

Parable of the Iron Bedstead

In the days of Abecedarian Popes it was decreed that a good Christian just measured three feet, and for the peace and happiness of the church it was ordained that an iron bedstead, with a wheel at one end and a knife at the other, should be placed at the threshold of the church, on which the Christians should all be laid. This bedstead was just three feet in the casement on the exactest French scales. Every Christian, in those days, was laid on this bedstead; if less than the standard, the wheel and a rope was applied to him to stretch him to it; if he was too tall, the knife was applied to his extremities. In this way they kept the good Christians, for nearly a thousand years, all of one stature. Those to whom the knife or the wheel were applied either died in the preparation, or were brought to the saving standard.

One sturdy fellow, called Martin Luther, was born in those days, who grew to the enormous height of four feet: he of course feared the bedstead and the knife, and kept off at a considerable distance deliberating how he might escape. At length he proclaimed that there was a great mistake committed by his ancestors in fixing upon *three feet* as the proper standard of the stature of a good Christian. He made proselytes to his opinions; for many who had been tried on the three-foot bedstead, who were actually *four feet*, had found a way of contracting themselves to the popular standard. These began to stretch themselves to their natural stature, and Luther had, in a few years, an iron bedstead *four feet* long, fashioned and fixed in his churches, with the usual appendages. The wheel and the knife soon found something to do in Luther's church; and it became as irksome to flesh and blood to be stretched by a wheel and rope to four feet, or to be cut down to that stature, as it was to be forced either up or down to the good and sacred *three-foot* stature. Moreover, men grew much larger after Luther's time than before, and a considerable proportion of them advanced above his perfect man; insomuch that John Calvin found it expedient to order his iron bedstead to be made six inches longer, with the usual regulating appendages. The next generation found even Calvin's measure as unaccommodating as Luther's; and the Independents, in their greater wisdom and humanity fixed their perfect Christian at the enormous stature of *five feet*. The Baptists at this time began to think of constructing an iron bedstead to be in fashion with their neighbors, but kindly made it six inches longer than the Congregationalists, and dispensed with the knife, thinking that there was likely to be more need for two wheels than one knife, which they accordingly affixed to their apparatus. It was always found, that in the same proportion as the standard was lengthened, Christians grew; and now the bedstead is actually proved to be at least six inches too short. It is now expected that six inches will be humanely added; but this will only be following up an evil precedent; for experience has proved, that as soon as the iron bedstead is lengthened, the people will grow apace, and it will be found too short even when extended to *six feet*. Why not, then, dispense with this piece of popish furniture in the church, and allow Christians of every stature to meet at the same fireside and eat at the same table?--The parable is just, and the interpretation thereof easy and sure.

Every attempt at reformation since the rude but masculine efforts of Luther, has been based upon the same principles. He did not like the popish superstructure, notwithstanding he built upon the same foundation. So did all his successors. They all divided the New Testament into two chapters.

The title of the one was, *the essentials*--and the title of the other was *the non-essentials*. In one party the one chapter, and in another party, the other, is much the larger. Still the volume comprises but two chapters, however disproportioned they may be. Many efforts have been made to reduce the chapter of Essentials into narrower limits; but as it is reduced the other is enlarged, and the old division is kept up. The book called The Creed contains all the essentials; and as they are there correctly arranged and soundly digested, this book is more the subject of controversy than the Testament, which has the essentials and the non-essentials all jumbled together.

Suppose, then, that a number of churches should agree to throw aside the iron bedstead, and take the book in one chapter, and call it their Creed and Book of Discipline. What then? Oh! says Puritans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, &c. &c. do this. Stop, my friend, not one of them dare trust themselves upon this bottom; they all have their creeds and disciplines to keep them from sinking. What then if an experiment should be made, and a fair trial of the adequacy of the Divine Book should be given; and whenever it fails of the promised end, let any other device be tried. But among all the experiments of this age and country, it is nowhere recorded that such a trial has been made and failed. I am aware of all that can be said on the other side, and still I assert that no such an experiment and result are on record. And, moreover, I do not think it is likely that it shall ever be proved by actual experiment that the New Testament, without a creed, is insufficient to preserve the unity, peace, and purity of anyone congregation, or of those of any given district. But above all, let us have no more iron bedsteads, with or without wheels or knives.

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Editor - Christian Baptist

October, 1826