

The Changing Scene and the Unchanging Word

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

Can Christian Men Enter the Ministry in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.?



Dr. Machen

THE second part of the covenant of the Presbyterian Constitutional Covenant Union says that if efforts to bring about a reform of the Church fail and in particular if the tyrannical policy of the present majority triumphs the members of the Covenant Union will continue the true spiritual succession of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. regardless of cost.

But what is "the tyrannical policy of the present majority"?

The Ecclesiastical Trials

One manifestation of that tyrannical policy has received a great deal of attention, and it certainly deserves the attention that it has received.

That is the attack which has been made upon the members of The Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions and upon the Rev. John J. De Waard and the Rev. Arthur F. Perkins.

The real issue in this attack has nothing whatever to do with the personality of the members of the Independent Board or of these other persons. They might be the most insignificant, indeed they might even be the most morally contemptible, persons in the whole country; there might be a thousand other grounds for removing them from the Church: yet it would still remain true that the attack upon them *on the particular grounds* alleged in the mandate of the 1934 and 1935 General Assemblies and contained in the sets of charges and specifications brought against them in the individual trials constitutes an attack not upon any mere men but upon the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The whole upshot of the attack is to substitute the word of man for the Word of God and to dethrone Jesus Christ.

Refusal To License or Ordain Christian Men

What is not always sufficiently observed, however, is that this attack upon the Lordship of Christ has come also in another way. It has come in the attempt of presbyteries to set up such conditions for entrance into the ministry that no real minister of Jesus Christ can be received.

A particularly plain instance is found in the Presbytery of New Brunswick. That presbytery is the presbytery in the bounds of which Princeton Theological Seminary is situated. It constitutes one of the chief gateways into the ministry in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

On September 26, 1933, that presbytery actually placed in its "Manual" a provision that all persons who seek entrance into the presbytery by licensure, ordination or transfer, shall be examined as to their willingness to support the regularly authorized boards and agencies of the Church.

At the last meeting of that presbytery that I attended I saw exactly how that provision of the Manual worked out.

A young man presented himself. I do not remember whether he was to be received under care of presbytery after he had been under the care of some other presbytery or whether he was already a licentiate. That does not make the tiniest bit of difference. The point is that he was being received. A step necessary to his final ordination was being taken.

Well, what happened? Something very simple happened. The young man was asked to come forward and take his seat at the front. He was then asked whether he would support the regularly authorized boards and agencies of the Church. He answered glibly in the affirmative. Then he was received.

The whole thing was done exactly as though one of the "constitutional questions" were being put.

What did that mean? Well, for one thing it meant that the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

was being violated in the most outrageous possible way. The Constitution provides a lawful method by which requirements for entrance into the ministry like those to which that young man was being subjected can be set up. That method is the method of sending down to all the presbyteries an overture amending the Constitution so as to put in an additional "constitutional question." The Presbytery of New Brunswick was doing that very thing by its own individual and arbitrary act. One could scarcely imagine a more lawless act than that act of the presbytery.

But it was something more sacred even than the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. that was being violated.

What happens when a man gains his entrance into the ministry by pledging a blanket allegiance to human councils and courts, by promising to make the missionary message that he commends to his people conform to shifting majorities in the General Assembly?

Here is what happens—the man who does that commits a very dreadful offence, and all who encourage, or connive in, his action commit that dreadful offence with him.

The offence consists in substituting the word of man, as giving the content of the message that one will commend, for the Word of God.

A great many presbyteries in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. are tempting young men to commit that dreadful offence, to gain an entrance into the ministry by the base act of promising implicit support of shifting human programs.

Some yield to the temptation. The presence of such men in the ministry is doing untold harm to precious souls.

Others will not yield. They stand bravely by the Bible and the Constitution of the Church. These men in many instances are refused admission.

What are we going to do about it? I may have something to say about that question in the next issue of THE PRESBYTERIAN GUARDIAN.