

The Changing Scene and the Unchanging Word

By the REV. J. GRESHAM MACHEN, D.D., Litt.D.

"The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever."—Isa. 40:8.

The Purpose of the Covenant Union



Dr. Machen

THE constitution of the Presbyterian Constitutional Covenant Union contains three principal articles in which the purpose and character of the Union is set forth. These are articles II,

III and IV.

Article II sets forth the occasion for the forming of the Union. The occasion is the increasing dominance of Modernism in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

Article III sets forth the purpose of the Union. The purpose is to maintain the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. against the assaults of Modernism.

Article IV contains the pledge or "covenant" to be subscribed to by those who are members of the Union. The pledge obligates the members of the Union to maintain a true Presbyterian Church, either by reform of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., or, failing that, by continuing the true succession of that Church separately from the existing Modernist-indifferentist organization.

Just now I want to say a few words about Article III, setting forth the purpose of the Covenant Union.

That article states that the purpose of the Union is to defend (1) the Bible, (2) the Reformed Faith as being the system of doctrine taught in the Bible, and (3) the Presbyterian principles of church government as being the principles of church government taught in the Bible.

These three parts of the purpose of the Covenant Union are closely related. You cannot really fulfill one of them if you do not also fulfill the others.

All three of them, it will be observed, are included in that defence and maintenance of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the

U.S.A. for which the Covenant Union exists.

In the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., a formulation very similar indeed to this article of the constitution of the Covenant Union occurs in the ordination pledge required of all who shall be ministers or elders or deacons. That ordination pledge, exactly like this article of the constitution of the Covenant Union, obligates those who subscribe to it to maintain (1) the Bible, (2) the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Bible, and (3) the Presbyterian form of church government.

Let us take just a look at the first two paragraphs of that ordination pledge—if we may now confine our attention to them, leaving the (very important) matter of church government to future discussion.

Those two first paragraphs of the ordination pledge read as follows:

1. Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?

2. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?

The former of these two paragraphs requires the prospective ministers and elders and deacons to believe that the Bible is the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Surely the meaning of that is not at all obscure. The paragraph simply means that those who take the pledge regard the Bible as absolutely true in matters of fact (the only infallible rule of faith) and completely authoritative in its commands (the only infallible rule of practice).

Very well, then. All honest subscribers to that pledge are obligated, when they find that the Bible really teaches anything, just to take what the Bible teaches as true; and when they find that the Bible really com-

mands anything, just to do what the Bible commands.

But the trouble is that a great many people who have taken the Bible as true have fallen into serious errors. Why? Because there is anything wrong with the Book that they have taken as their authority? Not at all. But because they have been wrong in their interpretation of the Book.

The second part of the ordination pledge takes care of that. It obligates those who subscribe to the pledge to avoid misinterpretation of the Bible. It requires that in their interpretation of the Bible they shall hold to the "Reformed" or, as opponents are more inclined to call it, "Calvinistic" system of doctrine as over-against other systems. No man who is an Arminian, for example, in his view of God's grace and the plan of salvation, has any right whatever to be a minister or elder or deacon in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

In the discussions of the past few years, the chief stress has been laid upon the first paragraph of the ordination pledge as over-against the second.

There is a certain justification for that. The Modernism that is now so largely prevalent in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. does not merely attack the Calvinistic interpretation of the Bible, but it attacks the Bible. It attacks not merely those things in our system of doctrine wherein that system differs from other systems like the Arminian system, but also, and particularly, those things that are held by all historic branches of the Christian Church.

Yet there is great danger to our Christian testimony if we forget the second part of the ordination pledge in our eagerness to defend the first.

What does that second part of the ordination pledge involve? I cannot tell you now because I have come to the end of this page. But I hope to say something about that question in a subsequent issue of THE PRESBYTERIAN GUARDIAN.