

## ON THE EXAMINATION OF MINISTERS.

In the *Form of Government* of the Southern Presbyterian Church, [Chap. V., Sec. IV., Art. 4](#), it is required that “ ministers seeking admission into a Presbytery shall be examined on experimental religion, and also touching their views in theology and church government.”

Were we to suspend our reading of the article here, it would appear doubtful whether the ministers in question are those who are passing from one Presbytery into another, or ministers who are seeking admission from other denominations. But this doubt is settled by the next subsequent passage, for that speaks specifically of the reception of applicants from other denominations.

The constitutional rule of the church, then, is that a minister coming from another Presbytery, however good his standing, and however unexceptionable his testimonials, shall, on his application for admission into a Presbytery, within the bounds of which he proposes to labor, be examined as to the matters specified.

The question arises, and is irrepressible, and it has disturbed the thoughts of the present writer ever since the year 1837, when the rule by the *mandate* of the General Assembly was made imperative upon the Presbyteries. *Is this rule consistent with presbyterial principle ?*

This question was not suppressed, when, in 1879, our Southern Church went beyond the Northern Church, and adopted this rule as a part of the constitution; as it was not satisfied when, prior to that, in the Assembly of 1834, a list of venerable names, such as that of Ashbel Green, was attached to a protest favoring the rule for examination.

The Assembly of 1834, in its action on a certain memorial, adopted a number of resolutions, the seventh of which was this:

“7. A due regard to the order of the church and the bonds of brotherhood require, in the opinion of the Assembly, that ministers dismissed in good standing by sister Presbyteries should be received by the Presbyteries which they are dismissed to join, upon the credit of their constitutional testimonials, unless they shall have forfeited their good standing subsequently to their dismissal.”

The protest against this action, signed, as I have said, by Ashbel Green, *nomen clarum et venerabile*, and by other distinguished persons, contained the following:

“We do earnestly and solemnly protest against the seventh resolution, in which it is asserted that ministers dismissed in good standing by sister Presbyteries should be received by the Presbyteries which they are dismissed to join, upon the credit of their constitutional testimonials, unless they shall have forfeited their good standing subsequently to their dismissal.”

We cannot bow to the authority even of venerable names, unless their opinions be sustained by convincing reasons. Their protest is based on these reasons, from each of which we dissent:

“1. This resolution is in conflict with the right of a Presbytery to judge of the qualifications of its own members, which we believe has never before been authoritatively attacked and impaired. It is in conflict with the acknowledged right inherent in the members of every society, civil as well as ecclesiastical, to judge of the qualifications of those with whom they are to associate.”

“2. It puts it in the power of a few corrupt Presbyteries to corrupt the whole church, by throwing their members into sound Presbyteries, one after another, till they become dominant in all.”

These are the only reasons, as far as we know, that have ever been, advanced in support of the rule requiring the examination of ministers in the case under consideration. Let us look at them.

It is readily agreed that every *self-constituted, independent* collective body has the right to determine the terms of membership in it, and to judge of the qualifications of candidates for membership. That this is a right natural to, and inherent in, all such bodies cannot be questioned. It is correctly ascribed as a prerogative to the Presbyterian Church, taken as a whole, for the church as a society is such a body. But a *Presbytery is not such a body.*

A Presbytery is only a portion of the whole constituted into an organism merely for convenience. It does not, and it cannot, constitute itself; but is constituted by the next higher body, the Synod; as the Synod is constituted by the body above it, the General Assembly, which is the representative of the whole church.

The Presbytery is wholly dependent upon the Synod for its continued existence. The Synod can, for cause, make or unmake it at its pleasure. It can, at its pleasure (always for sufficient reasons), divide a Presbytery into two or more Presbyteries, or it can merge a Presbytery into a neighboring Presbytery, making, *by the power of its own will*, the members of the dissolved Presbytery members of the Presbytery into which it is merged; thus directly contravening the rule for examination, and acting upon the principle that a minister when ordained is made a minister of the church as a whole, and a member in particular of that Presbytery within the bounds of which his lot is providentially determined. They act on the principle that a minister passing from one Presbytery to another, and carrying with him his credentials, is of right entitled to membership in the Presbytery to which he passes. His credentials, in the case considered, are found in the action of the Synod; his credentials, in ordinary translations from

one Presbytery to another, are furnished him by the Presbytery from which he removes.

The protestors of 1834 affirm that the right of the Presbytery to judge of the qualifications of its own members on their application for admission into it "has never before been authoritatively attacked and impaired." In making this statement, the protestors were strangely oblivious of the constitution under which they lived. In that Constitution, Chap. XVI., Art. 3, it is ordered that "the Presbytery to which the congregation (to which the candidate is called) belongs, having received an authenticated certificate of his release (from his former Presbytery) under the hand of the clerk of that Presbytery, shall proceed to install him in the congregation as soon as possible." There is here no intimation of a previous examination; nor is there, in any place or connection in the book, any intimation of an examination being requisite. His credentials from his Presbytery alone open for him the door of the Presbytery into which he desires to enter.

The second reason assigned by the protestors is, that to disregard the rule for examination "puts it in the power of a few corrupt Presbyteries to corrupt the whole church, by throwing their members into sound Presbyteries, one after another, till they become dominant, in all."

This statement, if made in ordinary times, would appear very strange indeed. Are there not ample provisions in our constitution, for the arraigning, trial, and deposition of heretical ministers, or ministers unsound in the faith? There are abundant safeguards to this effect. But the times in which this statement was made were extraordinary times, and *the emergency of the conditions called for it.*

The whole church was in an abnormal state, the result of a previous unconstitutional arrangement. In 1801 the PLAN OF UNION was adopted, by which provision was made for the amalgamation, under certain circumstances, of Presbyterian and Congregational churches; which was equivalent to an attempt to amalgamate oil and water. The result was the formation of hybrid churches, in numbers sufficient to form at least four synods; and the leaven of disorder prevalent in these four synods was spreading throughout the whole church. Heresy, consequent upon a mongrel government, so extensively prevailed that no man knew what position in regard to false doctrine his co-presbyter held.

At length the adherents of orthodoxy reached an understanding with each other, and gathered sufficient strength to control the Assem-

bly of 1837, when, to save the church from absolute extinguishment, they resorted to the desperate, yet just and necessary measure of disowning, and of excising from the church, the four synods in which error in government as well as of doctrine was rampant. This extreme measure was justified (and it was sustained by the civil courts), on the ground that *under an unconstitutional act no rights can vest*. The Plan of Union was unconstitutional, and all its results were abnormal.

In cutting off these Synods, however, provision was made for the return to the church of all members who declared their adherence to the church on the basis of the excising act. But as many would probably come from unsound Presbyteries, seeking admission into the church, and themselves unsound in doctrine, to be assured that applicants truly held to the Westminster Standards, it was ordered that such be made subject to examination prior to admission. And, to make the rule appear less invidious, it was made universal in its application to all ministers passing from one Presbytery to another.

The excising act, as we have said, was justifiable, and necessary to the continued life of the church. Necessary, in order to eradicate from the church a deadly evil, that was sapping the very foundation of the church; an evil which originated in, and was fostered by the previous unconstitutional measure of 1801. And this act was followed by the extra-constitutional, yet, for the time, necessary measure of examination of ministers.

We have nothing to complain of the great and good men of that day, who thus, by a heroic process, saved the church. But we do object to the continuance of a revolutionary measure (this, of the examination of ministers) in peaceful times, when the church is in a normal condition. Our Southern Church, in doctrine and order, is pure and homogeneous. So far, it is in a normal state. What is necessary to the completeness of its normal condition is, that all its ministers stand, at least ecclesiastically, on equal footing as to piety and orthodoxy. All are members, *pares inter pares*, of the same one organization, the whole church; and are entitled to an unquestioning reception and welcoming into any portion of the church to which they may in an orderly way be called.

This rule for examination is, however, engrafted into the constitution of the Southern Church. We object to it because it tends to disintegrate the church. It places each Presbytery, as we have shown, in the attitude of distrust towards every other Presbytery, each on the

assumption that *it* is pure as to piety and orthodoxy, while it has no assurance that *others* are equally so.

I have shown that the right to examine intrants from sister Presbyteries is not inherent in any Presbytery. It is not a natural right. Yet it must be admitted that they all may be invested with this power by an act of the General Assembly when concurred in by the Presbyteries, or, as in our case, by a constitutional provision. But what a picture does such an act by the Assembly, or such a provision in our constitution present! The Assembly is itself composed of commissioners from all the Presbyteries. Yet it assumes to declare that none of the Presbyteries are trustworthy! That the members of each need to be examined by others before they be admitted to fraternity! It appears in the attitude of a Congregational Association, between the components of which there is no certain bond of union other than that of mere convenience or expediency. That its constituents *may* be pure and trustworthy is admitted; but it does not know it, and suggests that it would be well for each to be on its guard against all others. Hence, it is the practice amongst Congregationalists, when a minister passes from one church to another, to examine him before that church prior to his being inducted into office as pastor. This is not Presbyterianism. We are all *one body*, the parts of which are set off into organisms, only for greater convenience in working. In being thus set apart, *the truthness, the purity of t/ie individuals is in no measure impaired.*

An essential difference between Congregationalism and Presbyterianism, then, is this: The Congregational Association is formed of independent constituents, that are associated only for convenience. The Presbyterian Church is one homogeneous body, and is set off into separate organisms only for convenience. Now, if the rule for examination prevail amongst the Presbyteries, the Presbyterian Church will just so far become Congregational. The individual churches will still be under the authoritative rule of the Presbyteries; but the Presbyteries will be to each other very much as so many Congregational Associations.

There are many practical anomalies that would necessarily occur under the prevalence of this rule. For instance, a Synod assembles; the members, coming from three or more Presbyteries, are on equal footing on the floor of the Synod; they concur in electing a moderator, and proceed to business as an authoritative body (the Congregational Association, with logical consistency, is merely an advisory council). The Synod having accomplished its business adjourns. Thereafter, one

of its members—say the moderator—is called, and accepts the call to a church in some Presbytery of the Synod different from that in which he previously had labored. He applies for admission into it, but is met with the demand that he be examined as to his piety, soundness in the faith, and in church government, before he can be admitted. Is not this preposterous? He is the equal of any member while in the Synod, but as soon as he becomes simply a presbyter he loses his standing, his equality! He is deprived of the confidence reposed in him while he is an acting member of the Synod, and is subjected to examination as if he were an alien!

The same thing might occur in regard to a member, or in regard to the moderator, of the Assembly; and the more glaringly so, as the Assembly is the highest court of the church. The Assembly is composed of commissioners, or representatives, from all the Presbyteries. They, on equal terms and by equal vote, determine rules for the guidance of the whole church. While in the Assembly they exercise, as in the Synod, perfect confidence in each other; but as soon as the Assembly is dissolved, and the members return to their Presbyteries, this confidence is dissipated! Any one of them, on passing from his Presbytery into another, must be examined. As a simple presbyter he is unknown, and must be examined.

Another anomaly: A Presbytery is composed, say, of comparatively young men. A man, venerable for age, for character, and for a half century's successful labor as a minister, applies for membership; but he cannot be admitted till he be tried—examined by those who are, by so many years, his juniors. It might be said that an exception should be made in his case. But no, that cannot be. The rule admits of no exceptions.

Another anomaly: A man has labored long in a Presbytery, and enjoys the confidence of all his co-presbyters. He is called into another Presbytery. But after a while, say twelve months or so, he for sufficient reasons returns to his former position; but before he can be reinstated in the Presbytery he must be examined. The rule admits of no exceptions, for the obvious reason that it would be invidious towards those who are examined. These are not imaginary cases. They all have actually occurred.

Other anomalies might be cited. It is not necessary. It is very manifest that the rule in question is not consonant with Presbyterian principle. It ought to be expunged from our constitution.

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