

The Auburn Affirmation: A Lesson for Today

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The Old School Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. determined in 1801 to enter into a Plan of Union with Congregational churches for the purpose of evangelizing frontier areas of our fledgling country. In 1837 the Old School Presbyterian Church removed itself from the Plan of Union and severed ecclesiastical ties with the New School churches due to their doctrinal errors. Yet, in 1869 the Northern Presbyterian Church reunited with the New School churches, bringing with them an influx of contrary doctrinal beliefs which aided in the downgrade of the denomination. The last conservative judicial victory of the Northern Presbyterian Church was in 1893 when Dr. Charles A. Briggs was suspended from the ministry due to his belief that the Scriptures contain errors. Biblical doctrines were further compromised when the Assembly made changes in the Westminster standards, including a Declaratory Statement which opened the door for union with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in 1906.

In 1918 three Northern Presbyterian churches united to establish the First Presbyterian Church in New York City. Rev. George Alexander was called as the pastor, and a liberal Baptist minister, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, was called as the associate minister. Dr. Fosdick, on May 21, 1922, preached a sermon titled "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" He believed that fundamental and liberal beliefs were "theories" that could peacefully co-exist. Such biblical doctrines as the Virgin Birth, the Inerrancy of Scripture, the Atonement, and the Second Coming of Christ were reduced to theories, while liberal heresies were placed on the same level to secure unity.

Conservatives within the Philadelphia Presbytery sent an overture to the General Assembly of 1923 requesting the Assembly "to direct the Presbytery of New York to take such action as will require the preaching and teaching in the First Presbyterian Church of New York City to conform to the system of doctrine taught in the Confession of Faith."¹ The General Assembly referred the overture to the Bills and Overtures Committee which returned a lame response, calling for the New York Presbytery to make its own investigation. However, Rev. Gordon A. MacLennan presented a one man minority report with a call for action. The Assembly approved the minority report and instructed the New York Presbytery

¹ Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1940), pp. 30, 31.

"to require preaching and teaching at the First Presbyterian Church in New York City to conform to the Bible and Westminster Confession of Faith." The Assembly also called for a reaffirmation of faith in the infallibility of the Bible, in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, in His substitutionary atonement on the cross, in His bodily resurrection, and in His mighty miracles, as essential doctrines of the Holy Scripture and the Westminster Confession of Faith."²

The liberals responded in January of 1924 by composing and signing the *Auburn Affirmation* with 150 signatures. By May 5, 1924, a total of 1,274 signatures were on the document. The *Affirmation* claimed that orthodox believers and apostate liberals could peacefully co-exist within Christ's Church. However, the Word of God teaches: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? (II Cor. 6:14, 15; see also, vv. 16-18; Gal. 1:8, 9; Rom. 16:17, 18; II John 9-10).

Murray Forst Thompson, in his booklet, *The Auburn Betrayal*, wrote: "While we are sad indeed to make the charge, and fully realize its seriousness, we are compelled to say that the evident purpose of the *Affirmation* was to affirm the liberty of ministers of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. to hold and to preach views at variance with the doctrinal standards of the Church. And this liberty, ironically enough, was claimed in the name of unity!"³

The liberal *Auburn Confession* stated: "There is no assertion in the Scriptures that their writers were kept 'from error.' The Confession of Faith does not make this assertion; and it is significant that this assertion is not to be found in the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene Creed or in any of the great Reformation confessions. The doctrine of inerrancy, intended to enhance the authority of the Scriptures, in fact impairs their supreme authority for faith and life, and lessens the testimony of the church to the power of God unto salvation through Jesus Christ. We hold that the General Assembly of 1923 in asserting that 'the Holy Spirit did so inspire, guide and move the writers of Holy Scripture as to keep them from error,' spoke without warrant of the Scriptures or of the Confession of Faith. We hold rather to the words of the Confession of faith, that the Scriptures 'are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.'"

The 1,293 signers of the *Auburn Affirmation* may have forgotten their first ordination vow: "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?" If the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, and God "is not a man that He should lie,

² Ibid., p. 34.

³ Murray Forst Thompson, *The Auburn Betrayal* (Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia: Committee on Christian Education, The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, n.d.), p. 11.

neither the son of man that He should repent" (Num. 23:19), then, necessarily, the Bible being God's Word, the Scriptures must be without error. The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter I, section IV, stated: "The authority of the holy scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God, (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God."

The *Auburn Confession* continued with veiled explanations of the other fundamentals of the Christian faith. It stated: "Furthermore, this opinion of the General Assembly attempts to commit our church to certain theories concerning the inspiration of the Bible, and the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, and the Continuing Life and Supernatural Power of our Lord Jesus Christ. We all hold most earnestly to these great facts and doctrines; we all believe from our hearts that the writers of the Bible were inspired of God; that Jesus Christ was God manifest in the flesh; that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, and through Him we have our redemption; that having died for our sins He rose from the dead and is our ever living Savior; that in His earthly ministry He wrought many mighty works, and by His vicarious death and unfailing presence He is able to save to the uttermost." Some of us regard the particular theories contained in the deliverance of the General Assembly of 1923 as satisfactory explanations of these facts and doctrines. But we are united in believing that these are not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures and our standards as explanations of these facts and doctrines of our religion, and that all who hold to these facts and doctrines, whatever theories they may employ to explain them, are worthy of all confidence and fellowship."

What the General Assembly stated as fundamental doctrines are referred to as "theories" in the *Auburn Affirmation*. If the virgin birth is treated as one theory among others, what other theory can exist but that Christ came into the world by natural birth? Such a blasphemy negates God's infallible Word and removes the foundation of our Christian faith. Is the incarnation of Christ a theory? He, "being the eternal God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever."⁴ "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

The General Assembly stated a third fundamental: "It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our standards that Christ offered up Himself a sacrifice to satisfy Divine justice and to reconcile us to God." Is there any other "theory" that would be acceptable with God for the eternal salvation of sinners other than the vicarious sacrifice of Christ? "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned

⁴ Westminster Shorter Catechism, #21.

everyone to his own way, and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all." Is the bodily resurrection of Christ a theory? The Apostle Paul said, "And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins" (I Corinthians 15:17). How can these liberals treat the blessed hope of our Lord's return as a theory? "For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself" (Philippians 3:20, 21). Is it a theory that our omnipotent Savior did mighty miracles? The Lord Jesus, who has no deceit in His mouth, sent word to John the Baptist: "The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them" (Matthew 11:5).

One hundred years after the *Auburn Affirmation* we are witnessing the sad results of compromise and apostasy. We look to the King of kings, knowing that He "will build His Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." The American Council of Christian Churches continues to stand in the narrow way, knowing that joy comes in the morning. The Lord Jesus said, "Fear not, little flock; for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).