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A Religious Revolution

By Gordon H. Clark

In Hitlerized Germany they repudiate Christianity by governmental decree: in the United States we have methods at once more refined and more effective. When a minister, as recently reported in the papers, hurls his Bible to the floor and says, "The Bible is not the word of God," we may consider it an isolated instance of spectacularism. When Northwestern University sends out a questionnaire and discovers that in spite of ordination vows approximately three-fourths of the ministers do not believe the Bible to be infallible, and that two-fifths think we are Sons of God just as much as Jesus was, this we may call a trend. But when organized ecclesiastical efforts are made to repudiate the historic position of the Church, then we face a religious revolution which claims the attention of the church member and the general public alike.

To be specific we refer to the proposed union of two Presbyterian denominations. Abstractly considered there is no reason why they should not unite; the plain people of the two bodies believe the same things, the two Churches have a similar historic background, and nothing should separate them. But the proposed union is not abstract; it is a concrete proposal, and embedded in it are radical doctrinal changes. The result of such a union would not be a larger Presbyterian Church, but a Church which retained hardly a vestige of Presbyterianism. To some this result appears desirable and that is why they work for it, to others it is undesirable; but to all it represents a religious revolution not only symptomatic of worldwide trends, but of first magnitude in its own right.

Dangerous as it always is to attempt predictions, one is tempted to guess the future when a parallel case is vivid in one's memory. In Canada a union of Congregationalists, Methodists, and Presbyterians was recently engineered. About half of the Presbyterians refused, on doctrinal grounds, to enter the union, and a great deal of dissatisfaction has been aroused. Even if the creed of the union Church had been satisfactory — which it was not — there was another serious defect. What good is a creed if no one is obliged to subscribe to it? Such is approximately the case in Canada, and the situation here is similar. Heretofore, ministers have been required in some Churches to subscribe to every phrase of the creed, or as is the case with one of the two bodies now contemplating union, they have subscribed to the system of the creed, as the system taught in the Scriptures, which system they unfeignedly hold true. Now, however, the terms of subscription are to be made so loose that the creed will no longer be regarded as containing the system taught in the Holy Scriptures. This type of subscription embodied in the present proposal of union would produce a Church which would stand for nothing definite; and if the church politicians who are now rushing this union through succeed, the split in Canada will undoubtedly be duplicated here.

Someone may ask, why cannot all parties get along together on such a loose subscription since everyone would then be free to believe as he chooses? There are two answers: First, everyone is now free to believe as he chooses. There are plenty of Churches, let everyone go to the one which pleases him. No one is forced to belong to a Church with which he disagreed. To destroy a creed is virtually to deprive those who believe the creed of the right of forming a voluntary association for definite religious purposes. What right have religious, or should we say irreligious, radicals to deny this privilege to conservatives? And second, while the radicals claim in their words that they want a Church which will include all beliefs, their actions belie their words.

This disparity between their words and action is seen in two cases. First: One of the two denominations involved instructed its committee to write into the term of union a guarantee to the effect that congregations conscientiously unable to surrender their Faith might retain their church property. This was wisdom derived from the unfortunate example in Canada. The refusal of the committee to obey its instructions shows more clearly than any argument what is to become of orthodox Christians in this union.

A second case of actions versus words is seen in another development, which while it is not logically related to the union movement is sponsored by the same group of people. This second case also shows the dimensions to which the general revolution has progressed. We point to the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. The mission situation has become acute since the public attack on the principles of mission work by the Laymen's Report last year. One would naturally expect a missionary board to be the most loyal and fervent department of a Church. Yet this is not the case. Some years back the Presbyterian Church forced Dr. H. E. Fosdick to relinquish a Presbyterian pulpit because of his slurs on the Virgin Birth and on the Presbyterian faith. Yet the Board of Foreign Missions of this Church, contrary to the expressed opinion of the Church, recommends and circulates Dr. Fosdick's books both at home and on the mission field. The Board also cooperates with and supports financially agencies in India and China which actively oppose orthodox Christianity. These agencies deny and ridicule the most essential doctrines, not merely of Presbyterians, but of all the Christian Churches. Yet the Board of Foreign Missions, in its own reports, not merely admits but rejoices in supporting these pagan endeavors. This series of disloyal and dishonorable actions has aroused widespread opposition to and distrust of the personnel of that Board. Now, what happens to those who protest?

In March a leading conservative who has dared to protest, the Rev. J. Gresham Machen, because he has moved his residence from one State to another, wished to transfer his church membership to his local Presbytery. There was an organized attempt to keep him out, and when this failed by about a two to one vote, the radicals signed a "complaint" which automatically stays the reception. Thus, through the vindictive narrowness of the modernists Dr. Machen is deprived of important ecclesiastical privileges.

These same modernists, who sponsor the proposed union with its repudiation of the present creed, were able in Philadelphia this April to pass a resolution condemning conscientious persons who were not willing to give their money to the official, but renegade Board. And finally, preparations are being made to seek "advice" from the highest Church court how to proceed against conservatives who dare to protest. The irony is that men are being persecuted not because they are heretics, but because they are not heretics.

The modernists call themselves liberals, and sponsor an inclusive, creedless Church; but The Thinker has thoughts of his own.