

DOCUMENTS ILLUSTRATING THE BEGINNINGS OF
THE PRESBYTERIAN ADVANCE INTO
THE OREGON COUNTRY

Introduction

To assert that the westward movement of the American people has been a succession of great undertakings in colonization is merely to say what nobody will deny; yet the fact is not always fully grasped that the history of the occupation of our Great West is a chapter in the history of the expansion of Western civilization. In describing the westward movement, it is not enough to tell of the displacement of Indian tribes, of international rivalries, of the creation of territorial governments, of the disposal of the public domain, of the building of lines of transportation and of communication, of economic exploitation on a grand scale. To be sure, all these things are involved in the story, and we have properly heard much of them. But the history of these developments is not the full history of the westward movement. That movement set in motion all the elements of our civilization; and of these the Christian religion was not the least significant. Hence the history of our westward expansion involves, among other things, the story of the spread of Christian faiths. The evangelization of the expanding West became one of the major concerns of Christians who remained in the East, and to some prospective emigrants the making of arrangements to carry with them some assurance of religious and educational instruction was considered an important part of the preparations for the journey from old homes in the East to new homes in the West. The growing West offered a challenge to men and women of every denomination. The response of certain American Presbyterian bodies to the challenge of the Pacific Coast, and more especially to the challenge of Oregon, the accompanying documents are intended to reveal.

Our first document, published in a religious periodical of January, 1849, shows the deepening interest of several Protestant denominations in the new communities forming on the Pacific Coast. By this time the Oregon boundary question had been settled, the war with Mexico had been terminated, and in California gold had been discovered. In the Far West America had entered into a new and goodly heritage that was rapidly becoming a center of world interest. The lure of gold was drawing its thousands. The movement of Americans into the Oregon Country, begun a few years earlier,

was now widening into an advance to the Pacific Coast. The rush of people to the gold fields of California was creating a situation which the churches in the East could not ignore. Opportunity and danger walked hand in hand. The gathering of the nations upon our own Pacific Coast was, so many devout Christians soon came to believe, striking evidence that God was opening to Protestant America the door to a world-wide evangelization. Soon a new argument for domestic missionary enterprise arose to support old arguments. In the affairs of the future the Pacific Coast of the United States seemed destined to play a large role. Across the waters of the great ocean lay the heathen lands of Asia, and for the evangelization of the Asiatic peoples by American Christians the way appeared to be providentially opening. Home and foreign missionary interests were converging upon the American shore of the Pacific Ocean. Here, then, was a region calling loudly for the gospel: Americans who went to the Pacific Coast must be kept under Christian influences, and foreigners attracted to that shore must be met by the gospel. A Christianized Pacific Coast could exert a powerful influence in converting the world. Opportunity lay in winning that area to Christ; danger lay in letting it fall into the possession of the enemies of a "pure gospel." Haste was of the essence of the solution of the problem. For compelling reasons, therefore, involving both the salvation of their own countrymen and the conversion of countless thousands in foreign lands, the several Protestant denominations in America were eager to get footholds in that new and rapidly settling region. And though for the moment California loomed large upon the horizon, yet Oregon as a part of a greater Pacific Coast community did not escape notice.

The problem of Christianizing the Pacific Coast did not find the American churches wholly unprepared. Back of the Protestant advance to the Farther West lay an important period of religious pioneering. By the middle of the nineteenth century the home missionary movement had long been under way; the task of planting churches in the Mississippi Valley had been faced, and, at least in some degree, had been accomplished. Organizations for sending out home missionaries were in existence; societies for disseminating Bibles and religious tracts were flourishing; agencies for the promotion of Sunday Schools and for the founding of schools and colleges were beyond the experimental stage; a philosophy of evangelization had evolved. American Christians of the mid-nineteenth century faced a difficult problem, but one that was not new. Even the

task of carrying the gospel beyond the Rocky Mountains had been undertaken. For long years through Methodist missionaries and missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions had labored among the Oregon Indians; as early as 1845 Ezra Fisher and Hezekiah Johnson had arrived in Oregon as agents of the American Baptist Home Mission Society; in 1848 George H. Atkinson had begun his labors in that territory as the representative of the American Home Missionary Society; and other ministers of the gospel had gone to Oregon without the support of any society. Before the middle of the century the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society had extended their operations into the Far Northwest; and as long ago as 1838 Catholic priests had entered the Valley of the Columbia. Several years before the first publication of any of the accompanying documents, Christian churches had been organized in the Oregon Country. Hence, because of such preparation, to American Christians in the mid-nineteenth century the prospect of a systematic advance to the Pacific Coast was more nearly thrilling than disconcerting.

Our documents describe in part the activities of three bodies of Presbyterians: the Associate Reformed Church, the Associate Synod of North America, and the Old School Presbyterian Church. Of the history of these organizations brief mention must suffice.

As a result of the union of Presbyterian groups, there was formed in Philadelphia in 1782 the Associate Reformed Synod of North America. By 1803 this Synod had become sub-divided into four subordinate Synods, viz., the Synods of New York, Pennsylvania, Scioto, and the Carolinas. Differences on various subjects, including those of communion and psalmody, in the course of a few years brought about a disruption of the organization. Between 1820 and 1822 the Synod of Scioto and the Synod of the Carolinas withdrew from the General Synod. The former became the Associate Reformed Synod of the West, the latter became the Associate Reformed Synod of the South. After these withdrawals, the General Synod voted to unite with the Presbyterian Church, and by this action the Synod of Pennsylvania disappeared; but the Synod of New York refused to abide by this decision and constituted itself an independent judicatory. From 1822 until after the middle of the nineteenth century the Associate Reformed Church existed in three distinct and independent divisions—North, South, and West—which, in general, maintained friendly relations. The territory of the Associate Reformed Synod of the West, the branch of the church with

which this article is especially concerned, embraced Pennsylvania, Ohio, and the Western states. In 1839, the western branch was divided into two subordinate Synods, called First and Second, which remained under the supervision of a General Synod.¹ It was the western division of the Associate Reformed Church that sent the Reverend Wilson Blain as a missionary to Oregon.

The Associate Synod of North America, formed in Philadelphia in 1801, was the supreme judicatory of a branch of the Presbyterian family commonly called the Seceder Church.² This denomination was a continuation of the Secession Church of Scotland. In the middle of the nineteenth century its congregations were to be found principally in New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, although its influence extended as far west as Iowa.³ This church sent the Reverend James P. Miller and the Reverend S. G. Irvine as its first missionaries to Oregon.

In Oregon the missionaries of the Associate Reformed Church and those of the Associate Church found a situation that argued strongly for union, a project for which was then and for some years had been under consideration by these denominations in the East.⁴ The people in Oregon, it appears, were either incapable of appreciating, or unwilling to make the effort required to comprehend, the differences between the Associate and the Associate Reformed Churches. Union seemed to offer the way out of a difficulty. As the Rev. James P. Miller wrote: "What we have chiefly to combat here is the wildest error in the shape of Campbellitism, Mormonism, Popery, or the rankest infidelity or Universalism. It would greatly imbolden and strengthen the hands of such people, to see those between whom they could discern no difference in doctrine or mode of worship, keeping aloof from one another."⁵ On October 20, 1852, the Associate Presbytery of Oregon and the First Associate Reformed Presbytery of Oregon were merged into the United Presbytery of Oregon.⁶ Such action did not immediately meet with

1 Anon., "A View of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church," in *The Christian Instructor* (Philadelphia: November, 1850), n. s., VII, 37-40. This magazine, a monthly "devoted to the interests of the Associate Reformed Church," was edited at this time by the Reverend John B. Dales, pastor of the First Associate Reformed Church, Philadelphia. See also James Brown Scouler, "History of the United Presbyterian Church of North America," in *The American Church History Series*, XI (New York, 1900), chaps. 5-7.

2 Scouler, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

3 *The Evangelical Repository: Devoted to the Principles of the Reformation, as Set Forth in the Formularies of the Westminster Divines, and Witnessed for by the Associate Synod of North America* (Philadelphia: October, 1854), XIII, 291. See also *ibid.* (July, 1850), IX, 97-104. This magazine, a monthly, was edited by the Reverend Joseph T. Cooper, pastor of the Second Associate Presbyterian Congregation, Philadelphia.

4 Scouler, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

5 *The Evangelical Repository* (December, 1852), XI, 367.

6 *Infra*, I, Doc. Q.

wholehearted approbation in the East. In the Associate Church, the Presbytery of Iowa and the Presbytery of Clarion recommended that the Synod condemn the proceeding⁷; but the Synod, at its annual meeting in 1853, merely voted to postpone consideration of the Oregon question until the next year.⁸ The General Synod of the Associate Reformed Church of the West, on the other hand, proposed a union of the two bodies on the basis of the union in Oregon. This offer the Associate Synod rejected by a unanimous vote.⁹ Although the history of the negotiations which led to the formation of the United Presbyterian Church in 1858 do not properly fall within the limits of this article, yet it is not without interest to observe that there was a United Presbyterian Church in Oregon more than five years before the Western and Northern Synods of the Associate Reformed Church and the Associate Synod of North America were merged into the United Presbyterian Church of North America.¹⁰

Of the history of the Old School Presbyterian Church—the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America—little need be said here. As a distinctive organization, it dates from the division into Old and New School Presbyterianism that took place in 1837.¹¹ The documents which form the second group in our collection describe the beginnings of the advance of this church into Oregon.

In the accompanying documents persons interested in the history of the West may read some of the principal arguments advanced by advocates of the Protestant home missionary movement; here they may discover what agencies were commonly relied on to effect evangelization; and here, also, they may learn that home missionary documents are not without value as sources of the history of colonization.

If a dim perception that the evangelization of the Pacific Coast was related to the foreign missionary cause be excepted,¹² none of the arguments presented in the subjoined documents will be unfamiliar to students of the history of the Protestant missionary advance into the Mississippi Valley. Indeed, such students will be impressed by the fact that one of the most telling arguments made for

7 *The Evangelical Repository* (July, 1853), XII, 54, 61.

8 *Infra*, I, Doc. R.

9 *The Evangelical Repository* (July, 1853), XII, 68. See also correspondence on this subject, *ibid.*, pp. 90-95.

10 Scouller, *op. cit.*, chap. 8.

11 Robert Ellis Thompson, *A History of the Presbyterian Churches in the United States (The American Church History Series, VI, 2d ed.; New York, 1900, chap. 11.)* See also James Wood, *The Doctrinal Differences Which Have Agitated and Divided the Presbyterian Church. or Old and New Theology*, enlarged edition. (Philadelphia, 1853), chap. 11.

12 *Infra*, I, Doc. L; II, Doc. F.

the spread of Protestant Christianity far and wide in the Great Valley, viz., that that area would in time give law to the nation, is not emphasized in relation to the Pacific Northwest. But they will observe that, as late as the middle of the nineteenth century, sectarian zeal had not abated. Presbyterians were as keen to pre-empt choice locations in Oregon as they had earlier been to acquire strategic positions in the Mississippi Valley. In this respect, however, they were not peculiar. Each denomination that was affected by the missionary spirit was eager to occupy new and choice ground. But, in the matter of spreading their faith, Presbyterians had acquired a reputation for aggressiveness. Early in the decade of the 1830's, the Reverend Jonathan Going, the first corresponding secretary of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, was not unconcerned by his observation that the Presbyterians "get up early."¹³ And certain it is that Presbyterians were zealous in the matter of getting a foothold in Oregon.

A compelling argument for Protestant home missions was the argument which stressed the importance of arresting the spread of Roman Catholicism. Here all Protestants were in areement: on this subject they spoke a common language. With the experiences of a bitter contest in the Mississippi Valley fresh in their minds, it is not surprising that Protestants should have anticipated a struggle with Rome for the possession of the Pacific Coast. Had not the "emissaries of the Man of Sin" for years been obstructing the spread of the "pure gospel" in the Valley of the Columbia? Had not California until recently been a province of the Pope? That the shadow of Rome might not completely darken the land, it was necessary to make haste to disseminate the light of the "true gospel" on the Pacific Coast. Not only did zealous Protestants deem an "undefiled" Christianity necessary to the preservation of American institutions in that territory; as the relation of the Pacific Coast to the foreign missionary enterprise became clearer in their minds, they saw that such was necessary if a proper influence were to go out from Pacific ports to lands beyond the seas. Accompanying documents¹⁴ which warn of the Catholic menace in Oregon are less bitter in tone than many which might be selected from Protestant missionary literature of the middle of the nineteenth century.

(Continued in July issue)

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¹³ Jonathan Going to the Reverend A. Fisher and the Reverend Addison Parker, November 15, 1832, in Going, *Letter Book, Ms.* (The American Baptist Home Mission Society, New York).