be made central in our preaching, central in our living, central in all our religious activities; only let us get a new grasp of the kingship of Jesus, a new longing to put the crown on the brow that was pierced, a new hunger to lay our trophies at his feet, and then, then, will our captivity be turned as the streams in the South, and all the dry places will blossom into life, and fruitfulness, and beauty.