

The Change of Name

BY THE REV. M. SWICK

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THINKING of the change of the name of our Church in 1867, and looking at the records somewhat, I find that very few are now living, of the ministers at least, who were members of the General Synod that year. It occurs to me, therefore, that some of the later generation of readers of THE CHRISTIAN INTELLIGENCER might like to know something of the particulars of the why and the how that change was brought about.

Up to 1792, what is now called The Reformed Church in America was generally known as the Church in America, or simply the Dutch Church, and was affiliated with, and to some extent under the care and oversight of, the Reformed Church of the Netherlands. Then, in 1792, it was organized as a separate body, and adopted as its name the Reformed Church, and later, in 1819, it was incorporated as the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church in North America, under which name and title it continued until 1867.

Previous to that date, however, there had been for some years, among certain of its adherents, a feeling of dissatisfaction, under the impression that the name "Dutch" was a hindrance to its growth and usefulness. Many persons, it was alleged, who might otherwise be disposed to unite with our Church and become its supporters, were repelled by the name and went into other Churches, and that others, who were unacquainted with the facts, were kept away under the supposition that it was a Church of immigrant foreigners, in which the preaching was in the Dutch or German language. On the other hand, of course, it was vigorously denied by others that such was the case to any serious and hurtful extent, and they claimed also that the name Dutch was really an advantage and ought to be retained because of its well known and honorable historic and family associations.

At the meeting of the General Synod, in New York City, in 1866, the matter was brought up and discussed pro and con, and, as the result, a committee was appointed to consider the advisability of a change and to report the next year. That committee was composed of Rev. Messrs. H. D. Ganse, C. Van Santford, Thomas De Witt, E. S. Porter and Elders S. B. Schiefelin, J. R. Wortendyke and R. Pruyn. Accordingly, at the meeting of the General Synod in Geneva, N. Y., in June, 1867, this committee made an elaborate report, reviewing the history of the name and its significance, and the arguments for a change. They recommended, at first, I think, not exactly the dropping of the word "Dutch," but a change of the name to "the Reformed (Dutch) Church in the United States," with the word Dutch in brackets; but, if so, it was soon amended to "Reformed Church in the United States," with the

Reformed Dutch Church," to be placed in the title pages of the constitution and hymn books and other publications. The report was read by the chairman, the Rev. H. D. Ganse, D.D., to an interested and somewhat excited audience, and printed copies were afterwards distributed. Then the debate began on the motion of approval, with intense earnestness on both sides, and was continued through parts of several days, so that with the other work to be done the sessions of the Synod were prolonged until Friday of the second week. Various and some curious amendments were proposed and for the most part rejected; and the whole thing was most persistently opposed by a respectable minority. Dr. Talbot W. Chambers, of the Collegiate Church of New York City, might perhaps be called the leader of the opposition, who argued and pleaded with all his well known skill and ability as a debater. Yet the great majority seemed to be in favor of the proposed change; and the final vote was about to be taken on the adoption of the report when the Rev. C. H. Edgar, of Easton, Pa., suddenly arose, and said, in substance (I quote from memory and may not have his exact words): "Mr. President, I move, as an amendment, that the words 'Reformed Church in the United States' be changed to 'Reformed Church in America.' Then we may say:

"No pent up Utica contracts our powers
But the whole boundless universe is ours."

The motion was greeted with laughter and applause, and was adopted by acclamation. It was afterwards known, I believe, that the Synod of the German Reformed Church was in session at the very time, and dropping the word German had adopted as their name "The Reformed Church in the United States"; and, but for this happy suggestion by Dr. Edgar, we would have faced the complication of having adopted the same name as this other sister Church. The report as thus amended, with the proposed change of name, was then formally adopted by a recorded aye and nay vote of 110 to 8.

The action, of course, went down to the Classes for approval or rejection; but instead of waiting until the next year it was decided to hold an adjourned meeting of the General Synod in the following November, in order to complete some unfinished business and to receive the report of the action of the Classes at their meetings in the fall. This adjourned meeting was held in the North Dutch Church of Albany, November 20 and 21, 1867. The Stated Clerk then reported that five of the Classes had voted in the affirmative and six in the negative, and then this action of the Classes was affirmed by the Synod by an aye and nay vote of 111 to 7, and the change of the name was an accomplished fact.