

**A VINDICATION OF SECESSION
AND THE SOUTH FROM THE
STRICTURES OF REV. R.J.
BRECKINRIDGE, D.D., LL, D, IN THE
DANVILLE QUARTERLY REVIEW**

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B. M. PALMER

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By B. M. PALMER, D. D.,
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A VINDICATION
OR
SECESSION AND THE SOUTH.

Discourse delivered by REV. DR. R. J. BRECKINRIDGE, on the day of National Humiliation, January 4th, 1861, at Lexington, Ky.

Our Country: its Peril, and its Deliverance. From advance sheets of the Danville Quarterly Review for March, 1861. By the REV. ROBERT J. BRECKINRIDGE, D. D., LL. D., Professor in Danville Theological Seminary.

Perhaps no writer in the Presbyterian Church is more entitled to a respectful hearing upon the questions which now agitate and divide the country, than the author of the two pamphlets whose titles are given above. The studies and pursuits of his early manhood were precisely such as to acquaint him with the subjects involved; while his great intellect, which has never faltered in any investigation, is fully competent to grasp the nature of parties, to expound the principles upon which they are formed, and to depict the results to which they naturally tend. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Danville Quarterly should signalize its advent into the circle of periodical literature by an elaborate political essay from the pen of its most distin-

guished editor, nor that this production should be selected and sent forth as an *avant courier* to herald its approach. When, too, the newspaper press announced the topics through which the discussion would range, public expectation was raised on tiptoe, prepared for a disquisition very far above the ordinary level of political harangues. Under an arrangement of subjects at once philosophical and exhaustive, such a thinker as Dr. Breckinridge might, if any one could, offer a solution of existing political problems. Considering, further, the position of Kentucky in the struggle now pending, one could not but be curious to see the middle ground which Danville should occupy between Princeton and Columbia; between the defence of Black Republicanism, on the one hand, and the advocacy of Secession on the other. It would be unjust to say that these anticipations have been wholly disappointed; for upon every page the characteristics of the author's mind are clearly impressed. Of no living writer can it be said with more emphasis, in the language of Milton, that his books "preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them." Yet, after all, we are constrained to say that, viewing it as a whole, we have laid this pamphlet down, after a third perusal, with a feeling of disappointment raised to the third degree. As a great State paper, explaining either the way by which the country has become involved in its present entanglements, or solving the method of its extrication, it falls immeasurably below what might have been expected from the source whence it is derived. Aside from the glittering generalities in which it abounds, and uncovered of the dogmatism in which it is enveloped, it simply revives, in its boldest and most offensive form, the doctrine of a consolidated nationality held by the old Federalists; and proceeds, upon this view, to counsel the Government at Washington, temperately, but with parental firmness, to chasten into submission seven refractory sovereignties! We can imagine the smile

stealing over the visage of some experienced statesman at the temerity with which this exploded political heresy is revived; and at the coolness with which the opposite theory is ignored, which, nevertheless, has generally prevailed through the history of American legislation to the present time. When so fertile a mind as that of this eminent Divine can suggest nothing to meet the exigencies of the Union but what is contained in this pamphlet, it is fair to conclude the bottom of the argument on that side to be reached. And if a decisive proof is required to show the necessity of the great revolution which has taken place at the South, it is furnished in this final argument, which constructs for the whole country a despotism as overwhelming and hopeless as any which has bowed down and broken the spirit of man in any age or portion of the world.

We shall endeavor to make these positions good in the following pages. Dr. Breckinridge is too old a polemic to hope, in a time of deep agitation, like the present, that any *ex cathedra* pronouncement of his opinions can shield them from scrutiny. He may rest assured, however, that no expression shall consciously fall from this pen, inconsistent with that profound respect in which his genius and reputation have been held by the writer for more than twenty years.

In order that the reader may be able to judge of the fairness and sufficiency of this rejoinder, it will be necessary to present an analysis of the pamphlet under review. Like a true philosopher, Dr. Breckinridge begins with the beginning. In tracing the perils of the country, he can of course rise no higher than to the "spirit of anarchy," of which they are all begotten; which is accordingly made the *first* of his five divisions. This spirit of anarchy commenced with the Abolition party; existing only as a fanaticism, from which it speedily rose to the dignity of a State principle, in the liberty bills which were afterwards enacted

—mounting at length to the highest national importance, by dividing the whole nation into two opposite parties—and, finally, upon Mr. Lincoln's election, reaching its consummation in the secession of seven States from the Federal Union. Amidst this chaos, the author proceeds, in his *second* leading division, to consider whether there remains any ground for hope and effort. From a number of facts rapidly grouped together, such as that a large minority in the North is thoroughly opposed to the distinctive principles of the Republican party, that many who voted for Mr. Lincoln, are far more Whigs and Americans than Republicans, that many Republicans themselves are patriotic men, who, upon any clear issue, will not hesitate to sacrifice their party to their country; from these facts, he infers a speedy and certain revolution in the Northern mind, which will sweep from power the anarchists who have brought the country to the verge of ruin. In like manner, assuming that the secession of the Cotton States has not been, as to the popular masses, either spontaneous or cordial, but the result of an organized conspiracy, which has hurried those States along by a sudden and irresistible current of opinion, he predicts a corresponding reaction at the South; so that if the border slave States shall remain steadfast in their loyalty to the Union, "the secession movement must prove a failure, both as to its avowed and as to any concealed object." To guard against the defection of these, certain "immense considerations" are presented; in the statement of which we have a very distinct enunciation of the author's Federal creed. This argument is enforced by the two additional considerations, that "this blind and fierce spirit of anarchy" is "in frightful antagonism to the total civilization of the age," as well as to "the dominion and purpose of God over and concerning our country," which is neither, on the one hand, that slavery should be extinguished, nor, on the other, that it should be perpetuated. So endeth the second lesson.

The question of negro slavery being the occasion, at least, if not the cause, of these commotions, it becomes necessary, in the *third* chapter, to consider whether any view of it can be presented, upon which the whole country should harmonize. "It may be discussed in the light of divine revelation, or in the light of the law of nature, or in the light of the political and municipal institutions of the countries where it exists." In this last aspect, the author affirms "there ought to be no dispute concerning it," it being strictly a domestic institution, with which no State nor the General Government may interfere in any wise—every plea to the contrary being immoral in itself, and revolutionary in its tendency.

As regards the law of nature, the grand difficulty occurs of interpreting its utterances, as made by the *human reason*, by the *common impulses of the human soul*, by the *common opinion and belief of the race*, and by the *actual execution of the law*, in the common state of that race in all ages. But "human reason," the author concludes, "lands the problem very nearly in a paradox." The common impulse of the soul towards freedom "is no evidence that restraint is wrong," and "fails of proving that they who cherish it would do aught but mischief," if it were universally gratified. If, again, "it was the common belief of the race, that servitude was contrary to the nature of man, then the race had before it always, in the actual condition of a larger part, the clearest proof that the belief was absurd." And finally, the testimony from the actual execution of the law is frightful and universal, to wit: that "all, every where, have felt themselves to be naturally impelled to reduce each other into a condition of subjection." From these confused, and perhaps "contradictory utterances," it only remains to turn to "the Word of God, where this great problem is completely solved." In the light of this Book, Dr. Breckinridge considers "human servitude, in all its forms, as one of the badges of the fallen condition of the