

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

FIRST GENERAL PRESBYTERIAN COUNCIL

CONVENED AT EDINBURGH, JULY 1877.

WITH RELATIVE DOCUMENTS

BEARING ON THE AFFAIRS OF THE COUNCIL, AND THE STATE OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.

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DR. EELLS of California spoke as follows on
PRESBYTERIANISM AS RELATED TO THE
TENDENCIES AND WANTS OF OUR AGE.

It has been a question with me, Mr. Chairman, after hearing the very elaborate and able papers which have just been read, why any one should be invited by the Committee to make extemporaneous remarks on a subject so fully discussed. Supposing, however, the object to be that a less formal discussion may thus be introduced, I will proceed to occupy the time which has been assigned to me.

Presbyterianism, as a system of faith, exalts God as to the infinite perfections of his nature, as to his supreme authority, and as to his universal control. For this it has ever been eminent among the other systems derived from the Bible; and it is manifest from the sentiments just uttered, never more eminent than now. I am convinced that by this it places itself over against some of the most marked tendencies of our age, the evil effects of which are manifest in all lands. Among these may be mentioned—*first*, that of philosophy to exalt the reason, and even to limit the idea of God to its conclusions, which must vary with the range of its speculation, and can never reach the absolute. Then, that of science to exalt law, and to even limit the idea of God to its ascertained control, which must vary with the extent of its discoveries, and, as proved by the disagreement of its advocates, must be subject to perpetual change. Then, that of supposed revelations by spirits, which exalt their assertions above all other ideas of God, though they must vary with the authors from whom they are believed to come. And that of a mere general eclecticism, to limit the idea of God to the fancy or wishes of each one, which must vary with the capacity and intelligence and disposition of those who are thus at liberty to worship the God they choose.

To all these tendencies our Presbyterian standards, as the interpretation of the Bible, are specially opposed; and they declare that philosophy and science, the spirits of the other world, and the men of this, are all out at sea, with no chart, no compass, no definite voyage, no positive destination, till they accept that view of God as supreme which makes him the creator, ruler, and supervising guide in all affairs. And they declare, after the most thoughtful study of all their arguments and assertions, that this is even more the

demand of reason than of faith. This would be true in the normal condition of the world, but disloyalty in God's government has occasioned a change, and now, if rebellion is to be pardoned, and rebels are to receive favour, Presbyterianism interprets him as declaring that his authority shall still be established, and his original purpose shall be fulfilled, notwithstanding the introduction of grace, or in its introduction; that grace is not the surrender of law, but the magnifying of law; that pardon is not the exhibition of weakness at the instance of love, but the display of power by him who still sitteth on the throne, and the pardoned sinner must submit and lay down his arms before he can be restored. With this sentiment it meets those various theories of justification which now assume to dictate on what terms God will forgive sin, and with a prominence which has excited prejudice and hostility and ridicule, places the vicarious sacrifice of his Son, and all the mysterious truths which cluster around his cross, next to the sublime doctrine concerning God himself, which must ever be first. To those who undervalue the victim, and vent their satire on his mission, the simple word is quoted, which rather announces than explains his nature and office and incarnation, and the necessity for his death. To those who say this is beyond reason, it is replied that nevertheless it is the wisdom of God, and it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; and the experience of the believer confirms the truth, and bears witness to its necessity. Indeed to all who for any reason, or because they view Christ and his cross from some point which the sovereign Ruler as well as infinite Father can never occupy, assert that these can have no place in a just as well as merciful method of pardon, or at least that our conception of the Atonement must be greatly modified if not abandoned, it is answered not only that it is God's method, but it has been proved to be all that men feel they need, when they have looked for help elsewhere in vain. And we have a right to insist that this test of experience be regarded. For if, after long swimming, and well-nigh exhausted, I find only a rock in the midst of the waters, upon which I have climbed, and begin to rest and hope, what right have any to push me off again into the deep, and tell me to swim on, because my rock is not a continent, covered with all the verdure and beauty which they take leave to demand! No, sir, here, as before, we affirm that reason,

even more than faith, offers our doctrines to the demonstrated need of man.

Holding these sentiments respecting God, his authority, his providence, and his method of grace, Presbyterians have always been tenacious concerning the divine authority of the Bible as the source of their knowledge of these truths, and jealous of any attempt to diminish its rule over the faith and practice of men. To this they have been forced by the very rigidity of their sentiments respecting God. His book must be supreme, his revelation must be undoubted; and the Bible is accepted by them as the light which God has caused to shine in the midst of darkness that would otherwise be profound. They affirm that we cannot compare any writings of men, however great, however holy, with these Divine Scriptures. They deny that human reason and conscience can decide what God may reveal, for then there would be as many revelations as there are men. They deny that each one has an inner and superior light, independent of the Bible, for his guidance in truth and duty, for then there would be an open way to fanaticism and superstition. They deny that the Bible, though once sufficient, has become effete, and the advance of the race demands that it be supplemented or superseded; for their understanding of its essential truths makes them ultimate truths, and their apprehension of the Saviour it reveals makes him to be all the world will ever need, and the fulfilment of his gospel to be the complete redemption of mankind. To the progress, therefore, of these, and kindred theories which now abound, we must oppose ourselves all the more positively, because of the absolute necessity for the Bible as infallible, urged by the marked characteristics of our system. Others may permit some invasion of philosophy and speculation on the positive authority of the Word, but Presbyterians must regard this as a direct attack on the very citadel of their system. Others may tolerate latitudinarian and loose views of what they declare to be inspiration, but Presbyterians must find an immovable foundation for their faith in the absolute "Thus saith the Lord," or their whole superstructure will fall to the ground. Men tell us that such faith is unworthy of us; but we ask them wherein it is unworthy. Men tell us that seeing is believing; but we answer, that when God and salvation and eternity are the themes, believing is seeing in the highest, worthiest sense. When Gabriel has tasked his

loftiest powers, and risen to the limit of what those powers can reach, it is proof of his greatness, not that he rests there content, because he can rise no higher, but that he there accepts the help of God, trusts where he cannot learn by research, permits the revelation of what he cannot discover, and thus soars into a region where are truths more grand than he could ever have conceived, and enters upon progress along which the Infinite alone can guide him as he moves upward. For faith is not the expression of weakness; in this sublime sense it is strength made perfect in weakness, it is not credulity blind because without knowledge, but with open vision and firm step it enters upon fields of knowledge not otherwise possible; and, assured that often it is far more important to a man that his spiritual nature be developed than that his mere intellect be informed, proves to him that in that development come the most rapt and glorious and real apprehensions of truth that he ever gains. It is with this kind of faith that we accept the Bible. It is with this faith that we give ourselves to be led by God up the mysterious heights of those doctrines which the experience of our need has made necessary, but which he alone can interpret to the soul. And we hold that this faith is as philosophical as it is religious.

Having these as the fundamental doctrines, the structure of our creed in its details corresponds to the basis. There is no opportunity to consider these details. It is enough to say that it is a creed which honours God and humbles man, while it recognises his freedom as well as his dependence, which makes grace infinite and unmerited, and obedience necessary and binding upon all, which makes the purpose and the love of God the ground of hope, and repentance and faith the conditions on which it will be realised. It is the expression, thus, of a piety which is both reasonable and beautiful, both majestic and attractive, and pointing to its fruits as the proof of its quality.

It would be according to my plan to dwell on the bearing of such a system on the tendency to ritualism, to high-churchism on the one hand, and irresponsible liberalism on the other, to a religion of mere taste and of mere feeling, but I have no time even to refer to these points. Presbyterianism has been marked with the seal of God, which we should be false to the charge he has committed to our hand if we fail to recog-

nise ; other denominations have done much, for which we unite our thanks with theirs, but at least we need not blush for what God has enabled ours to do. It has had a blessed history in its struggle with tendencies to error, and its effort to meet the wants of men. We see not that it has lost any of its power as it comes in conflict with the tendencies of our time, and offers to do for men now what they need as much as ever before.

We come not up hither, to this old rallying-point of Calvinism, to mourn over an effete Church, and to devise, if possible, some means for its revival, but to rejoice over a Church full of vigour, and to devise means for its still greater advance. As we rear our monument of veneration and love for those who, at the cost of suffering and blood, maintained its interests against all odds in days past, and gave its polity and faith to be our inheritance, we add our testimony to theirs in support of the same as signally adopted at our time ; and in this great Council we inscribe on this monument our injunction to our children, that because of what it is, as derived from God's Word, and because of its fruits, as seen in the history of the Church, they adopt and follow the faith we here reaffirm and honour !

Dr. FABRI, Director of the Mission House, Barmen, Elberfeld, who spoke in German, and was interpreted by Dr. Cairns, said : Last summer, when Dr. Blaikie visited me at Barmen, the question arose, "What do you mean by the Reformed Church ; is it the Calvinistic or the Church of the Reformation?" to which Dr. Blaikie said he was quite willing to understand it as the Church of the Reformation in the widest sense. Now I hope this assembly will give Professor Blaikie full absolution for this interpretation of the Reformed Church. They would ask, perhaps, why any importance should be attached to this interpretation more than another, but it seemed to him of vital importance that they should determine whether the term "Presbyterian" in this programme applied to the Church of the Reformation or the mere form of church-government for them on the Continent especially. The answer to this preliminary question was of great importance. They had examples in the Church of England of Churches that held the doctrine of the Reformation without being Presbyterian, without belonging to the Reformed Church in the strict sense. On the contrary, they had examples to the opposite on the Rhine, where there are also Lutheran Churches of a distinct Presbyterian character since the Reformation. When I first heard of the arrangements in regard to this Council, I said to myself, "This is of great importance to the dear brethren in England and America, but for us the importance is less." During the last few days, however, I have come to see that this meeting was of importance for us on the Continent also, especially in its bearing

upon the position of our own Protestant Church. This is not the opportunity to speak of the special position of the evangelical Church, particularly in Prussia. But two aspects of the subject I would refer to. Presbyterianism as the principle of church organisation has nowhere achieved more rapid and important triumphs than in Germany during the last years. All evangelical Churches in Germany have of late years adopted Presbyterian and Synodal institutions. Truly, indeed, in certain localities this has been accomplished so that the fundamental principle of Presbyterianism, which assumes the existence of a believing people, was violated. The second remark is, that the German Evangelical Church, in consequence of the development of our general relations, always loses more and more of its territorial character as a State Church, so that a free position of the Church, separated from the state in all quarters, is desired. Accordingly in Germany all circumstances tend to bring about the realisation of the voluntary principle, and the nearer this state of matters is reached the nearer will be the relationship between the German Evangelical Church and the Presbyterian Churches in Scotland and in North America.

Dr. BLAIKIE laid on the table "A Sketch of the History, Statistics, and Work of the Presbyterian Churches throughout the World." He drew particular attention to letters from Queensland and New South Wales, addressed to the Council. (See *Appendix*.)

Dr. WILSON, Limerick, said Dr. Blaikie had drawn attention to the state of the Colonial Churches. There were some of the members of the Council who had special interest in these Churches. Queensland is a weak Church and requires practical sympathy and help in its great mission of preaching the gospel and maintaining ordinances among its scattered Presbyterian population. That Church has taken the necessary steps to be represented in this Council, and have its case briefly stated. To the Conveners of the Established Church of Scotland and of the Irish Presbyterian Church, and to Dr. Blaikie, a commission was given to this effect. These gentlemen agreed upon a delegate whose statement should now be heard. The Queensland Church has opened a Divinity Hall, and begun to train students for the ministry. It is very important that the attention of the Council should be called to the position and want of a Church spread over a wide territory, and called upon to do a great work for Christ.

Rev. R. G. BALFOUR, Edinburgh, said he happened to be appointed as representative of Eastern Australia to the Council, along with the Rev. Peter Hope, as holding the position of Convener of the Colonial Committee of the Free Church. As Dr. Wilson had said, it was a Church very deeply deserving their sympathy and help. They occupied a territory twenty-five times the size of Scotland, and they had only twenty ministers. They had a population of 22,000 Presbyterians, which would give about 1000 to each minister. In cities they were in the habit of thinking 1000 members was very well, but certainly it could not be so in a scattered population like that of Queensland. He thought they should be subdi-