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Editor
SAMUEL G. CRAIG

Advisory Editors
OSWALD T. ALLIS
LORAIN BOETTNER

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Doctor Coffin as a Candidate for Moderator

THE first and if we mistake not, the most significant duty that will confront the commissioners to the 155th General Assembly when they convene at Detroit on May 27th, will be the election of a Moderator. Ordinarily that would not be the case. As a rule it has been a matter of relatively small significance whether this one or that one of the men nominated was elected. That it is otherwise this year is due to the fact that a determined effort is being made to elect Dr. Henry Sloane Coffin—outstanding Auburn Affirmationist and President of Union Theological Seminary of New York—as Moderator of the approaching Assembly.

The campaign to elect Dr. Coffin was opened formally on January 11th last when the Presbytery of New York on motion of its Moderator, Dr. John Sutherland Bonnell, adopted the following resolution:

“That the standing rule which places the election of commissioners to the General Assembly in the April meeting be suspended, that the standing rule which requires three years to elapse between the election of a person as a commissioner and another election be suspended, and that Dr. Henry Sloane Coffin be elected commissioner to the 155th Assembly.”

It was necessary to suspend the second of the standing rules mentioned because Dr. Coffin had been a commissioner to the 1941 Assembly. Inasmuch as Dr. Coffin was again elected a commissioner at the April meeting of New York Presbytery to conform to the provision of the Form of Government which provides that commissioners be elected “at the last meeting immediately preceding the meet-

ing of the General Assembly, provided there be a sufficient interval between that time and the meeting of the Assembly,” it seems clear that the purpose of suspending the first of the standing rules mentioned and in electing Dr. Coffin as a commissioner at the January meeting of Presbytery was to get his name before the Church as a candidate for the Moderatorship at an early date. Since Dr. Coffin’s candidacy was first announced, an active campaign by means of newspapers, letters and personal interviews has been carried on to further his election.

Inasmuch as there is every reason to expect that Dr. Coffin will be nominated for the office of Moderator at the coming Assembly, it seems fitting that certain matters bearing on his qualifications for this position be brought to the attention of the Church. In undertaking this task, we are not presuming to tell the commissioners how they should vote. We trust however they will not take it amiss—we are thinking more particularly of the elder commissioners—if we call their attention to some of the more significant things about Dr. Coffin which, if we mistake not, they will want to take into consideration in deciding whether to cast their vote for him. Nothing is further from our thought than to bring a railing accusation against Dr. Coffin. Unquestionably he is a man of high purpose and of outstanding gifts, not the least of which are a pleasing personality and unusual facility of expression in speech and writing. Some, we suspect, will find in the matters we are about to relate reasons why Dr. Coffin should be elected. We do not conceal the fact that we hope that most will think otherwise.

If Dr. Coffin is nominated for the office of Moderator of the 155th General Assembly, as seems cer-

tain, it will not be the first time he has been a candidate for this high office. He was a candidate in 1941. What is more, he came close to being elected as evidenced by the fact that he received 404 votes as compared with the 461 received by the successful candidate, Dr. Herbert Booth Smith. There is reason to believe, however, that on that occasion some voted for him in ignorance of who he was and the things for which he stood as little or no pre-Assembly publicity had been given to his candidacy. There is also reason to believe that a considerable number voted for him fearing that Dr. Smith was an Isolationist. Those who attended the St. Louis Assembly will recall that before the election an article appeared in a leading St. Louis newspaper alleging that such was the case. As a result it looked for a while as if the contest for the Moderatorship would be a contest between the Isolationists and Interventionists. Had that happened, it is quite certain that Dr. Coffin would have been elected, as it was proved later that the membership of the Assembly was overwhelmingly anti-Isolationist. To counteract the influence of this newspaper statement, Dr. Charles R. Erdman in nominating Dr. Smith expressly denied that this allegation had any basis in fact. Even Dr. Erdman's assurance however, did not wholly remove the fear engendered by the newspaper article. It is believed that quite a number voted for Dr. Coffin who, if the Isolationist issue had not been raised, would have voted for Dr. Smith.

This paper has not been prepared in the interest of promoting the candidacy of any particular aspirant to the Moderatorship. It may be anti-Coffin but it is not pro-anybody else. Its sole or at least its main purpose is to direct attention to certain significant facts about Dr. Coffin that should not be overlooked in considering his candidacy for the Moderatorship of the 155th General Assembly.

1. The first of these facts is that Dr. Coffin is a signer of the Auburn Affirmation. It is true that there is precedent for electing an Auburn Affirmationist. Dr. William Lindsay Young was elected Moderator of the 1940 Assembly. Dr. Young, however, was a rank and file signer of the Auburn Affirmation, who previous to his election as Moderator was not widely known throughout the Church. Moreover, inasmuch as no reference was made to the doctrinal position of any of the six candidates nominated the year Dr. Young was elected, there is every reason to believe that few of the commissioners who voted for him were aware that they were voting to place an Auburn Affirmationist in the Moderator's chair. The situation is quite different as regards Dr. Coffin. He is one of the most widely known men in the Presbyterian Church. What is more, he was one of the original signers of the Auburn Affirmation and as such one of those who sponsored it when it was sent out to all the ministers of the Church, accompanied with an invitation to sign. It is highly probable that he had a hand in its

composition and all but certain that it was not submitted to any considerable group of ministers before it had had his approval. It was one thing to elect Dr. Young as Moderator. It would be quite a different thing to elect Dr. Coffin.

It has been alleged that the Auburn Affirmation was merely a protest against the assumption that the Constitution of the Church can be amended by Assembly action without concurrent action on the part of the Presbyteries. If such were the case, it would be debatable whether such an assumption was involved in the doctrinal declarations of 1910, 1916, and 1923—their supporters denied it—but the Auburn Affirmation would have offered no evidence that its signers were doctrinally unsound. The Auburn Affirmationists however did not content themselves with affirming that the Constitution of the Church can be legally amended only by the concurrent action of the General Assembly and the Presbyteries, and in asserting that a mere deliverance by the Assembly, or even a succession of Assemblies, is without binding authority. It went further, much further than that. It asserted that the doctrinal deliverances of the 1910, 1916 and 1923 Assemblies had to do with non-essential doctrines—doctrines that need not be believed even by Presbyterian ministers. That our readers may have before them the doctrines which the Auburn Affirmationists branded as non-essential, we cite what the three Assemblies mentioned affirmed:

1. It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our standards that the Holy Spirit did so inspire, guide and move the writers of Holy Scripture as to keep them from error.
2. It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our standards that our Lord Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary.
3. 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.
4. It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our standards concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, that on the third day he rose from the dead with the same body with which he suffered, with which he also ascended into heaven, and there sitteth at the right hand of God, making intercession.
5. It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God as the Supreme standard of our faith that our Lord Jesus Christ showed his power and love by working mighty miracles. This working was not contrary to nature, but superior to it.

So far is it from being true that the Auburn Affirmation confined itself to questions of a constitutional nature that, not content to affirm that these deliverances concerned themselves with non-essential matters, it presented a doctrinal statement of its own. That statement reads as follows:

"We all believe from our hearts that the writers of the Bible were inspired of God; that Jesus 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 Saviour; that in His earthly ministry He wrought many mighty works, and by his vicarious death and unailing presence He is able to save to the uttermost."

It is not surprising that this doctrinal statement, expressed so largely in the language of Scripture, is often cited as evidence that the Auburn Affirmationists are doctrinally sound. Taken by itself and without regard to its context, it might be regarded as inadequate but hardly as heretical. So to take it, however, is to misinterpret it. It must in the nature of the case be interpreted so as not to contradict their contention that the doctrines mentioned in the deliverances are non-essential doctrines. Hence such belief as they profess in the inspiration of the Bible must be consistent with the belief that it contains errors; such belief as they profess in Christ as God manifest in the flesh must be consistent with disbelief in His virgin birth; such belief as they profess in Christ as One who died for our sins must be consistent with rejection of the notion that He "offered up Himself as a sacrifice to satisfy Divine justice and to reconcile us to God"; such belief as they profess in the continuing life of Christ, must be consistent with the belief that the body in which He suffered turned to dust; and such belief as they profess in Christ as One Who in His earthly ministry wrought many mighty works must be consistent with the denial that He wrought any miracles.

The Auburn Affirmationists are particularly explicit in denying that the writers of the Bible have been kept from error. The doctrine of the inerrancy of the Scriptures, they assert, "impairs their supreme authority for faith and life and weakens the testimony of the Church to the power of God unto salvation through Jesus Christ." How they reconcile such denial with their ordination vows in which they affirm that they believe "the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice" we do not profess to understand. Be that as it may, they do affirm that to teach that the writers of the Bible were kept from error is not only false but harmful.

It should not be overlooked that the doctrines which the Auburn Affirmationists regard as non-essential are doctrines which are not only clearly taught in the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms of our Church, but doctrines which have always been regarded as essential by all branches of the Christian Church. In the words of the late Dr. C. W. Hodge: "Whatever may be said as to the right of an Assembly to make any binding doctrinal declarations, the fact is that the plenary inspiration (and hence the inerrancy) of the Scriptures, the Virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Christ, His substitutionary atonement by which He rendered a satisfaction to Divine justice, and His personal return, are not only explicitly affirmed in the Westminster Confession, but are also essential to that common Christianity adhered to by the Romish, Greek,

Lutheran and Reformed Churches, and essential to the Christianity of the New Testament."

It is sometimes alleged, by way of extenuation, that many of those who signed the Auburn Affirmation did so without perceiving its full significance. Whatever truth there may be in this allegation—we have reason to believe there is considerable—it can hardly be urged in behalf of Dr. Coffin in view of the position of leadership he has occupied among the Auburn Affirmationists from the beginning. Moreover quite apart from the fact that Dr. Coffin was one of the original signers of said Affirmation, we have abundant evidence in his writings that his views are in full harmony with its assertions. Some of this evidence may be found in the excerpts from his writings which follow this article.

It was alleged by some of those electioneering for Dr. Coffin in St. Louis in 1941 that he had altered his views in the direction of orthodoxy since the Auburn Affirmation was issued in 1924, and hence that the fact that he had signed it should no longer be held against him. How little warrant there was for this allegation was evidenced by what happened to the Cedar Rapids overture of 1941 when it was committed to the Committee on Bills and Overtures of which Dr. Coffin was the chairman. That overture as presented by the Presbytery of Cedar Rapids read as follows:

"Whereas, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. has deemed it wise to declare itself in a 'didactic, advisory, and monitory' manner concerning the essential truths involved in the ordination vows to which ministers and elders subscribe, and

Whereas, the doctrinal standards of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. are substantially identical with our standards, and

Whereas, it is the hope and prayer of our denomination that these two great branches of the Presbyterian Church might once again be organically united in the service of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and

Whereas, we believe that this will be a step toward bringing the two denominations together;

Therefore, the Presbytery of Cedar Rapids, meeting in Mount Vernon, Iowa, on April 28, 29, 1941, respectfully overtures the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, in May, 1941, to declare that it regards the acceptance of the infallible truth and the divine authority of the Scriptures, and of Christ as very and eternal God, who became man by being born of a virgin, who offered Himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and to reconcile us to God, Who rose from the dead with the same body with which He suffered, and Who will return to judge the world, as being involved in the ordination vows to which we subscribe."

The Cedar Rapids Overture, as rewritten by the Committee under the chairmanship of Dr. Coffin, and as adopted by the General Assembly on his motion, reads as follows:

"The General Assembly recognizing that the doctrinal standards of the Presbyterian Church in the United States are substantially identical with our standards, expresses the hope and prayer that these two great branches of the Presbyterian Church may once again be organically united in

the service of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. This General Assembly reaffirms the fidelity of the Church to its doctrinal standards and declares itself convinced that its ministers and elders are loyal to their ordination vows, and we believe that the God of our fathers, who used them abundantly in winning the liberties, shaping the institutions and laying the spiritual foundations of this nation, is calling the inheritors of their convictions in this urgent day to witness in a re-united Church to the truths of the Gospel of Christ, on which alone a just and fraternal commonwealth can be reared, and which are the only hope for a world of righteousness and peace."

A comparison of the Overture in its original form and as rewritten by the Committee shows that while both express the hope that the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches may be re-united, they embody contradictory judgments relative to the Auburn Affirmation. To have adopted the Overture in its original form would have been to reaffirm in substance the deliverances of the 1910, 1916 and 1923 Assemblies, and hence would have involved a rebuke of the Auburn Affirmationists. As rewritten by the Committee however, it exonerates them by declaring that the General Assembly is "convinced that its ministers and elders are loyal to their ordination vows" despite the fact that among the former there are still living approximately eight hundred who signed the Auburn Affirmation—only three of whom are known to have publicly withdrawn their signatures.

If Dr. Coffin no longer held the doctrinal views expressed in the Auburn Affirmation, he had a "made-to-order" opportunity to tell the Church of that fact in connection with the Cedar Rapids Overture. All he had to do was to recommend its approval in its original form. He used that opportunity, however, to reassert, in effect, his hostility to the Assembly deliverances of 1910, 1916 and 1923 and to obtain an Assembly deliverance favorable to the Auburn Affirmationists—so little warrant was there for alleging that his attitude toward the doctrines opposed by the Auburn Affirmation had changed.

A word may be permitted in passing concerning the probable effect of Dr. Coffin's election as Moderator, upon the proposed reunion with the Southern Presbyterian Church. What the Cedar Rapids Overture asked the Assembly to declare to be "involved in the ordination vows to which we subscribe" is expressed in exactly the same words as were employed by the Southern Presbyterian Assembly in 1939 (repeated in effect in 1940) in expressing what they conceive to be involved in these ordination vows. There is no reason to think that Dr. Coffin's election would place any additional difficulties in the way of union with the Episcopal Church (which he favors on the basically un-Presbyterian terms proposed) as it is professedly a comprehensive Church that tolerates all sorts of doctrinal beliefs. It is quite otherwise, however, with the Southern Presbyterian Church. No doubt there are within that Church those who would welcome union on terms acceptable

to the Auburn Affirmationists but there is no reason to think that that is true of the Church as a whole. The election of Dr. Coffin, if we mistake not, would greatly retard, if it would not altogether prevent, union with the Southern Presbyterian Church in anything like the near future.

2. In the second place, Dr. Coffin is president of Union Theological Seminary of New York City—a position he has occupied since 1926. Since Union Theological Seminary has long been professedly an interdenominational, not a Presbyterian, institution, it follows that Dr. Coffin's main interest for the last seventeen years, has been outside the Presbyterian Church of whose Assembly he would now fain be Moderator.

Recall if you will, the history of Union Theological Seminary. It was founded as a Presbyterian Institution in 1836, but independent of any ecclesiastical control, and operated as such until it entered into the Agreement of 1870 which provided that it make annual reports to the General Assembly and that the election of professors by its Board be subject to veto by the General Assembly, as in the case of Princeton and the other Seminaries of the church. This Agreement remained in effect until 1892, when Union Seminary asked that it be annulled—the occasion of this request being that the Assembly had declined to approve the election of Dr. Charles A. Briggs as professor of Biblical Theology because his views were judged heretical—and when the Assembly declined to be a party to the breaking of the Agreement this Seminary took matters into its own hands and terminated the Agreement on the ground that either party to the Agreement had the right to act alone in its abrogation, despite the fact that the General Assembly claimed that "no such right is expressed in the Agreement, and in the nature of things, no agreement where valuable interests are involved and valuable considerations are given and received, can in good morals be abrogated by one party to the Agreement without the consent and against the expressed desire of the other party." The "valuable considerations given and received" referred to were the large sums of money which Union Seminary had received during the twenty-two years it was under Assembly control—monies which had been given with the understanding that it was definitely connected with the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. Against the judgment of many, the General Assembly decided not to enter into a contest in the Civil Courts concerning the funds which in its judgment Union Seminary was using in a manner "not in accord with the intention of the donors" but to "leave the whole matter to the honor and stewardship of those now in charge of the Seminary." If it was thought that this appeal to the honor of the Board of Directors of Union Seminary would lead to the surrender of those funds, the event proved that the thought was a mistaken one. They are still part of the Institution's property or endow-

ment. Immediately following the action of Union Seminary in abrogating the Agreement or Compact of 1870, the General Assembly disavowed all responsibility for its teachings, declined to receive its reports and enjoined its Board of Education from giving aid to any student who attends it—acts which still stand.

Following its repudiation of Assembly control, Union Seminary traveled rapidly in the direction of becoming an out-and-out modernist institution—so rapidly in fact that before the time of his death, Dr. Briggs was looked upon at Union Seminary as very much of a Conservative. At least since 1917, when Dr. A. C. McGiffert became its President, it has been the leading modernist Theological Seminary in this country and the chief disseminator of German rationalistic criticism. It has been alleged that the situation has been greatly improved at Union Seminary since Dr. Coffin became its President in 1926. We are not concerned to deny that there is a measure of truth in this allegation, but in as far as it is true, we think it is due mainly to the fact that there has been a widespread reaction against modernism and all it stands for even among the modernists themselves. But while there has been a widespread recognition of the bankruptcy of modernism, this does not mean that there has been a general return to Biblical orthodoxy—at least not at Union Seminary. This has been made abundantly clear in a recent volume entitled "Liberal Christianity" (1942) written in honor of a recently retired professor of Union Seminary, Eugene William Lyman, in which six of the sixteen articles have been written by men now connected with Union Seminary and all of which are by men in sympathy with its theological position. Excerpts from Dr. Coffin's article in this volume, entitled "The Scriptures" will be found on another page. The most that Dr. H. P. Van Dusen, Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Seminary has to say of our Lord in his article "The Significance of Jesus Christ" is that "in Jesus of Nazareth God Himself was as fully present as it is possible for Him to be present in a human life"—a statement that will meet with the approval of many Unitarians. Such warrant as there is for thinking that Union Seminary has markedly improved rests largely, if we mistake not, on the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, especially his recent Gifford Lectures, but while Niebuhr's writings are a vast improvement over what we have been accustomed to have emanate from Union Seminary, even he is still far short of Presbyterian orthodoxy. It is plain for instance from his latest book (*The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 1943, Vol. II), that he regards the Westminster doctrine of the Bible as tantamount to bibliolatry, the doctrine of the second coming of Our Lord as merely a symbol of the idea that "history's incompleteness and corruption is finally overcome," and the doctrine of the resurrection as merely a symbol of "the eternal significance of this historical existence." How-

ever, even if Dr. Niebuhr were much more orthodox than his writings indicate, it would still be true that the main bulk of the teaching at Union Seminary is unblushingly modernist and as such flatly hostile to the teaching of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The claim that Union Seminary under Dr. Coffin is becoming more orthodox has not been strengthened by its recent election of two new professors—Dr. John C. Bennett of the Pacific School of Religion and Dr. John Knox of the University of Chicago and editor of its modernist monthly, published under the name of "The Journal of Religion."

It is the President of this Seminary who is now being put forward as a candidate for the moderatorship of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.—a Seminary for whose teachings our Church has disavowed all responsibility for more than fifty years. Is the record of this Seminary such that the General Assembly should honor her President by electing him to the highest honor within her gift? Our Church has under her control ten Seminaries, not one of whose present heads has been so honored. It seems to us, at least, that if our Church wants to honor thus a Seminary President rather than a working pastor it should honor one of these rather than the President of an outside institution whose teachings are in open hostility to her standards. That apart, is it fitting that one whose chief work for some seventeen years has been outside the Presbyterian Church, and who sets such small value on his Presbyterianism (see concluding excerpt), should be chosen the Moderator of the coming Assembly?

We have called attention to two considerations which it seems to us should preclude Dr. Coffin from being elected the Moderator of the approaching Assembly. It is still being said—in conversation if not in public speech—that Dr. Coffin has changed, that he is now very much of a returned prodigal and that by-gones should be treated as by-gones. In the course of what has been written above we have called attention to certain matters which indicate that there is no sufficient warrant for this judgment. Even if this representation were true, however, it must be evident to all that his attitude is altogether different from that of the prodigal of the Gospel story. So far from saying with the prodigal of the Gospel story, "Make me as one of thy hired servants," he is saying rather, "Make me the president of the corporation" or, perhaps it would be better to say, since the father of the Gospel prodigal was evidently a large farmer, "Make me the manager of the estate."

More might be said relative to Dr. Coffin as a candidate for the moderatorship—about the doings, for instance, of New York Presbytery during the last twenty-five years under the leadership of Dr. Coffin and those in sympathy with him—but to say more, it seems to us would be either useless or superfluous—useless as far as those are concerned who think that the fact that Dr. Coffin is the

Church's outstanding Auburn Affirmationist and the President of Union Theological Seminary, commends him for the position, and superfluous as far as those are concerned upon whom these facts have exactly the opposite effect. Our purpose is not so much to persuade or dissuade as to do what we can to bring it about that all who are qualified to vote at the Detroit Assembly are made aware of the facts to which attention has been called. If knowing these facts the Commissioners to the 155th General Assembly elect Dr. Coffin as their Moderator, we will see in that action additional evidence of the triumph

of liberalism and doctrinal indifferentism in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. If knowing these facts the Commissioners to the 155th General Assembly do not elect Dr. Coffin as their Moderator, we will see in their action evidence that the rank and file of the ministers and elders of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. are still devoted to the Gospel of the Grace of God as expressed in its Confession of Faith and Catechisms and as exemplified in the lives of their Presbyterian forbears—God-centered, self-sacrificing but strong and rugged lives which served well their age and generation.

Excerpts from Dr. Coffin's Writings

In selecting excerpts we have confined ourselves to what Dr. Coffin has written since the year in which he was elected President of Union Seminary. None have been taken from "Religion Yesterday and Today" (1940) because, contrasting as it does the beliefs of one era with those of another, it is more or less impossible to tell to what degree he identifies his own beliefs with those he describes. Be that as it may, the book offers no evidence contradictory to that embodied in the excerpts chosen.

The Bible

THE New Testament contains various doctrinal interpretations of the faith—half a dozen views of the atonement and several explanations of the origin of the Person of Christ." (*Why I Am a Presbyterian*, The Forum, March, 1926.)

"The relatively greater freedom with which we handle the Bible, not hesitating to distinguish sub-Christian from Christian elements, the less from the more valuable experiences enshrined in this volume, and to discriminate between the religious experience and the form in which it is pictured, enable us to use each for what it is worth and to make these ancient discoveries of God accessible to modern men and women." (*What to Preach*, 1926, p. 41.)

"Liberal Christians distinguish between the revelation which came in events and in the experiences of those redeemed by them, and the literary accounts in which this revelation had been preserved and transmitted. The authors and compilers of the biblical books often had a variety of traditions, legends and writings before them, and they edited these for their purpose, which was not primarily to convey historical information, but to declare God's message to their contemporaries through these memories of the nation's past. They employed literary devices, usual in their time, such as putting into direct discourse on the lips of their characters the points of view for which they were reported to have stood, or even writing an entire book in the name of a revered figure of a bygone day. Daniel and the Second Epistle of Peter are examples of this practice. The purpose of the authors and editors is to communicate God's mind. If a writing does not give an accurate account, according to modern historical perspective, of the thought and life of the past age which it describes, it gives the revelation to the writer's generation, to whom God was speaking as truly as He had spoken to his people centuries before. The most skilful men of letters have difficulty in adequately expressing their minds and God's revelation must not be identified with its record published by his spiritually gifted interpreters. . . . Liberalism is opposed to external authority because it obstructs free response to truth; and the liberal Christians have examined carefully the nature of the authority of the Bible. Tradition declares it verbally inspired and inerrant. This claim was made, however, for the original manuscripts as they came from their authors, and these are irrecoverable. No man can pronounce a book without error unless he claims omniscience for himself, and verbal inspiration cannot be asserted of a collection of writings which frequently contain divergent accounts of the same incident or utterance. The Protestant Reformers did not regard the Bible as an external authority. . . . The Gospels conclude with the promise of Jesus to be with his Church in his

spirit. His followers are not under a law prescribed long ago, but under a present Leader. . . . And the Spirit's contemporary guidance frees Christians from any shape of things past, and keeps them advancing under his inspiration to create with him the diviner shape of things to come." (Article, "The Scriptures," in *Liberal Christianity*, 1942, pp. 231, 234 and 236.)

Virgin Birth

"My own country is in the throes of a belated theological controversy due to the persistence of an obsolete and unprotestant view of Biblical inerrancy. Like most controversies, it has focused on a single point, the Virgin birth of our Lord, which Fundamentalists hold to be essential to a faith in His Divinity. Simple expository preaching, showing what the New Testament teaches and where its emphasis lies, seems the corrective to this unscriptural exaggeration. . . . It becomes apparent that in the New Testament there are four explanations of the origin of our Lord's divine power: the anointing with the Spirit at the Baptism, the miraculous birth of the spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the spiritual ancestry reaching back in one genealogy through David to Abraham and in another to Adam, 'the son of God,' and the eternal existence of the Word with the Father who became flesh or the Man from heaven existing in the form of God who emptied Himself to assume a servant's form and be made in the likeness of fleshly men. One cannot argue too much from silence, but one may point out that no New Testament writer combines pre-existence and miraculous birth, which apparently are, to start with, two different explanations of our Lord's uniqueness." (*What to Preach*, 1926, pp. 31-32.)

The Atonement

"The revolt from various theories of the atonement has been due to their unchristian views of God. A father who had to be reconciled to His children, whose wrath had to be appeased or whose forgiveness could be purchased, is not the Father of Jesus Christ—the God in whom He believed and whose character He revealed in His teaching and whose nature was embodied in Himself. . . . Such a God freely forgives. Certain widely used hymns still perpetuate the theory that God pardons sinners because Christ purchased that pardon by His obedience and suffering. But a forgiveness that is paid for is not forgiveness. The God of the prophets and psalmists, the God and Father of Jesus' own teaching, forgives graciously all who turn to Him in penitence. . . ." (*The Meaning of the Cross*, 1931, pp. 110 and 118.)

"In Jesus on the way to Calvary we see One who is governed by no external law. There are no rules of right and wrong which direct Him to this vicarious Self-offering. He is impelled by an inward spirit, and is feeling His way to His Father's will. Life is a series of adventures prompted by love. He finds guidance and inspiration in the experiences of His predecessors. He draws upon the religious heritage for His ideals. But He cannot follow them slavishly. He appraises them with His own moral judgment. He tests them; and amid perplexities and mental struggle He arrives at His own solution of God's purpose for Him. . . . There were times when He Himself was uncertain of His course. But as He lived loyally and daringly, He was led, and led surely." (*The Meaning of the Cross*, 1931, pp. 127 and 130.)

Miracles

"A fourth difficulty lies in the treatment of the miraculous. Most of us believe in a God who surprises us by doing wondrous things, so that we cannot confine Him within man's discoveries of His usual ways. But we realize that in Bible days men's outlook upon nature and history was so different from ours that we cannot accept their explanations as identical with our own. Some preachers discard altogether passages in which the miraculous is prominent on the ground that they do not feel intellectually honest in employing them. Others use them, but give the impression of being ill at ease with them. Others, again, to the bewilderment of some of their hearers, use them as though they were handling a matter-of-fact modern history. The pulpit is usually not the place to deal with the question of the historicity of the Biblical narrative. That can be done when necessary, more wisely in a less formal meeting where there can be discussion and the give and take of question and answer. In any case, the preacher is not urging his hearers to attempt to reproduce the miraculous experience in literal form, but he is trying to state the spiritual principle, illustrated by the Biblical account and to induce his listeners to live by it. . . . The modern preacher may not feel that he knows exactly what lies behind the tradition of many of the Biblical miracles, but he knows that generations of believers

have tested the spiritual laws which these narratives illustrate with incomparable vividness and power. Let him use them for that purpose, and make plain in his treatment of them that this is his dominant aim. The historic question of what actually happened and exactly how it happened will not be raised because it is lost in the religious question of finding an all-sufficient God for our present necessities, and working with Him for their fulfillment in accordance with our conceptions of His ways in nature and the soul of man." (*What to Preach*, 1926, pp. 38-40.)

An Essential Defined

"In current discussions a particular interpretation of the manner of Christ's birth, of the meaning of His cross, or of the mode of the resurrection, is often called 'essential' or 'a fundamental of Christianity.' It is well to notice that New Testament writers give various explanations of our Lord's origin, and death, and of His life thereafter. While it would be fallacious to argue that a writer is ignorant of an event, or does not accept an interpretation, which he fails to mention, still each was trying to present a whole Christ to his readers. He was not aware that he was contributing to a collection of writings, so that his omissions would be filled in by others. We are, therefore, not justified in terming items, which several of them think unnecessary to include, 'fundamentals of New Testament Christianity.' What is essential is found in them all." (*The Portraits of Jesus Christ in the New Testament*, 1926, pp. 5-6.)

Presbyterianism

"I early learned by heart the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Divines, which is an excellent mental discipline in its logical reasoning and rhythmical English. Many of its formulations are obsolete, and I am not passing it on to another generation, but its purpose, to supply Christians with definite convictions and to make them think for themselves, is part of an inheritance worth striving to maintain. . . .

"I remain a Presbyterian, not because I believe the Presbyterian Church is better than any other, but because I owe to it whatever religious inspiration I possess and because I believe that in it for the present I, with my ancestry, training and temperament, can most usefully serve the Kingdom of God. . . .

"Ministers and other office-bearers are required to accept the Scriptures as the supreme standard of faith and life and the Westminster Confession as containing the system set forth in the Holy Scriptures. Such subscription was not originally intended by the Westminster Divines, and I hope to see the day when it will no longer be required. . . .

"I am a Presbyterian in spite of certain tendencies which crop out in the Church from time to time. One is the notion that the Presbyterian Church is a denomination and not an attempt to embody the Catholic Church of Christ, and a denomination which is held together by agreement in theological opinions. . . . A second is the strict interpretation of the vow required of ministers and other office-bearers, in which they accept the Bible as the Word of God, 'the only infallible rule of faith and practice' and receive the Westminster Confession of Faith 'as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.' . . . I am a Presbyterian only temporarily. The name carries many hallowed memories and associations, but it seems to me to belong to the past rather than to the present. . . .

"It is not easy to discover the distinctive characteristics of our existing Protestant communions. The advantages which I have ascribed to the Presbyterian Church will all doubtless be claimed by others for their own churches. For nearly twenty-two years, on the Faculty of an interdenominational theological seminary. [Dr. Coffin became its President shortly after this was written] I have tried to teach future ministers of all leading communions—Baptist, Congregational, Disciple, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, as well as Presbyterian—and I know that the work for which these men were preparing themselves is the same. Our denominational divisions do not stand today for differences in teaching or in type of life produced. There may be differences of emphasis but they are trifling. There are radicals and reactionaries, high, low and broad churchmen in all communions and denominational lines are not real frontiers. Ministers have more in common with the clergy of other churches who have had an education similar to their own than with fellow-ministers of their own church with different training. Our people pass readily from a church of one communion to that of another. There are genuine differences—the difference between the infallible type who believe in an inerrant book or an inerrant pope and the experiential type who believe in the progressive leadership of the Spirit within. But these types are found side by side in every Protestant communion and to some extent even in Roman Catholicism." (*Why I am a Presbyterian*, *The Forum*, March, 1926.)