

**THE NEXT MEETING OF THE
AMERICAN BOARD.
WORCESTER, MASS.,
OCTOBER 10-13, 1893**

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The Next Meeting of the American Board. Worcester, Mass., October 10-13, 1893 by Various

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VARIOUS

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in Pres. Angel 11/1/06

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AMERICAN BOARD *of Commission*
of foreign missions.

WORCESTER, MASS.

OCTOBER 10-13, 1893

CAMBRIDGE

Printed at the Riverside Press

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¹ Reprinted from *The Andover Review*.

"Neither this Board nor the Prudential Committee are in any wise a theological court to settle doctrinal points of belief, but a body instituted by the churches to make known the gospel of Christ among the heathen nations and those who sit in darkness, though nominally Christian, and establish churches among them, maintaining that faith and that only which is universally received by those Christian bodies whose agents they are and who furnish the funds which they administer."—*Declaration adopted by the Board at Salem, Mass., 1871.*

THE NEXT MEETING OF THE AMERICAN BOARD.

NOBODY seems to anticipate the coming meeting of the Board with much pleasure. This is a hopeful sign in so far as it indicates the absence of a contentious spirit and the prevalence of a desire for union in the work of the Board. We do not think, however, that the right note is now struck in any lamentation over the evils of controversy, great as these may be. What is needed, and what all should seek, is a settlement of existing differences. The next meeting of the Board affords an opportunity for agreement. Let us be thankful for this, and try to make the most of it. This seems to us the true note. It implies that we recognize the unseemliness of dissension in work that is so distinctively Christian as that of a Board of Missions, the duty to give to discussion even over "vexed questions" the character of a friendly conference rather than that of partisan debate, and the obligation upon all who participate — and who may not, at least in prayer and influence? — to cultivate the things that make for peace, among which are truth, justice, candor, frankness, and above all, charity.

There are propitious signs. The case of Mr. Noyes cannot fail to be uppermost in the thoughts of all, nor to influence and perhaps shape any action which may be taken. It is a case of singular clearness and simplicity, and of no little comprehension. It makes concrete and conspicuous what might otherwise be more or less remote and hidden from view. It brings to a practical test policies, methods, and principles. The greatest danger is, that what is unique in it may overshadow what is representative, and the gain it ought to yield fail of being realized.

Another favorable omen is, that since the Board met at Des Moines much light has been shed upon the problems which confront it.

All parties may find occasion to rejoice at the remarkable demonstration which has been given of attachment to the Board. Its policy and management have been frequently and sometimes severely criticised. There is a widespread dissatisfaction with its relation to the churches, the stiffness, and at times almost stolidity, of its administration, its inability to utilize or even understand new movements in Christian thought and life, and its generally ungracious and repellent attitude toward the more free and vigorous minds of the generation which is soon to take

the place of the fathers. Yet there has been so far scarcely an intimation of a desire to separate from it. Comparatively few churches or individuals, and these reluctantly and in protest, have withheld their contributions. Probably the strongest motive which animates the strenuous and determined criticism to which we have referred is the apprehension that the Board is failing to develop, stimulate and use as it might the missionary spirit in the churches. That this spirit clings, as it were, to the Board, even when keenly sensitive to its mistakes and its faults, is an evidence of its own constancy and depth, and a forcible suggestion of how much, with better methods of administration, an inspiring leadership might make of it.

Especially has the theological atmosphere been relieved of the tension and alarms which were so oppressive at Des Moines. The distinction between a dogma and a doctrine, an opinion or hypothesis and an article of faith, is now more clearly discerned and more generally understood. Mr. Noyes's letters, when read in the light of this distinction, are seen to be very different in meaning and tendency from what some have understood to be their import. All this was pointed out at the beginning of the discussion, but in the excitement of the hour failed of due appreciation. Its present recognition is friendly to harmony.

At Des Moines there was no little solicitude expressed lest the "doctrine of a probation after death" should prove to be "divisive and perverse, and dangerous to the churches at home and abroad." Still earlier was the charge that it would cut the nerve of missions. But experience has done much to alleviate these apprehensions. Mr. Noyes, at any rate, has made a safe and excellent missionary. Without exception, so far as we know, the missionaries of the Board in Japan desire his immediate enrollment in their number. In this country, throughout the fellowship of the Congregational churches, — that is, practically throughout the entire constituency of the Board, — his opinion respecting those who have not heard of a Saviour is recognized as at least permissible. The churches neither divide over it, nor are alarmed by it. As to its inconsistency with a missionary spirit, those who raised the objection have been constantly and effectively refuting their own criticism. They have kept the Board in more or less tribulation for eleven, and in more or less turmoil for seven, years past in order to keep out of service men whom they argue cannot want to engage in it.

We shall be surprised if the minds of some members of the Board who have hitherto acted with the majority are not affected by the evident futility, both doctrinally and practically, of the endeavor to construe the Des Moines resolutions as though they committed the Board to a theological dogma. If any body of men could have carried out such an interpretation of these resolutions, certainly those who have controlled all appointments for the last seven years may be supposed to be equal to the task. They have lacked neither interest in the effort, nor determination

and courage, nor ample resources and active and strong support. But what have the churches seen? A constant retreat from the original dogmatic position, a season of wandering in mazy by-paths of more and more intricate and baffling distinctions, a gradual acceptance of almost, if not quite everything, save men, which was rejected in the beginning. Scarcely had the attempt been made to enforce the dogma supposed to be prescribed by the Board at Des Moines before its requirement was abandoned in the case of Miss Judson. After successive further reductions, the very agnosticism which at first was made a definite ground of rejection was cordially welcomed. And then hardly a year passes when a man is appointed conditionally, who is recognized as "entertaining for himself," in respect to "those who do not hear the gospel message in this life," "what he conceives to be a reasonable hope that in some way, before their destinies are fixed, God's love in Christ will be revealed to them." On other doctrines than the one, so called, which has been in question, — namely, the universal decisiveness of the present life, — the Committee expects a candidate to say, "I know;" but on this alleged doctrine he is welcomed if he will only affirm, "I don't know." In respect to other articles of faith the Committee declares: "You must believe that it is so." But concerning this article it says: "You may entertain 'a reasonable hope' that it is not so." Now is it too much to anticipate that some who have desired the Committee to maintain the dogma in question will see that they have expected more than is practicable, that no doctrine is or can be maintained by such a method; that the whole process is rather a confession of uncertainty or absence of doctrine, and promotes no doctrinal security or stability, while it does engender a great amount of friction and waste? The churches, with the missionary and benevolent Congregational societies other than the Board, have chosen the policy of toleration and coöperation, and they are undistracted in their appropriate work. The Board is kept in a strife which is widening. No one asks for a larger liberty than has been proved by experience to be safe and salutary. Indeed, we only ask that where experience shows that dogmatic lines cannot be drawn, or if drawn cannot be maintained, the lesson of this experience be heeded.

The progress of seven years has made more unmistakable the character and scope of the contention of the minority in the Board. Men are not likely to be elected to such a corporation who are extremists in their liberalism. When at least one third, and probably a larger proportion, of members are seriously dissatisfied with the management, their opposition cannot be lightly dismissed. It is not a temporary effervescence of radicalism, nor a criticism unfriendly to the evangelical aim of the Board. It is enough to say on this point that nothing has been asked for in the Board by the minority which is not more than covered in principle by the public utterances of that eminent and devoted

friend of missions, Mark Hopkins. More especially has it become clear that the minority is contending for what it deems to be rights, which it is not at liberty to compromise or surrender. The most important of these rights are these: (1) The right of the fellowship of Congregational churches to participate, in their foreign missionary work, in the increment of its capital through the years in which they have contributed to its support; (2) The right of members of Congregational churches, who accept the articles of faith commonly recognized by these churches, to be doctrinally attested by this standard; (3) The right of men who hold the commonly acknowledged Congregational creeds, and have been ordained by regular Congregational councils to the Christian ministry, to be doctrinally accepted by the Committee on this basis; (4) The right of every portion of the united Congregational body to be impartially recognized, and not discriminated against, in the selection of missionaries. A contest for such rights as these cannot well have but one end. Is it not reasonable to suppose that, when it is generally and fully understood that this is the true nature of the contest, it will be near its end?

The experience of these later years shows still further that the meeting at Worcester will not accomplish anything of permanent value for concord and unity if it fails to meet, in some degree at least, the real problem of the Board, namely, its right adjustment to its constituency, the Congregational churches. It is not so adjusted now, either as to its constitution, its assumptions, its doctrinal standards, or its usages. The problem is many-sided. It cannot be solved at once or by a stroke. But it needs to be kept distinctly in view. The Committee of Eleven, appointed at Chicago, will doubtless propose some changes aimed at bringing the corporate membership into fuller connection with the churches. The case of Mr. Noyes may contribute to progress in theological and doctrinal directions. If it is treated as a purely exceptional case less will be gained than it is fairly entitled to yield, especially when it is considered how long it has been before the Board. The most important question, the one which underlies nearly every other issue, is, Will the Board be governed by the standards, and accept the validity of the usages, of the Congregational churches? Until this is settled, nothing is settled.

That Mr. Noyes should be appointed, either by the Board directly or by the Committee under its instructions, goes almost without saying. We know of only two objections to his appointment which are pressed. One is, that the Board has already repeatedly decided the case; the other, that his appointment would be a surrender to the New Theology. The first objection is not strictly accurate as to the facts in the case. The Board at Des Moines and at Springfield took action which by implication is adverse to Mr. Noyes, as *his case was then understood*. He has, however, always insisted that there was a large measure of misunderstanding at the basis of these decisions. After they had been rendered and