

THE INTRODUCTORY SERMON

OF THE

WEST UNION ASSOCIATION.

ON THE

PAST AND FUTURE OF THE BAPTIST CHURCHES.

BY S. HOWARD FORD.

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PAST AND FUTURE OF THE BAPTIST CHURCHES.

"And from thence when the brethren heard of us they came to meet us as far as Appi-forum, and the three Taverns, whom when Paul saw he thanked God and took courage.—Acts xviii —15."

Such is the brief, yet touching description of primitive christian brotherhood. When the brethren heard of us they came to meet us. What consolation did this evidence of christian friendship impart? Paul, surrounded by a roman guard; banished from his country and cursed by his countrymen; just delivered from the perils of shipwreck, and on his way to the tribunal of a heartless tyrant—felt oh! what gladness in the warm smiles of sympathy! "As iron sharpeneth iron so doth the face of man his friend." The sorrows of the past were forgotten, and the mercies of heaven alone were remembered. The terrors and gloom of the future disappeared, and he saw the same supporting power outstretched to sustain him.—"He thanked God and took courage."

Brethren, we have met to-day as messengers from our different churches, not to make laws or enforce discipline, but to encourage each other in our mutual efforts to advance the interests of Christ's kingdom, by sending the gospel to the destitute. And while contemplating this numerous, yet unpretending assembly, how vividly similar scenes, in other climes and by-gone ages, come up before our minds. Associations are not of yesterday. In every land, and in every age they have met; in the desert, in the mountains, or beneath the covert of the deep forest in the midnight gloom, when no star could guide their heartless persecutors to the spot.

Brethren, how changed the scene—how bright the future. No royal mandate can command us to disperse. No priestly scourge can drive us from our homes. Thank God we can worship Him beneath our own vine and fig-tree.

Let us then, glance with gratitude at the PAST, and look with encouragement on the FUTURE.

1st. In looking over the past of our denomination, it would be natural for us to allude to the man or class of men, or to the peculiar combination of circumstances, which gave rise to the establishment and organization of our churches. Our distinctive characteristics originated somewhere; and it is hardly probable that human research, which leaves no hieroglyphic undeciphered, and no age unexplored, should be entirely baffled here. If any human mind or human circumstances gave shape and origin to our churches, that mind and those circumstances can certainly be discovered. Where then shall we pause? In what country and in what age shall we investigate the causes which gave birth to our denomination? Shall we point to the reformation—that moral earth-quake which shook to its very centre the towering fabric of roman superstition? Can we point to any one of those mighty intellects whose sudden and simultaneous light burst in a flood of glory on the astonished world? No—these men, however great, however noble,

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were not the fathers, were not even the friends of our denomination. Flinging off, with super-human energy, many of the errors of Popery, they were every-where congratulated by a class of men who had never sympathised with Rome. Each leading reformer, so soon as he had stepped forth into the light, was suddenly addressed by a simple hearted people, who coming down from the mountain fastnesses, brought with them truths and ordinances which they had preserved pure, amid all the inventions of Rome. Mosheim says truly, that—

“Before the rise of Luther and Calvin, there lay concealed in almost all the countries of Europe, persons who adhered tenaciously to the principles of the modern Dutch Baptists.”

Whatever blessings, therefore, were conferred on the world by the reformation, it was not the cause, either immediately or remotely, of our existence as a denomination.

Long before the reformation a noble effort was made to throw off the spiritual domination of the Roman Bishop. A bright star rose on the mid-night gloom of the fourteenth century, and threw its light over Britain and the continent of Europe. Did our denomination originate with Wickliffe and the Lollards? Thomas Walden, who had access to the writings of Wickliffe, charges him with

“Denying infant Baptism, that heresie of the Lollards of whom he was so great a ring-leader.”

But Walter Lollard, a German preacher, as Fuller and Perrin inform us, came to England in the reign of Edward III, before Wickliffe the morning star of the reformation was born. He came says Perrin from among the Waldenses, among whom he was a barb (Pastor) of great renown.

We therefore look in vain among the Wickliffites and Lollards for the origin of our denomination. Did our denomination originate among the Waldenses?

Amid the mountains which divide France from Spain dwelt a hardy class of vaudois, or vallenses who defended by their isolated situation, preserved amid the gloom of the dark ages, their freedom and religion. The Pyrenees, stretching from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, enclosing rich valleys whose soil produced every variety of vegetation presented a scene of rural quiet peculiarly inviting to the persecuted christian. Deep dells surrounded by inaccessible mountains, the passes to which were known only to the inhabitants; vast caverns and trackless forests, afforded at once security and defence. “To these mountains, says the Historian, in all ages, the sons of freedom fled.”

From the Latin word valis came the provincial vaudois, and also the Spanish valle and vallenses. The inhabitants of a district of Barcelona, called vallensis, unintentionally communicated their name with their doctrines to other Vaudois, or dwellers in valleys. Hence the indiscriminate appellation of Vallenses, Valdenses, and finally Waldenses. Among others who were known by this general and opprobrious epithet, were the inhabitants of the valleys of Piedmont. But these were a mere handful, while the Pyreneans were thousands and tens of thou-

sands, and to the latter alone will the descriptions of the inquisitors apply.

Yet the Jesuit Gretzer, in writing against the Waldenses who appeared in the time of Luther, including the Piedmontese and poor men of Lyons, whose history he had examined, acknowledges their ancient origin and gives it as his firm belief that these Waldenses were the same sect that was condemned in 1178. And after describing this ancient heresy, he says:—

“ This is the picture of the Heretics of our own age particularly of the Ana-baptists.”

“ To say honestly what I think” writes the celebrated Limborch, “of all the modern sects, the Dutch Baptists most resemble the Albigensis, and Waldensis, but particularly the latter.” President Edwards, in his History of Redemption tells us that “one of the Popeish writers, says, the heresy of the Waldenses is the oldest in the World.

Here then it is evident that while our denomination, was fostered during the dark and stormy night of the middle ages by the sheltering Alps and Pyrenees—while it fled to those secure retreats from the persecutions and corruptions of the “man of sin,” and preserved within those mountain walls the glorious gospel, pure and fresh as it fell from the lips of the Lord and his Apostles—while it thus flourished beneath the smiles of Heaven, and sent the echo of its songs from hill to hill—yet, these sequestered vales were not its NATAL home; these friendly mountains witnessed not its birth. Farther up the stream of time must we look for the place of its nativity, and in other climes for the cradle in which its infancy was rocked.

In the classic land of Italy, beneath the dread shadow of the Vatican, have lived in every age men upon whose foreheads was never stamped the symbol of the “Beast,” and on whose spirits beamed the light of gospel truth, brighter and purer than their own lovely skies.

Says, Gibon the Historian, “in the busy age of the crusades, some sparks of curiosity and reason were rekindled in the Western world: the heresy of Bulgaria, the Paulician sect, was successively transplanted into the soil of Italy and France; the Gnostic visions were mingled with the simplicity of the Gospel; and the enemies of the clergy reconciled their passions with their conscience, the desire of freedom with the profession of piety. (19) The trumpet of Roman liberty was first sounded by Arnold of Brescia, (20) whose promotion in the church was confined to the lowest rank, and who wore the monastic habit rather as a garb of poverty than as a uniform of obedience. His adversaries could not deny the wit and eloquence which they severely felt; they confess with reluctance the specious purity of his morals; and his errors were recommended to the public by a mixture of important and beneficial truth. His ideas of baptism and the eucharist are loosely censured.”

Dr. Wall allows that he was condemned along with Peter de Bruys for rejecting infant baptism, A. D. 1155, “the martyr of freedom was burnt alive in the presence of a careless and ungrateful people, and his ashes cast into the Tiber.

Did our denomination originate with the Arnoldists?

There was a class of men scattered throughout Italy known by differ-

ent names, but all obnoxious to the maledictions of Rome. The Paterines sometimes called Catheri, at once backed the efforts of Arnold, and were measurably blended with his followers. They were known however in Italy centuries before the birth of Arnold.

They said that the Christian Church ought to consist of persons who had professed faith, and that it had no power to frame general canons or creeds.

Gregory writing against them says, "The Baptism which the Catholics approve the Paterines condemn, et de baptismo puerorum quem Paterines damnat,"—baptism of children which is condemned by the Paterines. As far back as the ninth century they were complained of by Atto, Bishop of Vercelli. They were Baptists, if adult baptism, and the independency of churches could make them such. Did our churches originate with them?

Gibbon in his decline and fall of the Roman Empire, clearly shows that these were the descendents of the Paulicians, whose doctrines were "successively transplanted into the soil of Italy," and there flourished in seclusion until the era of the reformation.

"About the middle of the seventh century" says Gibbon, "a branch of Manichaeans was selected as the victims of spiritual tyranny; their patience was at length exasperated to despair and rebellion; and their exile has scattered over the West the seeds of reformation. Under the grandson of Heraclius, in the neighborhood of Samosata, a reformer arose, esteemed by the Paulicians as the chosen messenger of truth. In his humble dwelling of Mananalis, Constantine entertained a deacon, who returned from Syrian captivity, and received the inestimable gift of the New Testament, which was already concealed from the vulgar by the prudence of the Greek, and perhaps of the Gnostic, clergy. (3) These books became the measure of his studies and the rule of his faith; and the Catholics, who dispute his interpretation, acknowledge that his text was genuine and sincere. But he attached himself with peculiar devotion to the writings and character of St. Paul: the name of the Paulicians is derived by their enemies from some unknown and domestic teacher; but I am confident that they gloried in their affinity to the apostle of the Gentiles. In the Gospels, and epistles of St. Paul, his faithful follower investigated the creed of primitive Christianity; and, whatever might be the success, a protestant reader will applaud the spirit of the inquiry.

"About the middle of the eighth century, Constantine, surnamed Copronymus, by the worshippers of images, had made an expedition into Armenia, and found, in the cities of Melitene and Theodosiopolis, a great number of Paulicians of his kindred heretics. As a favor of punishment, he transplanted them from the banks of the Euphrates to Constantinople and Thrace; and by this emigration their doctrine was introduced and diffused in Europe. (21) If the sectaries of the metropolis were soon mingled with the promiscuous mass, those of the country struck a deep root in a foreign soil. The Paulicians of Thrace resisted the storms of persecution, maintained a secret correspondence with their Armenian brethren, and gave aid and comfort to their preachers, who solicited, not without success, the infant faith of the Bulgarians.

(22) In the tenth century, they were restored and multiplied by a more powerful colony, which John Zimisces [23] transported from the Chalvbian hills to the valleys of Mount Haemus.

“ Under the Byzantine standard, the Paulicians were often transported to the Greek provinces of Italy and Sicily, in peace and war they freely conversed with strangers and natives, and their opinions were silently propagated in Rome, Milan, and the kingdoms beyond the Alps. [23] It was soon discovered, that many thousand Catholics of every rank, and of either sex, had embraced the Manichaen heresy.”

“ It is evident” says the learned Mosheim, that they rejected the baptism of infants. And Dr. Allix acknowledges “that they were Ana-baptists, or rejectors of infant baptism and were consequently reproachful with that name.”

Here then we have found those who with undying attachment are to our principles and were members of our churches, as far back as the seventh century, and in the land of Apostolic labor and suffering.

But did our denomination originate here? Men with similar views, crushed and scattered by persecution, were found in the same countries several centuries previous. From the fact of the distinct and independent organization of their churches, and the obscure and distant localities into which they were driven, they were known by different names, yet that of Ana-Baptist was applied to them all. Among other appellations was that of Montenses or Mountaineers. The name however by which they are known in Ecclesiastical History is that of Donatists, from Donatus, a prominent advocate of their principles. These defenders of the unadulterated truth of Heaven, were persecuted, and driven from their churches as far back as the year 316, by Constantine the Great, who sent their Pastors into banishment and punished some of them with death.

Robinson in his Ecclesiastical Researches, after closely investigating their history, and quoting numerous authorities, declares that they were Trinitarian Baptists. And Fuller the English Historian, never friendly to the baptist side of the controversy, says that “the Baptists of his day were the Donatists New Dipped.”

The Mountaineers or Donatists then, were Baptists; but yet, the great Dr. Lardner, whose knowledge and authority as a historian none can doubt, tells us that the Donatists resembled the followers of Novation.

Where then did our denomination originate? We have ascended far up the stream of time, and have approached the purer ages of primitive Christianity. We have found the way-marks but not the origin of our churches. We have come to the close of the apostolic age. The light of truth whose beams will not blend with human corruptions, is now, like the setting sun gradually departing; yet its twilight still lingers in the Catholic Church, giving evidence that the full tide of glory once flooded its precincts, and illuminated the hearts of its children. But no sooner are those corruptions introduced that a wide spread class of dissenters at once dis sever all connection with the so called Catholic Church, and adhere strictly to the principles, and observe no ordinances but those taught by Christ and his Apostles. How true are the words of the Great Sir Isaac, Newton, as given in Whiston’s Memoirs,

that "it was his conviction that the Baptists were the only Christians who had not symbolized with Rome.

Let us then go at once to the source of light itself, and there investigate the divine origin of our churches. If it was not in the apostolic age, amid Judea's hills, then in what other age or clime did it spring into existence?

We have found its foot prints all along the track of time, often marked with blood, yet radiant with patience, piety and truth, but its birth place, where was that? its fathers who were they? If not Judea, if not the Apostles, then where did it first see the light? and by whom was it begotten? These questions never have, never can be truthfully answered. Dr. Moshien, the learned Lutheran's well known remark is not true:

"The origin of this sect," the baptist, "is hid in the depths of antiquity."

It is not hid in those remote depths. It stands forth in unadorned simplicity, amid the scenes of the Pentecost and the cities of Greece, while the New Testament flings a flood of historic light over the whole subject. Here then is our ancestry of whom we are proud—the origin of our denomination for which we are grateful.

Let us now notice the characteristics of this organization, and we shall find much for which to be grateful.

IT IS SPIRITUAL.

"My kingdom, says Christ, is not of this world." He found in Judaism a blending of national and spiritual elements; but his doctrine neutralized this temporary affinity, and by developing the spiritual, destroyed for ever this artificial compound. "He found the Church in the world, he established a Church out of the world." Among the Jews, the man inherited Church privileges and membership by birth right—he was born into the Church. But in this new organization, "Unless a man be born again," he has no claim, no right to the ordinances of God's house. In the old, the child of the Jew, as a lineal descendant of Abraham, was initiated by the laws of the nation into the national organization. But of those who had a right to be introduced into the new, the Redeemer said, "were born, not of blood, natural descent, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God." In the one, the parent made his child, or servant, a Jew, a member of the Jewish church or nation, against or without its will. But in the other, personal application, and voluntary submission are the first and all essential requirements. "Knock and it shall be opened." Take my yoke upon you. This is the first element of their spiritual organization.

Here is the great distinctive feature of Christianity. Its opposite is to drive or lead the passive object, whose will is not consulted, or cannot act.

In the language of Dr. Harris in his "great Teacher."

"This radical change must take place before they are admitted into the church. Baptism is the vestibule or entrance to this spiritual temple—the church. So that before his disciples, can pass the threshold,

he requires them to receive the print of the sacred name.”

The church was to be composed of spiritual members, baptism was the vestibule where the profession of this spirituality must be made, so that the sublime announcement of the Savior is carried out. “My kingdom is not of this world, and a National Church is impossible.”

IT IS DISTINCT.

These Churches were distinct from each other. The word Church is never once used in the New Testament, to comprehend a plurality of Christian Societies. Each organization was distinct and complete in itself—was in fact a church, and was so denominated. The Apostles did not establish or recognize one great national organization, and call it the Church of Asia, Greece or Italy. Such great sectional Churches have no warrant in the word of God. The Apostles constituted churches in every city, each having its own distinctive characteristics, and as such they were addressed. When as yet there was but one church organized, it is said “fear came upon all the church.” But when by means of its dispersion others were formed, it says “then had the Churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria.” Paul went through Syria and Cilicia, “confirming (not the church, but) the Churches” and again says the same Apostle, “so ordained I in all churches.”

And again. “For ye brethren became followers of the Churches of God which are in Judea,” so we ourselves glory in you in the Churches of God.” Christ spoke to the seven churches in Asia, and said, “Let him hear what the spirit saith unto the Churches.” But of one such organization the Apostle, says, “The whole Church saluteth you.” “The Church at Cenchrea.” “The Church of God which is at Corinth.” “As I teach every where in every Church.” “And so were the Churches established in the faith and increased in number daily.”

It is therefore incorrect to speak of our denomination as a Church—great national or sectional organization, the word of God warrants no such notion. We therefore never speak of the laws of the Church, the discipline of the Church or of what the Church teaches. Though united to “Christ our living head in all things,” and in this sense, we trust, belonging to the “General Assembly and Church of the first born, whose names are written in Heaven,” yet as visible organizations we are Churches and not a Church:

“Distinct as the billows,
Yet one as the sea.”

IT IS INDEPENDENT.

There was no high court of commission no super-ecclesiastical tribunal established by Christ. Had the Savior instituted any such Court he would certainly have endowed it with something like infallibility. For if it be as liable to err as the individual churches, what can make its decisions more binding than theirs?

“Whosoever two or three are gathered together in my name” says

the Savior, there am I in the midst"—as much as in the largest or wisest assembly. In that congregation of believers, that small, unlearned, despised and perhaps persecuted church, in all that concerns its spiritual interests, in all its decrees and in all its enactments, it can receive as much of that wisdom which cometh from above as much of the light and guidance of that spirit who "chooses the weak things of this world to confound the mighty and the things that are (seem) not, to bring to naught the things that are"—as much of heavenly light can be obtained, as in the most renowned assembly of reverend or mitred heads. "Wheresoever two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst."

The Church therefore: that is, the congregation of believers, for this is the meaning of the term, has the right in the discharge of its most solemn and responsible duty, to excommunicate its disorderly members. After other prescribed means have been tried, says the Savior, "tell it to the Church," to the whole Church, and not to its pastor or officers, when assembled together, and if he will not hear the Church, let him be to thee as an heathen man and a publican. Paul writes to the Church at Corinth as though this, by them, was fully understood. "When you are gathered together, &c., deliver such an one over to Satan"—that is expel him. And this epistle was written to the Church without any mention whatever of its officers, to whom it would have been directed, or at least, these directions would have been given had it been THEIR peculiar duty to try and expel.

No duty can be more responsible or need more wisdom than this, and whatever objections may be brought against such a tribunal, and whatever may be insinuated in regard to its ignorance or prejudice, Christ has thought fit to lodge the power there, and to every objector he replies. "Wheresoever two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst."

And the action of such Church, though it cannot effect the man's interest in Christ, nor his soul's salvation, as that is a matter between him and his God, it is nevertheless solemnly ratified above. "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven." Tell it to the Church, not to an Association or other convocation which is not a Church. "Whatsoever ye"—the Church bind, not its rulers or overseers—"shall be bound in heaven." Where then is the place for appeal? Who shall dare treat with contempt, or revoke the decision of an independent church, whose action, Christ has solemnly asseverated is sanctioned in heaven.

This independence, however, is not inconsistent with Churches making associates of each other. But this Association, is not an integral of the complete organization. Each one is as much a Church without associating as with it. Nor would such incidental association have any right to assume jurisdiction over those independent churches. This, friends has ever been a distinguishing feature of our denomination. Mosheim gives a truthful description of the early Churches, which by no possible tergiversation could be applied to his own.

"All the Churches of these primitive times until near the end of the second century, were independent bodies, none of them subject to the

jurisdiction of any other. Each Church was a little independent republic, governed by its own laws."

"For though the Churches founded by the Apostles were often consulted in different cases, yet they had no judicial authority, no control, no power of giving laws; on the contrary, it is clear as noon-day that all the Churches had equal rights. The meeting at Jerusalem, as given in the Acts, was only a conference of a single Church.

This impartial statement of our Church polity, is corroborated by the classic author of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.

"Such was the mild and equal constitution by which the Christians were governed for more than a hundred years after the death of the Apostles. Every society formed within itself a separate and INDEPENDENT REPUBLIC; and, although the most distant of those little states, maintained a mutual as well as friendly intercourse of letters and deputations, the Christian world was not yet connected by any supreme authority or legislative assembly. Toward the end of the second century, the Churches of Greece and Asia adopted the useful institutions of provincial synod, and they are justly supposed to have borrowed the model of a representative council from the celebrated examples of their own country, the Amphictyons, the Achean league and the assemblies of the Ionian cities."

Among all the accounts of the Arnoldists Petro-brusions and Waldenses, we have no account of a federal assembly to enforce discipline, enact laws, or whose dicta were binding on the Churches. Each Church is an independent republic. Such is the doctrine of the New Testament, and such has been the conviction of our denomination in every age, from the Apostles to the present day. Shall we depart from it now?

A disposition, it must be acknowledged, is often evinced in Associations to interfere in the local affairs of the Churches. But what is an Association? Is it a Church? Who gave it power to interfere in matters above its control, or attempt to trammel the liberties of the Churches of Jesus Christ? Have we a Synod, a Conference, a House of Bishops, whose decrees must be obeyed? If we have, let us fling away our organization, our name, and our ancestry. No, brethren, we acknowledge the right of no man or association of men to meddle in any way with the affairs of an independent Church.

We, consequently, have no denominational creed—we never had. Each Church adopts its own; or, like the oldest Church in America, at Providence, Rhode Island, has none.

And, brethren, should we not be truly grateful for the character of this organization—one which could not in any conceivable way become connected with the state, and be an established Church. "My kingdom," said Christ, "is not of this world." He never intended that it should be linked to the state or sustained by human power. Radiant with light, and panoplied with the armor of Heaven, Christianity wins with her smiles and conquers with her charms; but never does she ask or seek for human aid or alliance. "Her weapons are not carnal, but spiritual and mighty." In her mysterious and majestic march—in fulfilling her sublime mission—in achieving immortal conquests, and gathering up the enduring trophies of her splendid victories—she is sustained alone by the breath of Heaven—a vital, matchless, spiritual energy.

To be united with the state would, therefore, be a confession of her earthly origin—"My kingdom is not of this world."

But it is evident that the Lord did not intend that His Churches should be consolidated into a centralized or national Church, which might be connected with the state. For, how could these distinct and independent "little republics" be so connected? Where is the leading link, the staple-ring, which if once attached to the state, would necessarily bring all the others in its train, and on which, when a law was impressed, it would be propagated down through all the succeeding links? Nothing of this kind was instituted by its Architect and Law-giver, Jesus Christ. We have no earthly head, either individual or confederate; and before our denomination can be united with the state, the whole machinery must be reorganized—must take some other model than that given in the New Testament. He, therefore, so organized it, that the possibility being removed, the temptation would not exist.

Our denomination has, consequently, never, in any instance, been allied to any human government. In all ages, it has lifted up its voice against the unholy connection. And when political power, unopposed, was in the hands of its members, and when the example of every other country and colony, pointed it to state protection, it proved its faith by its works, and proclaimed, "freedom to all, exclusive privileges to none." It never has, it never can be united to the state.

We should also be grateful for the character of this organization, because, having no human court of appeal; no supreme legislative body, and, consequently, never connected with the state, it has remained free from the stains of persecution. To force or frighten individuals within its borders, it never has—it never can. Voluntary faith, voluntary obedience, voluntary charity—these are its elements and its glory. How could a Church compel a man to believe a doctrine or obey an ordinance when the first principle of that Church is voluntary submission, and any suspicion of compulsion, or other motive than love to God would unfit him for membership? Our denomination in all its chequered history, is unclouded with the crimes of religious proscription. The blood of the oppressed and persecuted, cries not to Heaven for vengeance upon it. But, on the contrary, a free spirit has gone out from our Churches, which has proved a blessing to the world. Democratic in its government, with no EX-OFFICIO rulers, with a perfect parity among its ministers and members, its very existence was a constant protest against every form of despotism. Arnold of Brescia, while, as Gibbon says, "his views of baptism were loosely condemned, his advocacy of freedom brought him to the stake." Amid the mountains that surround the smiling vales of Switzerland, the Arnoldists, Petrobrusians and Waldenses had taken shelter, and had disseminated their principles at the very time that William Tell and his com-patriots beat back the power of Austria, and established a democratic republic in the centre of surrounding despotisms.

Roger Williams has immortalized his name, by advocating and establishing, amid insult and suffering, the great distinctive principle of

our denomination :—THAT THE CIVIL POWER HAS NO JURISDICTION OVER THE CONSCIENCE.

In the language of Mr. Bancroft—"At the time when Germany was the battle-field for all Europe, in the implacable wars of religion, when even Holland was bleeding with the anger of vengeful factions, when France was still to go through the struggle with bigotry, when England was gasping under the despotism of intolerance, more than forty years before William Penn, (who was the son of a Baptist Minister,) became an American proprietary. "Roger Williams asserted the great doctrine of liberty." He was the first person in modern Christendom to assert in its plenitude the doctrine of the liberty of conscience ; and in its defence he was the harbinger of Milton and Jeremy Taylor."

Our denomination had the honor of moving first in the war of Independence. Two years before the Declaration of Independence, the Baptists of Boston and Philadelphia laid before Congress a memorial, to which the following is an answer :

" In Provincial Congress, Cambridge, Dec. 9, 1774.

" On reading the memorial of the Rev. Isaac Backus, agent to the Baptist Churches in this government :—

" Resolved, That the establishment of civil and religious liberty, to each denomination in the province, is the sincere wish of this Congress ; but being by no means vested with powers of civil government, whereby they can redress the grievances of any person whatever ; they therefore recommend to the Baptist Churches, that when a General Assembly shall be convened in this colony, they lay the real grievances of said Churches before the same, when and where their petition will most certainly meet with all that attention due to the memorial of a denomination of Christians, so well disposed to the public weal of their country.

" By order of the Congress,

JOHN HANCOCK, *President.*

" A true extract from the Minutes,

* *" JOHN LINCOLN, Secretary."*

And when the strife, in which our ministers and members had nobly battled, was ended, and freedom achieved, our denomination received from the immortal WASHINGTON, this honorable eulogium, which is found in Leland's Virginia Chronicle :

"While I recollect with satisfaction, that the religious society of which you are members have been, throughout America, uniformly and almost unanimously the firm friends of civil liberty, and the persevering promoters of our glorious Revolution, I cannot hesitate to believe that they will be the faithful supporters of a free, yet efficient general government."

We might give the names of ministers who lived in the camp throughout the campaign and fought in the ranks of their countrymen ; of whole Churches who rushed as one man into the thickest of the battle ; of the well known words of Thomas Jefferson, but the authorities cited are sufficient to show that our Church organization has ever diffused a spirit of independence. And still we are the advocates of freedom. We wish men to be allowed to act for themselves in every thing connected with religion. In youth, while we believe the mind should be informed of the great facts of the Bible, and of the great duties it inculcates, we believe it should receive no sectarian bias from education.

But above all do we deny the right of obliging a child either against or without its will, to enter the Church, submit to its ordinances and be enrolled among its members.

Such then is the character of this organization, for which we have reason to be truly grateful.

But as we glance over the past history of our Churches, remembering the overwhelming despotisms and superstition which it has had to oppose, what gratitude should we feel that this simple and unsupported organization, has, amid all its sufferings, **STILL BEEN PRESERVED.**

Every thing connected with the Church of Jesus Christ was calculated to bring down upon it the obliquy and hatred of a worldly spirit. For those Churches were distinct and independent, and consequently weak. No central court assembled to give unity to their views or uniformity to their actions. "Wheresoever two or three were gathered together," there was Christ, and there was a Church, independent of every other, and these, connected by naught but feelings of brotherhood to each other. Yet, though thus distinct and scattered, and in the eye of human philosophy, soon to perish like the scattered leaves, their fit emblems; yet they have been kept, **PRESERVED** by Him who "holdeth the seven stars in his right hand and walketh in the midst" of the Churches. This is the more extraordinary, we might say miraculous, when we remember the persecutions which our denomination has suffered. Opposed to tyranny in every form, it has always met with the hatred and vengeance of despots. In every country where Christianity has had a foot-hold—by pagan, by catholic, by protestant—by almost every party, have the Baptists, who intermeddled with none, been proscribed, banished, persecuted to death. The first of the noble army of Martyrs whose blood has bathed the soil of Britain, was William Sawire, a Baptist, and William Wrightman, a Baptist, was the last that was burnt at the stake for his religious opinions in England. Our denomination had the honor of both leading the way and bringing up the rear, of that immortal host whose deaths lit up a flame in Britain, "which by the grace of God shall never be quenched."

A touching account of one of those wholesale persecutions, with which our denomination has so frequently been visited, is given by Robinson in his Ecclesiastical Researches. In Bohemia the Jesuits procured an edict of banishment and confiscation against the Baptists, to take effect just three weeks before the gathering of harvest; so that they could carry with them none of the fruits of their patient toil.

"It was autumn," says the Historian, "the prospect and the pride of husbandmen. Heaven had smiled on their honest labors, their fields stood thick with corn, and the sun and the dew were improving every moment, to give them their last polish. The yellow ears waved an homage to their owners, and the wind whistling through the stems and russet herbage softly said, **PUT IN THE SICKLE, THE HARVEST IS COME.** Their luxuriant vine leaves, too, hung aloft by tendrils mantling over the clustering grapes like watchful parents over their tender offspring; but all were fenced by an imperial edict, and it was instant death to approach. Without leaving one murmur upon record, in solemn, silent submission to that Almighty power which governs the universe, and causes "**ALL THINGS TO WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD,**" they packed up and departed. In several hundred carriages they conveyed their sick, their innocent infants sucking at the breasts of their mothers, and their decrepid parents whose work was done and whose silvery locks told every beholder that they wanted but the fa-

.or of a grave. At the borders they fled off, some to Hungary, and Transylvania, others to Wallasia, others to Poland and Szek-hel; greater, far greater for their virtue, than Ferdinand, for all his titles, and all his glory."

This is but one instance. And can we feel any thing but grateful astonishment that amid all this our denomination has lived and still exists. With no well devised machinery to mould them into uniformity; no mutual dependency or central supervision to bind them together; never linked to the state, and steadily refusing such aid; hated by despots for the spirit of freedom they diffused—is it not a miracle that our churches have been preserved. Like the frail bark amid breakers, with storm and blackness all around it, our denomination has "lived through the night, has weathered the fury of the gale"—piloted safely by a power unseen.

But there is a preservation still greater than this, the remembrance of which should awaken grateful emotions in every heart.

For, what is the temple if the fire that burned on its altar is extinguished, and the divinity within has departed?

It is a singular fact, that in the very building where Calvin preached, his writings and creed are rejected. In the land of Luther, a cold rationalism has succeeded the burning fervors of the noble reformer. And in England, formalism and puseyism have subverted the influence of an orthodox creed.

Thus these national Churches (and we speak of it with regret, not in triumph) notwithstanding their well sustained creeds, their logical formulas, their solemn rituals, and legislative councils, sustained by the civil arm—with every thing to guard against innovation and heresy—have lost the spirit and the power of their early martyrs, have adopted sentiments subversive of those principles for which their forefathers labored and bled, and have deteriorated into politico-religious establishments destined to crumble beneath their weight—yet a phenomenon, defeating all the calculations of philosophy, is presented in the preservation of our Churches.

Who could have supposed that these feeble "independent little republics," compared by an opposer to a rope of sand, with no general creed which all must receive, no federal assembly whose law must be obeyed, no overseers having supervision over the whole denomination, and no act of parliament ever enacted in any case to support or sustain them, that these amid all their migrations and persecutions, should continue "to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace." Our Churches have been kept, preserved by him, who chooses the weak things of this world to confound the mighty.

We have also reason to be deeply grateful that God has raised up among us so many men of distinguished piety, talent and learning. We never have had an institution of learning endowed and sustained by state patronage. Geneva, nor Wittenburg, Oxford nor Edinburgh, have never invited to their halls the rising ministry of our denomination. And yet, who that would not be classed with the utterly ignorant, will attempt to deny that our denomination has produced its full share of distinguished scholars and divines. The names of Bunyan, and Gill, of Booth and Gale, and Stennet, are known wherever Christianity extends: and the

eloquent luminary of the Scottish Church gives the following eulogy on denomination as beautiful as it is magnanimous, which is found in Dr. Chalmer's Lectures on Romans :—

“Let it never be forgotten of the Baptists of England that they form the denomination of Fuller, and Carey, and Ryland, and Hall, and Foster; that they originated one of the greatest of all missionary enterprises; that they have enriched the Christian literature of our country with authorship of the most exalted piety, as well as of the first talent, and the first eloquence; that they have waged a noble war with the hydra of antinomianism; that perhaps there is not a more intellectual community of ministers in our island, or who have put forth, to their number, a greater amount of mental power and mental activity in the defense and illustration of our common faith; and what is still better than all the triumphs of genius or understanding, who, by their zeal and fidelity, and pastoral labor, among the congregations which they have reared, have done more to swell the lists of genuine discipleship in the walks of private society and thus both to uphold and extend the living Christianity of our nation.”

So that we have reason to thank God, that while he has shown by his dealings towards us, that it was not by worldly wisdom that we have been preserved; there has yet been learning sufficient among us to challenge the admiration of the world and remove the glosses with which the truth has been obscured.

Thus, brethren, we have glanced at the past of our Churches, and the manner in which they have been preserved. Like the bush in the wilderness, feeble and unsightly, with the fires of persecution even in the midst, yet thank God it remains unconsumed. Like the tree scathed by the lightning and battered by the storm, our denomination still stands erect, often riven but never uprooted, a monument of Heaven's protection. Let us look up to God, and to God alone, with the deepest feelings of humble gratitude—he has been a “wall of fire round about us and the glory in the midst.”

“Let us thank God and take courage.”

2d. And now brethren, with these views of the past, with what feelings shall we anticipate the future? Persecutions have almost ceased, in England and in America altogether. No longer can our denomination be treated with contempt; its strength, its steadfastness, and its learning, command universal respect. The doctrine of religious freedom, for which Arnold of Brescia was burnt, and Roger Williams was banished and John Bunyan was imprisoned, is now generally received and advocated by almost every religious party. But above all, we live in a BAPTIST COUNTRY, where the great distinctive principle of our denomination is universally received. For, what is the great leading principle for which Baptists in all ages have battled? It is this: That no person, young or old, shall be considered a Christian, or a member of a Christian Church, until he or she shall voluntarily, following the dictates of his or her own conscience and reason, receive the Christian doctrine and ask admission into a Christian Church. Now, in America—and this is the only country—this has become public opinion. No matter what church standards say concerning Baptism as the initiatory right into the church—that Baptism is the “badge of distinc-

tion from heathenism ;" no one recognizes this distinction, or that the child has been so initiated. Though confessions and formulas speak of infant membership and teach that the infant is made at baptism a bona fide member of the church, yet public opinion, even of the church whose standards so teach, denies it and will not acknowledge the child a member, until it voluntarily acts for itself.

Ask the parent if his children, thus admitted "in at the door," are members of the Church, and although his Church standard teaches that they are, he will readily answer in the negative. Ask the child himself when he comes to manhood, if he has ever been united to a Church, and, unless he has done so of his own choice, he will deny any such connection. The fact is, that in America, few, if any, believe in infant membership—that infant baptism is the door, or does introduce into the Church. Before it can be recognized, the person must choose, must act for himself. This is the great principle for which our denomination has contended for ages. Baptism itself is a form, the subject and his fitness involves a great fundamental principle—voluntary submission—freedom of choice. But so far as public opinion is concerned, the victory is achieved; and America is a Baptist country. And soon, according to all experience, opinion will influence practice, and their harmony will be the full triumph of our principles. And when freedom shall have sounded her notes in other lands—shall have awakened from their gloomy slumbers the slaves of superstition and tyranny—when the example of America shall have been felt, and the light that gleams from her lofty brow shall point out the pathway that lead to her greatness, will not the same effects be produced, and will not our principles be finally triumphant? Yes, brethren, the past of our denomination proclaims its glorious destiny. "When crushed to earth," she rose again, nerved with immortal vigor; and now that she has gained the vantage ground, and her foes are defeated and her persecuters fled, may we not say "the eternal years of God are her's?"

What prospects then open before us in the future? What courage, what energy should these prospects inspire? Our principles are spreading, and like the dawning light, shall soon flood the world with the noon-tide splendors of the latter day glory. In every denomination our principles are more or less known and respected, and are working their sure, though silent, way towards a final and glorious triumph. Some of the first lights of other denominations, are annually and constantly leaving the orbits in which they have formerly moved, attracted by the simple power of truth. In America, in Europe, in the land of Carey's toils and of Judson's sufferings and triumph—throughout the whole earth, our principles, like the swelling seas, roll on, and soon shall fill it with one wide ocean of truth and love.

Brethren, messengers from different Churches, a few words to you and I shall close. Another ecclesiastical year has passed. Trials, doubtless, and difficulties, opposition and discouragement, you have had to meet. But these trials are over. Let us lift up our hearts. Let us shake the dust from off our garments. "Let us thank God and take courage." The future is before us. The smiling skies bend

kindly over us. The examples of our ancestors, by all their suffering, by all their labors, by all their deeds of noble daring, in silent eloquence invoke us to "fight manfully the battles of our Lord" Let the invocation be answered by a fresh consecration of ourselves to God. And let that consecration be accompanied by a solemn prayer, that the spirit of our martyred brethren may be ours, that their piety may be ours, that their courage may be ours—that we, united under our great and only Captian, may move on in solemn column, admitting of no relaxation, and not knowing the name or sound of retreat; and soon the music of Heaven shall announce the advent of the era, "when the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."

"When he whose car the winds are, and the clouds,
The dust that wait up on his sultry merch;
When sin has moved him and his wrath is hot,
Shall visit earth in mercy, shall descend
Propitlous on his chariot paved with love,
And what his wrath has blasted and defaced
For man's offence, shall with a smile restore."