

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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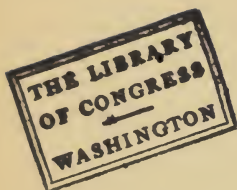


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Oct. 5. 98

THE CIVIL AND RELIGIOUS CONDI-
TIONS OF THE TIMES OF THE
WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY.

BY THE

REV. SAMUEL J. NICCOLLS, D. D., LL. D.

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MODERATOR, FATHERS, AND BRETHERN :

AT first reading, one might readily suppose the Westminster Standards to be the product of quiet times, the labor of cloistered theologians who, removed from the distractions of life and unaffected by the passions of men, carefully elaborated their opinions. Logical and symmetrical in form, written in a clear passionless style, and with the single exception of the reference to the papacy, free from all terms or phrases that would indicate controversy or condemnation of opposing views, they give no indication that they were framed in tumultuous times, when the feelings of men were excited to the highest degree. Like pure gold that has passed through the furnace, the smell of fire is not on them. But he who would attempt to account for them by simply referring to the Act of Parliament that called into existence the Westminster Assembly of divines, has a very imperfect and superficial conception of their origin.

He fails to take into account the great forces that have worked in history, of which they are in part the expression. Two hundred and fifty years backward from to-day takes us to a critical period in English history. The leaven of great truths, fermenting for years among the people, had at last wrought its work, and was now bubbling, and swelling, and breaking forth on the surface of society with irresistible force. It is true that when on the 3d of November, 1640, Parliament, the historic Long Parliament, assembled, it was with the promise and hope of peace.

The speaker of the House of Commons in glowing terms congratulated the king on the prosperity of his realm and the glory of his throne. Gathered around him were the Lords Temporal, apparelled after their order, and the scarlet-robed barons; with them clothed in lawn and rochet were the Lords Spiritual, the representatives of the ancient Church of England. All were fervent in their expressions of loyalty, and the stately ceremonials of the occasion gave no indication of the suppressed feeling that was soon to burst forth in a tempest of wrath, overwhelming for a time both throne and church. A crisis was at hand destined by its effects to influence not only the future history of England but of the world. Two parties were there facing each other, ready to join in a life-and-death struggle. One was composed of the men of the past, the representatives of the ancient order, the supporters of the divine right of kings, the up-

holders of hierarchy. The other consisted of the men of the future, the forerunners of liberty, the pioneers of democracy, whose mission it was to make the crooked places straight and the rough places plain, that a highway might be prepared along which in future ages the people would march to their destiny in peace and safety. The causes which led to the then existing condition of affairs are not difficult to discover. Among them must be placed the revolt against the authority of Rome, begun in the preceding century by Henry VIII. That revolt was more political than religious in its character ; it was a declaration of independence upon the part of the English people from an oppressive foreign despotism. It was in no true sense a reformation of the Church from its error and superstition ; but it was a step fraught with important consequences for the future liberties of the people. Associated with it was a more potent cause, the doctrines of the Reformation that was then agitating Europe. These doctrines, briefly summarized, were three: The right of private judgment or liberty of conscience ; the supreme authority of holy Scripture ; and justification by faith alone. They were the cardinal doctrines of Protestantism. It is not material now to state how they entered into England ; it is enough to know that they were received at first by a few, but gradually acquired a larger dominion. Their presence and working can readily be seen, now in political dissensions, now in doctrinal discussions,

and again in disputes concerning rites and ceremonies. Their growth can be traced by martyrdoms, imprisonments, and persecutions. Those who advocated them did so at the peril of their lives.

The prison, the scaffold, and the burning stake were then, as they ever have been, the milestones marking progress in the march of civil and religious liberty. It was not, however, until the close of the reign of Elizabeth that Protestantism was firmly established in England, and accepted by the majority of the people. But even then the condition of the National Church was far from satisfactory. It still bore the marks of its old enslavement to Rome. There were those in it who demanded a larger and clearer application of the doctrines of the Reformation. They desired to see the Church of their fathers set free from the bondage of ecclesiastical tyranny and brought into close conformity to the Scriptures, both in doctrine and government. Many of these when driven abroad by persecution had found a refuge in Geneva and Holland, and in these great schools of liberty had been instructed more fully in the Calvinistic doctrines and the Presbyterian polity. They returned earnest propagandists of these new views. These, with others like minded with them, constituted the Puritan element of the Church of England. They were not separatists. They did not purpose to establish an independent church, but their consciences forbade them to conform to certain

usages which seemed to them contrary to the truth of the gospel. Ceremonial worship or a simple service, altars or communion tables, kneeling or sitting at the reception of the Holy Communion, white surplices or black gowns were to them burning questions. However trivial they may seem to us, they were then questions involving vital doctrines. The contention of the Puritans was that they should be free from the commandments and traditions of men, and that the ritual of the Church should be purged from all papistical ceremonies and services and restored to the simplicity of the Apostolic Church. So it was, when upon the death of Elizabeth, James I. came to the throne, the hopes of the Puritan party were greatly revived. Was he not a member of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland? Had he not given his kingly word to maintain its liberties? Had he not spoken of the English Prayer-book as "an evil said mass in English, wanting nothing of the mass but the liftings?" No wonder that the millenary petition signed by a thousand clergymen of the Church of England asking for a revision of the ritual for public worship and for a reform in government, was presented to him with confidence and hope. The historic conference at Hampton Court, so fatal in its results, effectually destroyed this hope. James, whom Henry IV. of France called "the wisest fool in Christendom," seemed to have changed his principles, if he ever had any, in leaving the climate of Edin-

burgh for that of London. The conference ended with the king's declaration, "I will make them conform or else I will harrie them out of the land, or else do worse, hang them, that is all." It was a declaration of war upon the part of the throne, a fatal policy for the ill-starred house of the Stuarts. It is needless now to state what followed. The heroic sacrifices of the non-conforming ministers, the growing arrogance of the bishops, the inquisitorial proceedings of the Star Chamber and High Commission, the conflicts between Parliament and the throne, and the despotic assumptions of the king are well-known matters of history. The determination of the throne and the hierarchy to enforce conformity resulted in increasing and strengthening the party of liberty. As with Israel in Egypt "the more they afflicted them the more they multiplied and grew." Puritanism was not originally opposed to prelacy as a form of church government; the Puritans would have accepted it in a modified form; nor were they opposed to a liturgy as such. But the intolerance of the bishops, their preference for Roman Catholic rites and ceremonies, and their close alliance with despotism in civil government widened the breach between the parties. James's attempt to establish Episcopacy in the Church of Scotland aroused the sturdy Presbyterians of that country to the verge of rebellion, and led to a closer sympathy between them and the suffering Puritans of England.

There was also another cause which contributed largely to the growth of the Puritan party, and secured for it finally the sympathy and co-operation of the masses of the people. It was the encroachments of the throne upon their civil liberties—the attempt to rob them of their constitutional rights. Indeed, such was the condition of affairs at this time that it is impossible to draw a definite boundary-line between the great political and religious questions at issue. Each involved the other. The king was by law the head of the church as well as of the state; and in both of these positions he claimed despotic powers for himself. James was a fanatical believer in the doctrine of absolute monarchy. He looked upon himself as a second providence on earth, the fountain of all power, at liberty to make or unmake his subjects according to his own pleasure, and accountable to none but God for his actions. The people had no rights, but only privileges such as the throne might choose to grant. To doubt the correctness of these notions was in his judgment blasphemy and treason. Naturally, his attempt to govern in accordance with these opinions led to a conflict with the people, who were proud of their ancient liberties and chartered rights. The outlook for the reformation of the church and for the interests of civil liberty at the time of the death of James I., which took place April 27, 1625, was most gloomy and depressing. There was prevailing discontent with the govern-

ment and a growing apprehension that the Anglican Church would again come under the control of the papacy. Nor was this condition improved by the accession of Charles I. to the throne. An abler man than his father, he had inherited his extravagant notions of kingly prerogatives; but what with James was a theory which he was too cowardly to press to logical results, was with his son a principle on which he was ready to risk his throne and life. Obstinate and determined in his purposes, yet treacherous and unprincipled in his methods of accomplishing them, he sought to establish in England, in defiance of its Parliament and Constitution, a despotism like that which Richelieu fastened on France. Petitions of rights scornfully rejected, taxes levied without authority, forced loans, Parliament after Parliament defied and dissolved because it refused to submit to the royal dictation, its patriotic members fined and imprisoned, showed that Charles at least had the courage of his convictions. At last came the eleven years in which the king reigned without a parliament, a period in which his plans and purposes were so fully developed that the conflict between the throne asserting its despotic prerogatives and the commonwealth fighting for its liberties could no longer be avoided. As tyranny always does, Charles himself prepared the way for the convulsions that overturned his throne. Two historic figures come in view in connection with the king; one is Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Straf-

ford, his most trusted counsellor and minister in political and military affairs; the other, Archbishop Laud, Primate of the Church. Both were men of extraordinary ability and energy, both equally devoted to the cause of absolutism, and both fated to expiate their folly on the scaffold.

What Strafford attempted to do with his policy of "Thorough" in the State, Laud attempted to do in the Church. Both succeeded in intensifying the opposition and in increasing the number and determination of the friends of civil and religious liberty. Laud, by his foolish attempt to force Episcopacy and a Romanized ritual upon the Church of Scotland, aroused that kingdom to take arms in defense of its liberties. The insane demand of tyranny and bigotry was answered by the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant in Greyfriars' church-yard. Presbyterian Scotland rallied around the blue banner of the covenant in defense of the crown rights of King Jesus and the liberties of his Church. Equally irritating were Laud's attempts to enforce conformity to his mandates in England. He was fond of gorgeous ceremonials, cared little for preaching, believed in sacramentarianism, was an Arminian in his theology, hated dissent and non-conformity with a perfect hatred, and claimed for the bishops the reverence and submission due to a superior and a divinely appointed order in the Church. In short, as Macaulay testifies, "of all the Anglican bishops,

he had departed farthest from the Reformation and drawn nearest to Rome." Under his direction every part of the realm was investigated, and all Dissenters and Non-conformists visited with severe punishment. The case of Dr. Alexander Leighton, father of the future archbishop, tried and condemned by the infamous Star Chamber process, illustrates his method of procedure. Dr. Leighton had written a pamphlet in favor of Presbyterianism and against prelacy. For this offense he was imprisoned and degraded from holy orders. Escaping from prison he was retaken, publicly whipped, exposed to the pillory, one ear cut off, his nose slit, and his cheek branded with the letters S. S., meaning "a stirrer up of sedition." After this he was sent to prison for ten years. It is easy to see how such actions increased popular feeling against the Church, and led to corresponding extremes on the part of the Puritans. Some, indeed, despairing of better times and anxious to escape from the intolerable tyranny, left England to find a refuge and freedom of conscience in the colonies of the New World.

The great mass of the Puritans stood doggedly in their lot, and grew more determined and extreme in their antagonism. Always caring more for the spirit of worship than about its forms, they now came to hate religious ceremonies. They were as zealous against conformity as the prelatical party were for it. Their ministers made it a matter of conscience to wear the black gown instead of the surplice, and to

omit certain portions of the liturgy. The people would not give the responses; they would sit when they ought to stand, and stand when the ritual required them to kneel, or remain erect when they should bow. Honest convictions, patriotism, fanaticism, resentment, hatred of despotism, and religious zeal were all mingled together in one stream of feeling, that would soon grow into the violence of a torrent.

Through the vigorous efforts of Strafford and Laud the government of England was now as despotic in method and action as that of France under Louis XIV. But it lacked an element of permanence—an army. The necessity for money and an army to suppress the outbreak in Presbyterian Scotland compelled Charles to convoke another parliament. Accordingly in November, 1640, there met that renowned Parliament which as Macaulay says, "In spite of its errors and disasters, is justly entitled to the reverence and gratitude of all who in any part of the world enjoy the blessings of constitutional government." It fairly represented the great heart of the English people, irritated and angry, yet true to righteousness, and determined to stand by the liberties of the nation. This is not the time, even if it were possible, to relate in detail its proceedings. Enough to state that its first step was to remove crying abuses, sweep away Star Chamber and High Commission, bring the instruments of tyranny to justice, and restrict the

powers of the king. At the same time its attention was turned to ecclesiastical affairs. Religious liberty, or relief from the despotism of prelacy, was one of the crying needs of the hour. Men could not forget what they had suffered for conscience sake under the tyrannical and inquisitorial proceedings of Laud. The Primate was imprisoned in the Tower, and measures were proposed for the revision of the liturgy of the Church. It is idle to speculate as to what might have taken place had moderate counsels prevailed at this juncture. It is sufficient to say that the folly or panic of the bishops and the obstinacy and perfidy of the king, wrought together with Puritan zeal and fanaticism to hasten the end. Never were more conscientious or abler representatives of the people gathered together than were to be found in this Parliament. That they committed excesses, which cooler judgment cannot justify, is true. But what they in the main demanded in behalf of civil and religious liberty was reasonable, and is now accepted by all as just. Step by step they were led to adopt measures which they had not intended at first. They were, without knowing it, in the swift current of a revolution. In 1642 Charles, infuriated by the action of Parliament, left London and shortly after raised the royal standard to rally his followers in defense of the throne. Civil war had come with all its horrors and distractions. England, from one end to the other, was filled with alarm and confusion. There was

much marching and countermarching, much fighting and praying and fasting and preaching and singing of Psalms. Prince Rupert and his fiery troopers riding up and down the land, Essex with his sturdy militia, and Cromwell with his Psalm-singing Ironsides, furnish the main figures in the war-scenes. In the meantime Parliament continued its sessions, ever growing more radical in its measures. In 1643 a bill was introduced and passed for the utter abolition of Episcopacy. Parliament had reached this conclusion, "That this government by archbishops, bishops, their chancellors and commissaries, deans and chapters, arch-deacons and other ecclesiastical officers depending upon the hierarchy, is evil, and justly offensive and burdensome to the kingdom, a great impediment to the reformation and growth of religion, very prejudicial to the state and government of this kingdom and that we are resolved that the same should be taken away." This was speedily followed in the same year by an ordinance commanding that an assembly of divines should be convened at Westminster, "For the settling of the government and liturgy of the Church of England, and for vindicating and clearing of the doctrines of the said Church from false aspersions and interpretations, as should be found most agreeable to the word of God, and most apt to procure and preserve the peace of the Church at home, and nearer agreement with the Church of Scotland and other Reformed churches abroad." So

began the famous Westminster Assembly. It was called, not to theoretical discussions, but to an intensely practical work. The old form of the national church had been set aside, a new one must be speedily constructed. The Assembly, in its work, was to listen not to the voice of tradition, or to the commands of hierarchies, or to human wisdom, but solely to the Word of God. It is not easy to exaggerate the critical and exciting character of the years during which it held its sessions. Upon the removal of the restraints of despotism, new views and doctrines with regard to both civil and religious affairs were earnestly promulgated. There were the Levellers, the Fifth Monarchy Men, the Socinians, the Antinomians, the Quakers, the Erastians, and the Independents, the Radicals of that day, as well as Presbyterians and Episcopalians. The opening sermon of the Assembly from the text, "I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you," and its frequent days of fasting and prayer show that it appreciated the seriousness of its position and felt the evil of the times. During these same years public feeling was wrought up to the highest pitch by the events of the Civil War. There were alternations of hope and despair, as victory or defeat attended the forces of Parliament. There were riots, incipient insurrections, contentions between factions and insurgents, defections, and bloody executions. There were battles such as Marston Moor and Naseby. At last the Roy-

alists were utterly defeated, the king imprisoned, tried, and executed; the monarchy abolished and the commonwealth triumphantly established by military power. In short, the Assembly held its sessions in the midst of a great revolution; but it was a revolution with a conscience. No reader of history can fail to notice the contrast between it and another that took place a little more than a century later in France. It also was a fierce protest against a crushing despotism; a frantic uprising of the outraged people against their robber ruler. It, too, for a time overturned the throne and the established church. But what a difference between the French National Assembly and the English Long Parliament; between the so-called worship of reason and the Westminster Confession and Directory for worship; between Jacobins and Puritans. The men who wrote in the declaration of their faith that cardinal doctrine of liberty, "God alone is Lord of the conscience," as a witness against all tyranny, also held the deeper and fundamental truth that God is Lord of the conscience, and that true liberty is obedience to him. It does not belong to me to vindicate the agreement of the work of the Assembly with the teachings of Holy Scripture; but certain it is that it wrote the great religious creed of democracy. Its doctrines and its polity are vitally allied to both civil and ecclesiastical liberty. It is a fact of history that the men who have held that Confession have ever been the foes of despotism

and the friends of freedom. Whatever may be the future of the Confession, one thing we can safely say, it will never be the creed of a despotic government, of a priest-ridden church, or of an enslaved people.

It would be a false and misleading view of the civil and religious condition of the times of the Westminster Assembly to attribute all the virtue, patriotism, and purity of principle of that day to the Puritans, and all the intolerance, irreligion, and wickedness to the Royalists. He would be a rash man who would attempt to justify all the acts of the Parliamentary party. Revolutions like earthquakes are not careful to respect the Ten Commandments. The men of that day who rose up in behalf of civil and religious liberty, saw more clearly the evils of the despotism they hated, than they did the right application of their own principles. They saw as did the half-healed blind man when he beheld "men" as trees "walking." They had not yet purged themselves of that religious intolerance which they condemned in others. Like the fiery sons of Zebedee, they were ready to call down fire from heaven upon those who did not share their faith. Parliament was as ready to demand and enforce conformity to the new Directory for Worship as the Prelatists had been in behalf of the "Book of Prayer." True, some souls with clearer vision held such sentiments as Dr. Cudworth uttered in his sermon before the House of Commons: "The golden beams of truth and the silken cords of love

twisted together will draw men on with a sweet violence, whether they will or no. Let us take heed that we do not sometimes call that zeal for God and his Gospel which is nothing else but our own temptations and stormy passions. True zeal is a sweet, heavenly, and gentle flame, which makes us active for God, but always within the sphere of love. It never calls for fire from heaven to consume those that differ a little from us in their apprehensions. It is like that kind of lightning which the philosophers speak of, which melts the sword within, but singeth not the scabbard. It strives to save the soul, but hurteth not the body." But more believed in the necessity and efficacy of Acts of Parliament, in order to keep men within the bounds of true religion and to suppress dissent. Accordingly, the original chapter on the Civil Magistrate, which in later times has been amended, expressed the prevailing views of that age. We can readily see their defects, but we cannot cast a stone at these beginners in the school of freedom. Religious tolerance is a hard lesson to learn, and it is questionable if even in our own times we fully understand it or are ready in all things to apply it.

In another way also the Westminster Standards bear the mark of the times in which they were written. They speak with the accent of conviction. There is no trace of doubt or hesitancy in them. They express the faith, not of doubters or critical

investigators, at best uncertain of their conclusions, but of martyrs and confessors of whom the world was not worthy. That was an age of intense convictions; truth was not an abstraction, but a solemn reality affecting the daily conduct of life. The doctrines and principles recorded in the Confession had been tested and purified in the fires of controversy and forged into shape by master hands. Call that age rude, coarse, and violent, if you will, and so it was in some respects; but out of it has come a statement of high spiritual doctrine that still remains with us, like some pure spirit in paradise, purified by its sufferings and delivered from the weaknesses and infirmities of the mortal body in which it once dwelt.

We are prone to boast of the marvellous progress and intellectual activity of this nineteenth century, and of the inheritance it is ready to transmit to the new one now dawning. But the period of which I speak will not suffer in comparison with it. Take as a central point the year 1620, in which Old Colony was founded on the shores of New England, and with a radius thirty years long describe a circle of time. Its circumference will hold a period that could easily be embraced within the memory of one man living in that age. Yet within it are men, and women, and events, that rank in historic importance with the most notable in our own century. On that stage of time may be seen a goodly company of the chief and ever to be remembered actors in the great drama of his-

tory. There are Queen Elizabeth, Cromwell, Pym, and Hampden among rulers and patriots; Spenser, Shakespeare, Benjamin Johnson, John Milton, Dryden, and George Herbert among the poets; Hobbs, Lord Bacon, Locke, and Sir Isaac Newton among the philosophers; Thos. Fuller, Lord Clarendon, Burton, and Isaac Walton among the writers; Richard Hooker, Ralph Cudworth, Tillotson, Barrows, John Howe, John Bunyan, John Owens, Richard Baxter, Jeremy Taylor, and Bishop Ussher among the preachers and theologians. It was an era of great men. When the time comes that we can discard as inferior productions "The Faery Queen," "Macbeth," "Paradise Lost," "Pilgrim's Progress," the works of Bacon and Locke, and the writings of the Puritan theologians, because they belong to the seventeenth century, then, but not till then, can we brand the Confession of Faith as inferior because it belongs to the same age. What changes and convulsions may be before us I am not wise enough to foretell; but of this, in the light of history, I am confident: should ever the time come when the liberties of the people are assailed, either on the one side by civil and ecclesiastical despotism, or on the other by anarchy and license, they will find no clearer declaration of their sacred rights, and no better rock on which to plant their feet in their defense, than the Westminster Confession of Faith.