

For the Christian Observer.  
THE "GREAT DEBATE"  
And The Deliverance of 1880.

The "Assembly Report" of the *Charleston News and Courier* has been adopted by the papers generally. The CHRISTIAN OBSERVER is the only one which, with characteristic enterprise, has given its readers a fuller and more satisfactory account of the proceedings. It has enabled us to form a just estimate of the lengthened discussion on Assembly Deliverances, between a rhetorician on the one side and a sophist on the other; and to regard the "Great Debate" as really a small debate, so far as argument is concerned; untenable positions, and erroneous distinctions, some of them frivolous, being found on both sides. But something more than frivolous is found on one side, the side of the advocate of the Deliverances of 1879, viz., this monstrous position: "The object of discipline is not to affect the conscience at all, but only to affect "the relations" of a man to the visible Church. And when you sit in church court, you must enforce the law, without raising a question of your conscience, or of his. *If there were a wrong or wicked law in the Confession of Faith, it would be our duty to enforce that law, whether our conscience approve or not.*"

We do not stop to notice the absurdity of the first position, but emphasize the last by reason of its abominable Jesuitism. "A wrong or wicked law," is *no law* at all—and thus the Confession of Faith itself decides. Instead of its being "our duty to enforce that law," it would be our duty not to enforce it, our duty to resist it, and, if possible, abolish it. It is well for the Church that "the relations" of this sophistical preceptor to its candidates for the ministry have ceased—better for it had they never existed.

The issue of this debate was the adoption of the following paper :

The Assembly met in Charleston, in virtue of its power to give authoritative interpretations of the Word, declares

1. That nothing is law, to be enforced by judicial prosecution, but that which is contained in the Word, as interpreted in our standards.
2. The judicial decisions of our courts differ from their *in thesi* deliverances, in that the former *determine*, and when proceeding from our highest court, *conclude* a particular case; but both these kinds of decisions are alike interpretations of the Word by a church court, and both not only deserve high consideration, but must be submitted to, unless contrary to the constitution and the Word, of which there is a right of private judgment belonging to every church court, and also every individual church member.

### I. Number One.

Here the Assembly asserts "its power to give authoritative interpretations of the Word, and declares," etc. Its deliverances, then (this of 1880 among them), are "authoritative interpretations of the Word." But the authoritative interpretation of law *is law*, and as such, to be enforced by judicial prosecution. Yet No. 1 affirms that "nothing is law, to be enforced by judicial prosecution, but that which is contained in the Word, *as interpreted in our Standards.*" The interpretation of the law of God by our Standards is authoritative, and "to be enforced by judicial prosecution." The interpretation of the law of God by the Assembly is also "authoritative," and "must be submitted to:" to be enforced, then, in the matter of offences, by

judicial prosecution.

But "nothing is law, to be enforced by judicial prosecution, but that which is contained in the Word, as interpreted in our Standards." What, then, is to be done with that which "can be proved to be an offence from Scripture," but is not so "interpreted in our Standards," because not designated therein? If our Standards prove to be defective, not full interpretations of the Word of God, shall

the Assembly's "authoritative interpretations" of the law, which "must be submitted to," be "enforced by judicial prosecution" or not?

## II. Number Two.

Passing by the trivial distinction made between judicial decisions and deliverances, we reach the important concession that both these, being alike interpretations of the word by a church court, are equally authoritative, and both must be submitted to. And then follows an astonishing condition, or proviso, which evacuates both of all power whatever!

Either this deliverance does mean what it says, or it does not. If it does not, then another deliverance is needed to show what it does mean. *Parturiunt montes, nascitur ridiculus mus*. But if it does mean what it says, then a more *ridiculus mus* could not have been brought forth. For it teaches that *any church member may decline submission to any deliverance, or any judicial decision, if in his judgment, it be contrary to the constitution and the Word; and that every such recusant member is protected by the Assembly through this deliverance!*

Mark the language: "Both must be submitted to, unless contrary to the constitution and the Word." And who has the right to judge of this? Answer: "Of which there is a right of private judgment belonging to every church court, and also every individual church member." The same right that a church court has, a church member also has. And it extends to judicial decisions as well as to deliverances. None of these are to be submitted to, if contrary to the constitution and the Word; of which every member is to be the judge, and which is left to him to determine without being at the trouble of proving its unconstitutional and unscriptural character. So that judicial decisions do not "conclude a particular case," but "the particular case" concludes it himself!

Formerly, if one's conscience constrained him to disobey "the decrees and determinations" of church courts, he appealed from the Church to her divine Head, but took the consequences of resistance to her authority; the supremacy of law being manifested in the censure inflicted. But now, if any one's conscience—it may be the "conscience" of a hypocrite, a heretic, or a rascal; it matters not—decides that any deliverance, or any judicial decision, is contrary to the constitution and the Word, that settles it; process is stopped; the shield of the Assembly's Deliverance is over him, and "delivers" him from justice and all its penalties; the supremacy of the individual conscience over that of the Church, and over the law, being manifested in that liberty wherewith the Assembly has made him free! The deliverance of 1880 constitutes another "new departure" for the Church, and is even more odious than that of 1879—a death blow to all government and law. Presbyterian history does not exhibit its equal.

So ridiculous is the conclusion that many, doubtless, will forthwith pronounce it an impossible deduction from the grave paper of an ecclesiastical body claiming to be a judicatory of Jesus Christ. But these are the Assembly's own words. If the deliverance means what it says, let its advocates show that any other construction natural and just, is even possible. KNOX.