

THE PROVINCE OF ASSOCIATIONS.

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The Philadelphia Association has just closed a very interesting session. The veneration in which this ancient body is held, its prominent position, established character, and the large number of churches represented in it, give to its deliberations and movements an importance that belongs to few similar organizations throughout the land. The meeting was one of much harmony and spiritual enjoyment.—The accounts presented by the delegates from the several churches indicated, in general, a healthful tone of religious feeling and action; while the interest manifested in the various objects of benevolence, and the liberal contributions made for their support, afforded the most cheering evidence that this noble cause has a firm hold upon the hearts of the multitude there assembled.

But the decision which appears to us of chief moment, and fraught with the happiest consequences to the peace of Zion, was one relating to the sphere of the Association in matters of discipline. By one of the churches certain queries were sent up, having reference to subjects connected with its own internal administration, on which advice was sought. The Association, by a very large majority, decided that such questions did not come within its legitimate scope; that it was foreign from the design of its formation to give counsel in affairs of ecclesiastical government; and that difficulties arising in an individual church, or between different churches, should be adjusted in the customary and ordinary way. In this conclusion we rejoice, believing it calculated to promote order, to preserve the independence of the churches, and to determine the real province of those voluntary bodies emanating from them. And to show that our approval is not lightly given, we shall take occasion to offer a few thoughts on the true nature and purpose of Associations, as a recognized department of Baptist polity.

There is, perhaps, no other organization among us so ill defined, or respecting which so vague opinions are entertained. And yet Associations, meeting as they do regularly, having a permanent existence, and an established connection with the churches, must, from their very character, be capable of great good or evil. It is, therefore, a question of much practical importance, What is their appropriate sphere? Within what limits is their influence beneficial? When does it become dangerous and harmful?

It is plain that no express mention of Associations is found in the New Testament.—We know not that the primitive churches had any arrangements analagous to them. But though not directly required by any command or example of Scripture, their existence is we conceive, strictly in harmony with the general spirit of its instructions. It is certainly allowable for Christians to institute, with a view to their own religious improvement, such voluntary combinations as do not conflict with any statute of the Gospel; which assumes not to make, interpret, or execute laws in the kingdom of Christ; and which trench upon none of the prerogatives of that ecclesiastical constitution which He has ordained. Accordingly, the churches of our denomination have deemed it not inconsistent with the Bible, and profitable to themselves, to unite in fraternal communities, under the name of Associations, for the purpose of mutual edification and comfort. The institutions so formed are intended simply and exclusively to have regard to the spiritual interests of the churches connected with them; to ascertain and collect the facts of their condition; to produce concert in their pious labours; to extend succor and encouragement to the feeble; and, by the interchange of sympathy and fellowship, to promote unity of feeling, and co-operation in the cause of God. They have no authority to promulgate creeds, to issue canons, to prescribe systems of discipline, or in any way to supervise the internal regulations of the churches. They are not boards of reference, nor councils of advice, nor courts of appeal. They can neither legislate, nor adjudicate, nor punish. An Association may, indeed, separate from it any church that becomes corrupt in doctrine, or whose disorderly and violent proceedings endanger the general peace; that is, it may withdraw the privileges of union and intercourse when the conditions on which they were conferred are violated. Such a power is necessary to secure the ends it has in view, and is involved in the very principles of its organization. But farther it cannot properly go. Apart from this, its sole office

is, by the means above indicated, to advance truth, holiness, and love; leaving all that is executive, disciplinary, or governmental, where Christ hath left it—to the churches themselves, acting in their individual capacity, under their sovereign Head, to whom alone they are responsible.

It may, however, be said that when cases of difficulty exist in a church which it is unable to settle, it may be both suitable and useful to seek instruction and guidance from the Association to which it belongs. To such a course there are, in our opinion, very serious and weighty objections. References of this nature, should they become frequent—and were the principle established, they would soon do so—must necessarily absorb the time of the Association, protract its sessions, create strife and party feelings and waste in exciting discussions, the hallowed hours that should be spent in devotional exercises, and in solemn consultation on the great interests of the Redeemer's kingdom. Thus the very objects for which an Association is formed would be crowded out and lost. Nor is such a body at all a fitting one to investigate and determine questions of discipline. It is not so constituted as to answer any purpose of this kind. It has neither the leisure nor the means for the calm deliberation, the patient weighing of evidence, the full and impartial inquiry, so indispensable to just conclusions. Whatever judgments it might pass, in these circumstances, must be hasty, crude, one-sided, and would probably only aggravate the evil they are intending to cure.

But, it may be asked, is a church, when embarrassed by cases of an intricate and distracting nature, never to claim advice from any source without itself? To this we reply, that the rules which Christ has given in his word for the order and regulation of his house, if rightly understood and applied, are amply sufficient for every conceivable exigency. Let these be duly studied and wisely followed, and the most obstinate dissensions will vanish before their healing influence. And what is true of difficulties in a particular church, is equally true of those which sometimes arise between different churches. But should instances occur, in which the application of the Saviour's laws is not clearly seen, or division and excited feeling prevent their being put into force, there is a remedy at hand, sanctioned by scriptural precedent and the general custom of our denomination. Let the church or churches, so situated, agree to submit their differences to the umpirage of neighbouring churches. Let judicious and impartial brethren be called in for this purpose, before whom the whole facts of the case shall be laid, and who, after careful investigation, shall explain the scriptural rule in the premises, and give such counsel and aid as may be needed. Scarcely an occasion can arise in which such an expedient will not be found adequate. At all events it is far more effectual and safe than a reference to Associations. Councils, as such occasional assemblages are denominated among us, are chosen with a view to the specific case that is to come before them. They meet at the call of the church desiring their assistance. Their office is wholly advisory, and even that is delegated; and when its functions are performed, it reverts to the church at whose request they act. Having discharged the duty assigned them, they are dissolved, and cease to exist.

But an Association is a permanent body.—It is frequently even a legal corporation. By its stated meetings, and annual delegates, it renews and perpetuates itself. If it be empowered to take cognizance of discipline, or to instruct the churches in the management of their internal affairs, self-respect alone will lead it to see that its dictates be regarded.—Where they are treated with contempt, it can do no less than put out from it the delinquent or refractory members. And thus we have at once, an ecclesiastical court, interpreting laws, issuing decrees, and enforcing them by the very highest penalty, that of excommunication. It may declare that the potent words it utters are merely those of advice—the mild admonitions of a kind and watchful guardian—but they are, in effect, commands—the imperative edicts of a judicatory, erected over the churches, and awing them into submission. It matters little by what name such a controuling power may be called—whether Synod, Presbytery, or Association. The thing, as to all practical results, is essentially the same. As soon would we place ourselves under an organization claiming to legislate in God's house, as under one presuming to expound to us his will, and visiting with censure the neglect of its

teachings. Whatever thus exercises superintendence over the churches, or hinders their free action, is a palpable encroachment upon their authority, and a gross usurpation of the rights of their exalted Lord. Will it be said that Associations, as now modelled and conducted, can never do this? But let them be made regular organs of advice—standing arbitrators on every occasion of doubt or dispute—and they will soon grow into lordly bulk, and overshadowing influence. The early Christians were wont to hold fraternal conferences on the best modes of extending the Gospel in their particular neighbourhoods.—From these simple and harmless gatherings, human perversion and ambition drew, in later times, a precedent for those tremendous engines of ecclesiastical tyranny, the Ecumenical Councils, in which arrogant bishops, and priests, and monks, prescribed the doctrines to be received, and the laws to be observed by the universal church, and fulminated anathemas against all who should disobey their mandates. Let Associations be restricted within their proper limits; let them be regarded and maintained as annual festivals of piety, where the churches, by their messengers, come together, to inform each other of their state; to recount the mercies of God; to draw from the past hope for the future; to sympathize in each other's joys and sorrows; and by mutual exhortation to ciliate to holy zeal; where, as on a spot consecrated to love, brother greets brother, heart mingles with heart, thought responds to thought, and hymns, and prayers, and the faithful preaching of the word fill the soul with foretastes of heaven—let such be their character, and they will be seasons rich with enjoyment, and full of blessing. But if once they are diverted from their true design, and made arenas of debate, and platforms for the exercise of spiritual authority, then farewell to all their usefulness. They will become instruments of pride and domination.—The independence of the churches will be an empty name. The free impulses of christian affection, and the varied but blended music of all its sweet harmonies, will die away amid the noise of strife, and the thunder of imperious behests. Zion will languish and mourn; while through all her desolate borders, will stalk the dim and shadowy, but ever-present form of a spiritual despotism, only the more fatal and terrible because its province is undefined and its existence unacknowledged.—*Christian Chronicle.*

DR. CHANNING ON UNIVERSALISM.

A correspondent of *The Independent* gives the following quotation from Dr Channing, the celebrated Unitarian on Universalism:

"It seems to me that a man of common understanding, reading the scriptures without any knowledge of the way in which they have been interpreted, would not think it possible that the doctrine should ever have been drawn from them, that there is to be no future punishment. Almost any opinion would seem to him to receive greater countenance from the Bible than this. Yet this opinion has found strenuous advocates; and from its very nature it has not been advocated without making converts. This error should be resisted with earnestness, because it directly, palpably, and without disguise, diminishes the restraints on vice. It is at war with society. It is a blow at social order. It lets loose those propensities which are constantly struggling against the principle of duty, and which this principle unaided by the fear of future suffering, is in multitudes poorly able to restrain. The doctrine I am opposing, goes to the very extinction of conscience. Conscience in man is an echo, if I may so speak, to the will and moral sentiments of God. Its dictates are authoritative, because we feel them to be the dictates of Him who made us. A sense of God's abhorrence of sin is the chief nourishment of our abhorrence of it. Let God be viewed as so unconcerned about character as not to punish the guiltiest, as to fall short in his administrations of the plainest requisitions of justice, and a deadly torpor would spread over the human conscience. Moral sensibility, would be paralyzed.

The effect of this doctrine, indeed, may not immediately appear, because it cannot eradicate the principles of our nature, and cannot entirely efface the impressions of education.—Guilt and punishment are seen to have a connection too natural and intimate to be wholly separated even in thought.

But while the influence of this doctrine may be counteracted by these and other causes such as natural good dispositions, freedom

from great temptation, the power of opinion, and the like, yet its proper effects must be always bad; its fruits are bitter, its tendency is to sin and death. On this account I believe that the scriptures in great wisdom say nothing of happiness reserved for the guilty after they shall have borne the penalty of their sins. If that happiness be intended for them I should say that the present life is not the proper time for revealing it. Nothing decisively clear seems to me laid down in the scriptures upon this subject. A solemn darkness hangs over the prison house of the condemned."

FAR AWAY FROM HEAVEN.

I know not what eternal death is. I can tell you some things. It is far away from Heaven, those blissful plains where eternal joy dwells. It is far from hope—hope that here "comes to all." It is the abode of all the abandoned, and profane, and vile—the collected guilt and wretchedness of this world. It is a place where no sanctuary like this opens its doors and invites to heaven; where no Sabbath returns to bless the soul; where no message of mercy comes to the suffering and the sad. It is a world unblessed like this with the work of redemption. On no second Calvary is there a Redeemer offered for sin; and from no tomb there does he rise to life to bless the sufferers with the offer, and to furnish the pledge of heaven. No Spirit strives there to reclaim the lost; and on no zephyr there is the message of mercy borne, whispering peace. No God meets the desponding there with promises and hopes; and from no eye there is the tear of sorrow ever wiped away. There is no such friend as Jesus; no voice of mercy; no day-star of hope; no father, mother, daughter, pastor, angel to sympathize; no one to breathe for the lost the prayer of pardon; no great Intercessor to bear the cry of mercy up to the throne of God. It is death—the dying sorrow prolonged from age to age; onward—onward toward eternity—ever lingering, never ending.

* * * I have no power—no heart to attempt to portray these scenes. They are not topics for declamation. For of whom are these things spoken? Of the dwellers in distant worlds? Of those whom we have seen? Alas! of many, many of the wicked in this house. How many now in despair may have occupied the seats which you now occupy—not suffered now to go and tell their brethren, lest they also come into that place of torment! Oh, they are spoken of our kindred and friends—of wives, and husbands, and parents, and school companions, and teachers, and pupils, who are out of Christ. They are spoken of those to whom we are bound by every tender tie, and to whom the heart is drawn by all the gushing sympathy of love; but are they less in danger on that account? Oh, is there no danger? Suppose a voice from heaven should be heard in this house, and saying to the living here, "The day is coming in which all that are in their graves shall hear the voice of the Son of man, and shall come forth, they that have done evil to the resurrection of damnation;" "the wicked shall be turned into hell;" "except ye repent, ye shall all perish;" is there a heart here that would not feel there was danger? Should a hand be seen writing on these walls the names of all those here who are in danger of hell, how solemn would be this house! With what anxiety would you trace the record made!—How anxiously would you look to see if your name was begun—was recorded—was fixed there! How deep the anguish of the soul! How deep, perhaps, the groans that would be heard in every part of the house!—*Barnes' Practical Sermons.*

BORROWED THOUGHTS.

To be in Christ is Heaven below, and to be with Christ is Heaven above.

Some seem to think they place God under an obligation to them when they engage in religious services, as if the sun was ever debtor because we drew light and heat from it, or the fountain because we refreshed ourselves with its waters.

He that runs from temptation is in a very different position from him who runs to meet it: for the first there is a refuge, but none for the latter.

How awful the responsibility of pastors! How important that they should be sound in the faith! There is no more certain way of destroying the inhabitants of a town than by poisoning the public fountains whence their water.

If conscience be a thousand witnesses, surely the all-seeing God is as a thousand consciences.