ARCHIBALD ALEXANDER OF PRINCETON

FRANCIS MAKEMIE, the father of American Presbyterianism, was born in the neighbourhood of Ramelton, Co. Donegal, and was introduced to the Laggan Presbytery of that County by the Rev. Thomas Drummond of Ramelton. He was licensed by the Laggan Presbytery in 1681, and shortly after was ordained by it with a view to going to America. His residence for eighteen years (1690 to 1708) was in Virginia, but he exercised an extensive and powerful ministry far beyond its borders. The Church which sent him forth was a Church "under the cross" and in the land of his choice he had also to do battle and to suffer for liberty. He took a prominent part in forming the first Presbytery (of Philadelphia), and shortly after its formation he was its Moderator (in December, 1706). "He was a man of eminent piety, as well as strong intellectual powers, and an uncommonly fascinating address."[1]

Archibald Alexander, the subject of this sketch, had connections, like Makemie, with Ulster and Virginia, and was a builder of American Presbyterianism. His grandfather, whose name he bore, went to America from the neighbourhood of Londonderry. He settled first in Pennsylvania, where he came under the influence of a great Revival. After a few years he moved to the beautiful and fertile valley of Virginia. His son, William, became an elder of the Church, but did not rise to the Christian eminence of his father. William had a family of nine children of whom Archibald was the third. He was born on April 17, 1772, three years before the outbreak of the American War of Independence. The country was new and the times difficult. His boyhood was spent amid the alarms of war. But the country was free in spirit and democratic in its institutions, and life in it had its glamour. At the age of ten he went to school at Liberty Hall Academy, which later became Washington College.

This Academy was presided over by Rev. William Graham, a graduate of the College of New Jersey, for whom Archibald

[1] For Makemie's life, see J. S. Reid's *History of the Irish Presbyterian Church*, Vol II, p. 342; W. B. Sprague's *Annals of the American Pulpit*, Vol. III, pp. 1–4; and I. M. Page's *Life Story of Rev. Francis Makemie* (1938).

cherished ever the greatest affection and regard. Graham was an earnest man of orthodox views—" strictly Calvinistic, but he had his own method of explaining things", to use Dr. Alexander's words.

At the age of seventeen Archibald left his father's house to become tutor in the family of General John Posey. He had learned the Shorter Catechism before he was seven, and had later mastered much of the Larger. Yet he afterwards confessed that at this time his ignorance was profound. In the house of General Posey there was an aged Christian lady, a Mrs. Tyler, who often spoke to the young tutor on religious matters. Here he began to seek for truth as a hid treasure. He continued for a year or more deeply dissatisfied with himself and far from the assurance of faith. Yet later in life, at the age of seventy-seven, he expressed the opinion that his regeneration took place in 1788 at General Posey's.

In the autumn of 1789 he made public profession of his faith. Books were rare in those days, but he read and was greatly helped by works of Flavel, Owen, Alleine, the Erskines, Willison, Doddridge and Whitefield. About this time he was seized with a fever, from which he felt that his constitution received a shock from which it never fully recovered. In 1790 he began his preparations for the ministry, studying under the direction of Rev. William Graham. He read no great number of volumes; but some treatises of Edwards, Bates, Owen and Boston he did read with much care. He was prevailed upon to present himself before the Presbytery of Lexington, Virginia, in October, 1790, and was encouraged by them to proceed. From them he received authority to exercise his gifts in exhortation. Mr. Graham was accustomed to hold a meeting at the house of " old John M'Kee ", and there Archibald and a fellow-student made their début. His fellow-student " hemmed and groaned, rolled up his pocket-handkerchief into a ball, made a few convulsive gestures and sat down ". Archibald tells us, " After another prayer and hymn, I was called upon. Although I did not know a single word I was to utter, I began with a rapidity and fluency equal to any I have enjoyed. . . . I was astonished at myself, and as I was young and small, the old people were not less astonished ".[1] Thus began his career as a preacher, and we note with interest that his son James expresses

[1] *Life of Archibald Alexander*, by his son, J. W. Alexander, p. 86.

the opinion that his father's " extemporaneous discourses were throughout his life the highest effusions of his mind ".

In the spring of 1791 he went to the General Assembly at Philadelphia as a representative elder. He felt ill at ease on account of his extreme youth. It is interesting to note that while in Philadelphia he was frequently at the house of old Mrs. Hodge, grandmother of Charles Hodge, who in future days was to be his beloved junior colleague at Princeton. He was reluctant to be licensed by the Presbytery on account of his sense of unfitness, but Mr. Graham disregarded his scruples and urged him on. The text fixed for his " popular sermon " was appropriate—Jeremiah i. 7. He was licensed in October, 1791. Shortly after, when preaching at Charleston from Acts xvi. 31, a puff of wind carried his notes into the midst of the congregation; he " determined to take no more paper into the pulpit ", a resolution which he kept throughout his days save in a very few instances.

Those were days of Revival and he was kept busy; he travelled long distances as an itinerant missionary under the Synod of Virginia. Often he had appointments to preach almost every day of the week. An article which appeared in the *New York Observer* shortly after his death says of him at this period:

> " He was remarkably handsome in person, erect, of ruddy face, and pleasing address, with a silver voice melodious as a flute, persuasive in his tones, and powerful in his appeals; even in his youth he was famed as an eloquent preacher, in a region of the country where the eloquence of Patrick Henry had been often heard, and where Samuel Davies and Waddell and others had made the pulpit illustrious as ' the source of thoughts that breathe and words that burn' ."

One under whose roof he stayed spoke of him as burning with zeal to save the souls of men. He was ordained to the pastoral charge of a number of congregations in Virginia in 1794. In 1796, at the age of twenty-four, he became President of Hampden-Sidney College, while continuing to act as pastor and preacher. In his new position he laboured even beyond his strength in adding to his stores of knowledge. In 1801 he resigned as head of the College, partly owing to ill health and partly because he desired to visit New England. He was chosen by his Presbytery as a Commissioner to the General Assembly (1801) at Philadelphia, and on his way there he stayed at the home of the learned and eloquent Dr. James Waddell, who was born at Newry, Co. Down, in 1739, and brought

to America in his infancy by his parents. William Wirt in his *British Spy*[1] describes the tremendous impression made on him through a chance hearing of this celebrated blind pulpit orator at a communion service. On this visit Archibald Alexander secured the hand of Dr. Waddell's beautiful and devoted daughter Janetta.

In his travels in New England in 1801 he met men of kindred views, like his future Princeton colleague, Samuel Miller, but he also came into contact at close quarters with an Arminianism that was fast ripening into Unitarianism and with the "Modified Calvinism" of New England. The effect produced by his eloquent addresses on this tour of New England long remained. In May, 1802, he resumed charge of Hampden-Sidney College, but in 1806 he received a unanimous call to the Third Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, which he accepted. Coming to the central city of the land at thirty-four years of age, his mind and character were already moulded and matured. As his son says, "Wider range of knowledge, richer stores of accumulation, sounder experience, keener sagacity, more prophetic forecast, there may have come with advancing years, but in whatsoever can attract in the man, or impress in the preacher, he was just now at a point of culmination".[2]

Though now removed from Virginia, he remained a Virginian to the last. He was sometimes homesick, yet he never yielded to the efforts of his warm friend, Dr. John H. Rice, to lure him back to work in his native State.

In 1811 came one of the great turning-points in his career. In that year Princeton Seminary, the first Presbyterian Seminary in U.S.A., was founded. Its organisation was due, says Professor John de Witt of Princeton, "above all to the anxiety, the prayer, the correspondence, and the separate and united labours of three notable men, Ashbel Green, Samuel Miller and Archibald Alexander".[3]

In 1808, Dr. Alexander preached as the retiring Moderator a sermon before the General Assembly, from the text, "Seek ye to excel, to the edifying of the Church", in which he pointed to the numerous vacancies and the deficiency of preachers, and expressed the opinion that "we shall not have a regular and sufficient supply of well-qualified ministers of the Gospel

[1] See Sprague's *Annals*, Vol. III, pp. 237–239. [2] *Life*, p. 277.
[3] *Princeton Theological Review*, iii (1905), p. 575.

until every Presbytery, or at least every Synod shall have under its direction a Seminary established for the single purpose of educating youth for the ministry".[1] This sermon gave an impetus to the enterprise and in 1811 the General Assembly proceeded to elect a professor to commence a training-school at Princeton. The fathers and brethren waited upon God, and silently and prayerfully gave their votes. They felt the solemnity and importance of the occasion. Their choice fell, almost unanimously, on Archibald Alexander.

After serious consideration, he accepted the appointment and was inducted as Professor in 1812. For the first year he was the sole instructor. Doubtless his son was right in saying: "These were the most anxious moments of his life." He drafted the three years' course, wrote lectures, taught all the classes and adjusted his teaching to the varying efficiency of students from different institutions of learning. At his inauguration on August 12, 1812, the first discourse was given by Dr. Samuel Miller, who was destined to be his colleague for nearly forty years. Dr. Miller said, prophetically, "We have more reason to rejoice, to felicitate one another, on the establishment of this Seminary, than on the achievement of a great national victory, or on making a splendid addition to our national territory. It is the beginning, as we trust, of an extensive and permanent system, from which blessings may flow to millions while we are sleeping in the dust".[2] Lying on the rail of the gallery listening to Dr. Alexander's inaugural address was a boy of fourteen—Charles Hodge.

The Seminary began its course in troublous times—the United States had just declared war on Great Britain. Dr. Samuel Miller was elected by the General Assembly of 1813 to the Chair of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government at the Seminary, but owing to severe illness did not take up duty till December of that year. *The Biblical Repertory* was commenced by his junior colleague, Charles Hodge, in 1825 (Charles Hodge had joined the teaching staff of the Seminary in 1820, as Instructor, and in 1822 became Professor). To this Journal and its successor, *The Princeton Review*, Dr. Alexander was a frequent contributor. These Journals, with their lineal descendants, down to the *Westminster Theological Journal* of our day, have wielded a vast influence. Of his books, probably

[1] *Life*, pp. 314–315. [2] *Life of Dr. Alexander*, p. 346.

the best known and most useful was his *Canon of the Old and New Testaments Ascertained*, of which there was a British as well as an American edition. Also of vast importance were the Sabbath afternoon "Conferences" for the students which he commenced. His hearers at these Conferences often felt that their eyes were opened to look on things invisible.

Mention must be made of the controversy which arose in the years following 1830, as a result of which the General Assembly divided into the Old School and New School bodies. There was in the Church a departure from the Calvinism of the Westminster type. Rev. Albert Barnes was prosecuted for doctrinal error before the Second Presbytery of Philadelphia in 1835.

Dr. Alexander was a thorough Old School man, and though keenly desirous of peace, he felt that the two parties could not much longer remain in one church. Yet he took no leading part in the division which came in 1838. "The Princeton gentlemen", as the Seminary professors were called, felt—with the exception of Dr. Breckinridge—that the Old School party should not take the lead in forcing a division and they did not agree with all the actions of their Old School brethren. When the division took place, they cast in their lot without a moment's hesitation with the Old School Assembly. Samuel Miller, Jr., in his life of his father, confesses that the more advanced Old School men in their bolder policy in 1836 were wiser than "the Princeton gentlemen."[1]

Till almost the very close of his life Dr. Alexander continued to teach.

> "At the stroke of the bell, he might be seen without fail, issuing from his study door, and going across the small space which divided the Seminary from his grounds; much bent, and with eyes turned to the ground, as he paced slowly on, wrapped in his cloak and with his profuse silver locks waving in the wind; but often, as if at some sudden dash of thought, he would quicken his steps almost to running and ascend the threshold with alacrity."[2]

The last sermon he preached was delivered to the students in the Seminary Chapel on September 7, 1851, on Isaiah liv. 13: "All thy children shall be taught of God."

Dr. Charles Hodge tells of his visit to his venerated colleague in his last illness. "For the first time in my life he called me his dear son." At the very last visit, he gave Dr. Hodge the injunction that no word of eulogy be spoken at his funeral service,

[1] *Life of Samuel Miller*, ch. xxxiv, p. 316. [2] *Life*, pp. 596–597.

and then with a smile, " handed me a white bone walking-stick, carved and presented to him by one of the chiefs of the Sandwich Islands, and said, ' You must leave this to your successor in office, that it may be handed down as a kind of symbol of orthodoxy '."[1] From that last interview Charles Hodge returned to his own home in an agony of weeping.

On his sick-bed, when relieved from pain, he said that such relief was often to be attributed to the ministration of angels; and added, " They are always around the dying beds of God's people ". He stated, " My views of theological truth are what they have always been ".

When his family returned from church and spoke of Dr. Hodge's sermon, he said warmly, " He is a noble man ". On October 22, 1851, he passed away peacefully.

God prepared Moses in two periods of forty years for his position in the third forty as leader of Israel. So He fashioned Archibald Alexander in a period of forty years for his great work at Princeton in his second forty. His experiences in his native Virginia, his first-hand knowledge of Revivals with their attendant blessings and dangers, his contacts with various erroneous systems in Virginia and in New England, his Hampden-Sidney Presidency, his pastorate in the metropolis of the nation, which brought him before the whole Church—in all these the great Potter was moulding him for the future task.

Dr. Alexander was distinguished for his profound acquaintance with the human heart " in all its morbid and healthful exercises ". He excelled in unmasking the heart of saint or sinner to itself. Dr. Theodore Woolsey ventured to call him " the Shakespeare of the Christian heart ". He kept an open door for his students, and many there were who sought his aid as counsellor and physician of the soul. A noted man in Princeton remarked that Dr. Alexander must have been a very wicked man in his youth, his knowledge of the evil of the heart was so profound!

He was distinguished for his wide learning, his simple, earnest piety, and, as his colleague Dr. Miller said, his " enormous modesty ".

We must mention, too, the affection which prevailed between him and his colleagues and brethren. Dr. Miller, Dr. Hodge and he lived and worked together for many years

[1] *Life*, pp. 605–606.

" in absolute singleness of mind, in simplicity and godly sincerity, in utter unselfishness and devotion to the common cause, each in honour preferring one another. Truth and candour was the atmosphere they breathed; loyalty, brave and sweet, was the spirit of their lives ".[1] To their students through all the years the concord and affection of these servants of Christ was a beautiful sight. This concord sprang from devotion to the same great system of truth. We note with interest that Dr. Alexander took delight in urging upon the Directors of the Seminary the release of his young colleague, Charles Hodge, for two years' study in Germany, while he warned him that there he would breathe " a poisoned atmosphere ".

His classes at Princeton grew from nine in the first year until at his death 1837 young men had sat at his feet. One of the most famous of these, Charles Hodge, paid tribute to Dr. Alexander as exercising the chief formative influence in his life, but a great host of others were brought near to God, and enabled to see the glory of Christ through the testimony of his lips and life. He passed on the torch to Charles Hodge, and Hodge to other men who were good and true exponents of the Old School Theology. Dr. J. Gresham Machen, who went forth from Princeton to found Westminster Seminary, would have delighted to own indebtedness to Archibald Alexander, the co-founder and first teacher of the Princeton School.

At the meeting of the General Assembly following the death of Joseph Addison Alexander in 1860, Dr. Charles Hodge declared on the floor of the Assembly that he thought Dr. Addison Alexander the greatest man he had ever seen. Some fourteen years later, on reflection, he acknowledged he had been rash and unwise. We believe his maturer judgment would have coincided with that of his son, A. A. Hodge, that, great as Dr. Addison Alexander undoubtedly was, Dr. Archibald Alexander was " incomparably the greatest, as he was the first, of that illustrious family ".[2] Dr. Samuel Miller would have concurred in that high estimate; while his colleague was still in his prime he said of him, " I solemnly believe that Dr. Alexander is the greatest man who walks the earth ".

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[1] A. A. Hodge, *Life of Charles Hodge*, p. 378.
[2] *Life of Charles Hodge*, pp. 454, 557.