

**Have the Organizers
of the Independent Board for
Presbyterian Foreign Missions
Violated the Law of the
Presbyterian Church
in the U. S. A. ?**

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**The Independent Board
for Presbyterian Foreign Missions**

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Dr. McDowell's Statement



HAVE before me a statement released for publication by Dr. John McDowell, Moderator of the 1933 General Assembly. It is his "response to several inquiries concerning his recent visit to Synods and Presbyteries regarding the attitude of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. toward those who refuse to support the work of the Church as embodied in its Boards and Agencies." This spokesman for the Modernist-Indifferentist coalition in the Church first states that ministers, elders, deacons, and communicants who want to leave the Church have a right to get out, but in doing so "must follow the constitutional procedure of the Presbyterian Church; for ours is still a Church of law and constitutional processes."

After this opening, impressive for its concern about the Constitution, Dr. McDowell continues, "On the other hand, if any minister, elder, deacon, or communicant decides to remain in the denomination, while they have a right to work for any changes in doctrine, in government or in work which they desire, they must work for these changes in harmony with the constitutional procedure; and while they are so working for them, they must be loyal to the doctrine, government and work of the Church as embodied in the local Church and in the Boards and Agencies of the General Assembly. The Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. stands for liberty, but it must not be forgotten that it is liberty within law and within loyalty."

While Dr. McDowell's statement contains no reference to the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, it is apparent that it is intended to indicate that the organizers of the Independent Board are violating the provisions of the Constitution of the Church. I shall not take time here to discuss the strange aspect presented by this stalwart defense of the Constitution on the part of the very group whose failure to adhere to the Constitution brought about the formation of the Independent Board they now attack.

The Law of the Church Is Found in the Standards

We are asked to remember that liberty is “liberty within law.” I shall presently say some things regarding this liberty, now so eagerly embraced by the majority in the Church. It is necessary first to determine where this law is found.

It is found in the Holy Scriptures, and in the Constitution, that is, the Confession of Faith, the Catechisms, the Form of Government, the Book of Discipline, and the Directory for Worship. There is no doubt, in view of the Adopting Acts—particularly the Act of 1788—that these documents taken together make up the Constitution of the Church. Of course, the Constitution has been variously amended from time to time. (For the texts of these acts, see *The Digest*, 1930, Vol. II, pp. 4-8.)

The Standards which comprise the Constitution are known as the “Standards subordinate to the Word of God.” They are based upon and derive their authority from the Holy Scriptures which are “the only infallible rule of faith and manners.” (Confession of Faith, Chapters I and XX; Form of Government, Chapter I). The question of the right to establish the Independent Board must therefore be determined in the light of the subordinate Standards and the Word of God.

It is important also to note where the law of the Church is *not* found. It is not found in the “Manual of Presbyterian Law for Church Officers and Members,” nor in “The Presbyterian Digest.” Both publications, of course, are most helpful in studying the law which is found in the subordinate Standards; but it is necessary to remember that no legal standing can be accorded the statements of the editors of those works.

A further caution is required. The law is not to be found in resolutions or declarations of General Assembly. The Form of Government (Chapter XXIV, Sections I and II) provides for the method of amending the Constitution through formal action *by General Assembly and the presbyteries*. That Constitution could not be altered one whit by all the resolutions successive Assemblies might pass. However, I do believe, as I shall show, that certain declarations of the General Assembly are significant in that they indicate the interpretation placed

upon the Constitution by Assemblies in years when Modernism and Indifferentism had not weakened the testimony of the Church.

Does the Law of the Church Prohibit the Formation of the Independent Board?

Having determined the sources of the law of the Church we come to the question whether the organizers of the Independent Board have violated the Constitution or have acted contrary to the Word of God. In the first place, it is vitally important to remember that this Board claims no official sanction. Those who have formed it do not hold themselves out as an association having *any formal connection with any judicatory of the Church*. The real question is whether the law of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. forbids its members to associate in an independent enterprise whose aim is the promotion of truly Biblical Missions.

I am not unmindful of Chapter XXIII of the Form of Government which relates to "The Organizations of the Church." That provision permits the formation of such organizations "for the conduct of a special work for missionary or other benevolent purposes, or for the purpose of instruction in religion and development in Christian nurture." It provides, among other things, that such bodies, if formed in a particular church, shall be responsible to the session, and if formed to function in territories covered by a presbytery or a synod or by General Assembly, shall be responsible to those judicatories, respectively. This chapter refers to organizations purporting to have standing because of their relation to church judicatories. Certainly it does not contemplate an association such as the Independent Board, which so far from claiming official standing in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. disclaims any relation to General Assembly.

One looks in vain for any provision in our Constitution forbidding the action taken by the organizers of the Independent Board, or requiring officers and members of the Church to support the Boards and Agencies established by General Assembly.

The Confession of Faith declares that “God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to His Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship” (Chapter XX, Section II). If the Constitution contained such restrictions it would be contrary to principles of Christian liberty and freedom of conscience set forth in the Holy Scriptures. Let it not be forgotten that the organizers and supporters of the Independent Board, while they are outnumbered in the Church, are in agreement with, and loyal to, the subordinate Standards which rest upon the Word of God.

If the organization of the Independent Board does not violate any provision of the subordinate Standards, can it be said to be contrary to the Word of God? An “offense” is defined in Chapter I, Section 3, of the Book of Discipline as “anything, in the doctrine, principles, or practice of a Church member, officers, or judicatory which is contrary to the Word of God; or which, if it be not in its own nature sinful, may tempt others to sin, or mar their spiritual edification.” It is obvious to anyone familiar with the doctrinal basis of the Church and with the evidence presented to the last General Assembly (but not considered by that body) that the present Board of Foreign Missions is not loyal, to the Standards of the Church. Is it then contrary to the Word of God to take a definite stand against Modernism in the Church and to establish an independent agency which undertakes to maintain and encourage the propagation of the gospel of salvation only through faith in the atoning substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus Christ—the New Testament gospel which is so gloriously summarized in the Confession of Faith? It should also be borne in mind that that Confession was sincerely received and adopted “as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures” not only by those ministers and office bearers in the Church who are loyal to God and to His Christ, but also by those who either tolerate or encourage disloyalty to this supernatural gospel. If it be treason to take a stand against the official Board, it is treason to men and loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Modernist-Indifferentist bureaucracy may make the most of it.

The issue of the *Presbyterian Banner*, dated December 7,

1933, carries a leading editorial entitled "What Moderator McDowell Meant." The writer explains that the statement of Dr. McDowell, from which I have quoted, refers to the organizers of the Independent Board. Among other things the editor says, "It is held that these brethren are starting an outlaw organization in opposition to our General Assembly, and, therefore, are violating their ordination obligations to render loyalty to our polity and to study and promote the unity and peace of the Church." We presume these words refer to the ordination vows taken by those of the organizers of the Independent Board who are ministers and office-bearers in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. The vows of bishops or pastors are found in Chapter XV, Section XII, and those of ruling elders in Chapter XIII, Section IV, of the Form of Government. The former promise, among other things, "to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the gospel, and the purity and peace of the Church; whatever persecution or opposition may arise unto [them] on that account." Ruling elders, like pastors, at ordination state that they "believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice," and that they "sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures." Ruling elders are also required to promise "to study the peace, unity and purity of the Church."

It is significant that the editorial in the *Presbyterian Banner* makes no reference to the *doctrinal* aspect of the vows: faithfulness in maintaining "the truths of the gospel," and the "purity" as well as the peace of the Church. It is obvious that these vows do not oblige ministers and elders to maintain peace *at the price* of purity. The very reverse is true. No Church can have peace in the true Biblical sense of the term unless it is also pure, unless it is loyal to the God whose peace "which passeth all understanding, shall keep [our] hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." Finally, it is to be noted that the minister's vow requires him to maintain the truths of the gospel and the purity of the Church "whatever persecution or opposition may arise * * * on that account." If the peace referred to in the vow were a mere absence of controversy, those words

would mean nothing. No minister of Christ suffers persecution because he avoids controversy and insists on peace at any price. He suffers persecution because he preaches the offense of the Cross and because he would rather die defending the purity of the Church than live in outward peace in a Church which had ceased to testify to the “truths of the gospel.”

May Church Judicatories Legislate Against the New Board?

Someone may say, “Although it is true that the law of the Church does not now prohibit the organization of the Independent Board, may not the General Assembly or other judicatories pass laws penalizing those who have organized the Board or those who support it?” The answer happily is clear. The opening chapter of the Form of Government (Section VII) declares,

“That all church power, whether exercised by the body in general, or in the way of representation by delegated authority, is only ministerial and declarative; *that is to say*, that the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners; that no church judicatory ought to pretend to make laws, to bind the conscience in virtue of their own authority; and that all their decisions should be founded upon the revealed will of God. Now, though it will easily be admitted, that all synods and councils may err, through the frailty inseparable from humanity; yet there is much greater danger from the usurped claim of making laws, than from the right of judging upon laws already made, and common to all who profess the gospel; although this right, as necessity requires in the present state, be lodged with fallible men.”

Here we find carried into the government of the Church the priceless Presbyterian heritage of Liberty of Conscience which is set forth in Chapter XX of the Confession of Faith. Church judicatories whose power is only “ministerial and declarative” obviously have no authority to legislate. “No church judicatory ought to pretend to make laws to bind the conscience *in virtue of their own authority*.” (Italics are ours.) Their power is restricted to “judging upon laws already made” since “there is

much greater danger from the usurped claim of making laws.” The purpose of having a Constitution is to provide a restraint upon majorities. Certainly no one will seriously contend that whatever a temporary majority decrees is constitutional. If majorities were always right, there would be no need for the check afforded by a Constitution.

What Is the Law of the Church Regarding Compulsory Support of Official Boards and Agencies?

This question is in some degree related to the right of Church judicatories to legislate against the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. There is no doubt, in view of the Constitutional provisions just referred to, that church courts have no authority to pass laws requiring support of the official Boards and Agencies. Does the Constitution itself impose such obligation on members, officers and Churches?

In Chapter VI, Section III, of the Directory for Worship, regarding the disposition of Church offerings, we read,

“The offerings received may be apportioned among the Boards of the Church and among other benevolent and Christian objects, under the supervision of the Church session, in such proportion and on such general plan as may from time to time be determined; but the specific designation by the giver of any offering to any cause or causes shall always be respected and the will of the donor carefully carried out.” At least three propositions are implied in this provision: (1) Offerings *may*, but *are not required to be*, apportioned among the Boards of the Church; (2) Offerings may be used for *other* benevolent and Christian objects; (3) The designation of contributions *must* be respected.

Section IV of the same chapter of the Directory for Worship provides,

“The offerings of the Sabbath school and of the various societies or agencies of the church shall be reported regularly to the session of the church for approval, and no offerings or collections shall be made by them for objects other

than those connected with the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., without the approval of the session.”

Obviously such a provision is a proper one, because presumptively the objects connected with the Church are worthy of support, and societies or Sunday Schools in particular churches should not be allowed to take offerings for purposes not approved by the session. However, this section does not *require* support of the agencies of the Church. It expressly recognizes the power of the session to approve gifts for other objects. Let no one confuse the issue. The question is not whether members of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. ought *prima facie* to support its Boards and Agencies. The question is whether members may decide what objects deserve their contributions. Conservatives would be only too happy to support the work of the Church if their consciences could approve such action.

The propositions implied in the foregoing provisions of the Directory for Worship, of course, are consistent with the principles of Christian liberty and freedom of conscience to which I have already referred. Our Church standards recognize that a Christian in the matter of his service and giving is responsible only to God, who delights in the *willing* obedience and the *cheerful* gifts of His children. “Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so *let him give*; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver” (II Corinthians 9:7).

While the organization of the Independent Board can be justified squarely upon the basis of the Constitution and the Holy Scriptures, it is instructive and inspiring to read certain pronouncements of General Assembly. Although these declarations have no legal force, as we have seen, they are significant as interpretations placed upon the Standards by Assemblies in years when Modernists and Indifferentists had not come into power and no one would have seriously contended that loyalty to the Standards must be identified with loyalty to a current majority in the councils of the Church.

In 1869, at the time of the reunion of the New School and Old School branches of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., the Old School possessed a Board of Foreign Missions. The New School had been using as its agency the American Board

of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Before merging, the two assemblies adopted concurrent resolutions. These were not adopted as covenants since the basis of the reunion was simply the *Standards*. Nevertheless the resolutions possess a tremendous moral force and indicate the view taken regarding freedom in Christian service. Resolution 6 reads as follows: "There should be one set of committees or Boards for Home and Foreign Missions, and the other religious enterprises of the Church; which the Churches should be encouraged to sustain, *though free to cast their contributions into other channels if they desire to do so.*" (Digest, 1930, Vol. II, p. 38.) (Italics are ours.)

It will be observed that this freedom was not merely something the Assemblies thought advisable *until* a unified Board should be set up, but that it was specifically contemplated that this liberty was to continue *after* the establishment of the unified Board.

A significant passage also occurs in the report of the Joint Committee on Foreign Missions, appointed by the Assemblies of 1869, reporting to the United Assembly of 1870, which report was adopted by the Assembly and is found on pages 44-46 of the Minutes of 1870. After expressing the hope that missionaries of the American Board would serve under the Presbyterian Board, the Report continued, "Especially is it to be kept in mind, that these brethren and sisters are, first of all, missionaries of Christ; that their relations to Him are personal and direct; and that, unquestionably, the liberty and responsibility are their own, of deciding in what relations to Boards and Churches they will spend their consecrated lives. Equally free and responsible directly to Christ are all Christian people, in deciding through what agencies they will do their share of His work of Missions."

In the Minutes of 1870, page 39, in the Report of the Committee on Conference with the American Board, it is said, "That the time has now come when an effort should be made, *as far as may be consistent with the fullest liberty of individual contributors and churches*, to concentrate the counsels, the energies, and the contributions of the whole United Church in the work about to be carried on by our Foreign Missionary Board." (Italics are ours.)

In 1878 General Assembly declared that it did not have power to impose an obligatory assessment even for a thing like mileage for commissioners to General Assembly. The Assembly admitted that "None of our Church courts are clothed with the power to assess a tax upon the churches." (Digest, 1930, Vol. I, pages 477-479.)

In view of the provisions I have cited from the Confession, the Form of Government and the Directory for Worship, there is no doubt that the foregoing pronouncements of General Assemblies are consistent with the subordinate Standards. All Christian people are responsible only to God in deciding through what agencies they will contribute to the Lord's work. It is a principle of liberty taught in the Word of God and guaranteed to all members by the Constitution of the Church.

In conclusion, I submit that the following propositions are clear: (1) The law to which Dr. McDowell appeals is found in the Standards of the Church: The Holy Scriptures and the Constitution; (2) there is nothing in this law forbidding the establishment of an Independent Board, which as a faithful steward will maintain Missions to which Bible-believing Christians can contribute; (3) church judicatories have no power to pass laws "binding the conscience" and penalizing those who conduct or support the Independent Board; and, (4) the law of the Church expressly permits members to designate their gifts for Christian benevolences other than those controlled by Boards and Agencies of the Church.

Those who pass judgment upon the organizers of the Independent Board must bear in mind that evidence was presented to the Committee on Foreign Missions of the last General Assembly substantiating the charge that the Board of Foreign Missions was not taking a firm stand against Modernism. General Assembly was requested to make certain changes in the personnel of the Board, and to give it definite instructions regarding its policies. The majority of the Committee (one of whom was a member of the "Appraisal Commission" which produced the anti-doctrinal Laymen's Report "Re-Thinking Missions") reported to the Assembly that such action should not be taken. The Assembly, without really considering the issue on its merits and without adequate debate on the questions

raised by the minority report of the Committee, rejected the proposals of the Conservatives, who had placed their objections before the proper judicatory by Overtures from two Presbyteries. The Independent Board was not organized until General Assembly had refused to rectify the conditions which made it impossible for Evangelicals to continue to support the official Board.

While doubtless many missionaries now serving under the Board of Foreign Missions are sound in the faith, unquestionably the missionary program of the Church as a whole is shot through and crippled by Modernism. Missions which are true to the Bible must continue. The Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions has been formed to obey the command of our Lord. The Great Commission must be faithfully executed. The Lord Jesus Christ said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." Let us remember that the real issue is not one of loyalty to men or to church judicatories, but one of loyalty to the Holy Scriptures which declare that if "our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost."

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Editorial Note:

This tract was the reprint of an article which had first appeared in *Christianity Today* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.; Samuel G. Craig, editor), 4.8 (Mid-December 1933): 4, 10-12. The printed tract was unedited from the original work and simply reproduced the typesetting of the *Christianity Today* article, down to the inclusion of the arts and crafts style illumination for the initial letter of the first paragraph. The tract was then produced as a 12.5 cm. x 18 cm. (5 in. x 7 in.) twelve page bi-fold brochure printed with black ink on uncoated white paper stock and finished with saddle-stitch stapling.

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