

ON THE REVISION
OF
THE CONFESSION OF FAITH.

I.

THE PROPOSAL TO REVISE THE WESTMIN-
STER CONFESSION.*

IF we may judge by the comments of the secular and undenominational press, the recent action of the Presbyterian General Assembly in inquiring of its presbyteries whether they desire a revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith, is likely to be much misapprehended by those who are insufficiently acquainted with all the circumstances of the case. It may seem natural to infer from such an action, that the Presbyterians, speaking through their highest court, are proposing to themselves a rather thorough-going revision of the doctrinal basis on which they have so long stood; that such an agitation could not arise save in response to a wide-spread, spontaneous movement in the Church, by which a large body of its ministers and adherents have drifted into a position of opposition to

* Printed in *The Independent* for July 18, 1889.

the doctrines taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith, or at least of dissatisfaction with the way in which they are taught in it; and that the movement thus begun is sure to issue in extensive changes of the mode of statement or of the doctrines themselves of the Westminster Standards, if not in the total discarding of them as antiquated relics of a past age and the substitution for them of a new creed more accordant with the living faith of the Church. Nevertheless, no one of these inferences is justified by the facts. The sole legitimate deduction is rather that the Presbyterian Church is so true to its profession that God alone, speaking in His Word, is “Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men,” and so jealous of the rights of the Church as over against its subordinate standards, which are its creation, not its mistress: that it keeps constantly before itself the expression of its testimony to doctrine, and thus secures that that testimony shall always remain the living voice of the Church bearing its witness to the truth of God, as it apprehends and lives by it.

I.

The present overture does not contemplate change of doctrine, and does not explicitly propose change even in the statement of doctrine. In its preamble it recites as the ground on which it bases itself:

“*Whereas*, Overtures have come to this General Assembly from fifteen Presbyteries. . . . asking for some revision of the Confession of Faith; and *whereas*, in the opinion of many of our ministers and people, some forms of statement in our Confession of Faith are liable to misunderstanding, and expose our system of doctrine to unmerited criticism.”

Here no dissatisfaction with the doctrine itself is recited; rather it is suggested that criticism of the doctrine is un-

merited and the fruit of misunderstanding, and may be remedied by a more careful and better statement of the same doctrine. It is only revision of “forms of statement,” then, that is contemplated in the overture. And it avoids going so far as to propose even this. The preamble continues:

“And *whereas*, Before any definite steps should be taken for revision of our Standards, it is desirable to know whether there is any general desire for such revision.”

The “revision of our Standards” here is, of course, the kind of revision defined in the preceding clause, and this sense is necessarily carried over to the concluding resolution:

“*Therefore, resolved*, That this General Assembly overture to the Presbyteries the following questions: 1. Do you desire a revision of the Confession of Faith? 2. If so, in what respects and to what extent?”

If anything were needed to vindicate the foregoing exposition of the meaning of the overture, it would be supplied by the brief debate that was held in the Assembly upon its adoption. It was adopted just in this form on the distinct ground that it was a colorless inquiry into the will of the presbyteries, and did not propose either revision or no revision to them; and so little was it thought to concern the substance of any doctrine that the moderator ruled that the introduction of doctrinal discussion into the debate concerning it was out of order.

II.

That even this colorless overture was not the outgrowth of any general and spontaneous movement in the Church, the history of its origination in the Assembly sufficiently shows. Its origin is traced to an overture sent up by the

Presbytery of Nassau to the General Assembly of 1889, asking for the revision of the third chapter of the Confession of Faith (that on “God’s Eternal Decree”) on the ground that “in its present form it goes beyond the Word of God, and is opposed to the convictions and repugnant to the feelings of very many of our most worthy and thoughtful members.” That the Assembly did not consider the matter very urgent is sufficiently evinced by its neglecting to act on it further than by referring it to the next Assembly. In the interval between the two Assemblies, the Presbytery of Nassau made a strong effort to enlist the Church at large in its overture, sending a circular letter out requesting the co-operation of the other presbyteries. The success of the effort was not striking—the great majority of the presbyteries paying no attention to the request, and the great majority of those who did take up the matter refusing in one way or another (usually by laying the appropriate motion on the table) to enter into the movement. Only some fifteen presbyteries out of upward of two hundred responded by appropriate action; and it was in answer to their request thus obtained that the Assembly passed the overture. Even this meagre result, we shrewdly suspect, does not represent an impulse wholly native to our soil or Church. In these days of easy communication the ends of the earth are brought very close together, and contagion is easy if not unavoidable. It is significant that the Committee of the Presbytery of Nassau, in urging co-operation on the other presbyteries, were not willing to rest their appeal on the merits of the case; but were careful to adduce the examples of the Scotch United Presbyterians and the Presbyterian Church of England. And the contagion of the present restlessness of the foreign Presbyterian Churches in their relation to the Confession of Faith, appears to us to be the source of all the apparent strength

the present movement has among us. The adduction of the example of these foreign Churches—and, much more, any attempt to imitate it—is, however, the fruit of a misapprehension. Their struggles now are simply efforts to attain some such free and yet safe relation to the Confession of Faith as the American Church has enjoyed ever since it adopted the Westminster Symbols in 1729. From the very beginning, the American Church, whose present formula asks of its office-bearers acceptance of the Westminster Standards only as containing “the system of doctrine” which they believe to be true and Scriptural, has possessed all the liberty which the Free and Established Churches of Scotland, for example, are now seeking. Up to to-day those Churches have required confession of sincere belief “of the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith. . . .to be the truths of God” and the confession of the signers’ personal faith. Despite Dr. Candlish’s efforts to explain it away, this obviously means and was intended by the Assembly of 1711, which framed the formula, to mean (in the present Principal Cunningham’s words) acceptance of “the whole doctrine” (“every detail and syllable,” as he elsewhere exaggeratingly expresses it,) of the Confession, not of its “doctrine as a whole.” Instead of being disturbed or infected by the restlessness of these Churches, bound to a confession with a strictness that must wound every tender conscience which finds any phraseology in the document to which it can raise any exception, we should pity them as brethren still in durance, and point out to them the safe pathway through which we escaped more than a century and a half ago. Certainly, so far as there are those among us who are led to believe that the Confession of Faith needs revision, because the foreign Churches are more or less restless under their relation to it, the movement is not only not a spontaneous one among us, but even a spurious one.

III.

What has already been said will suggest some of the reasons why we do not think that the issue of the present overture will be extensive doctrinal change, or even important verbal change, in the Standards of the Presbyterian Church. As discussion goes on, it can scarcely fail to become increasingly plain to all, not only that the Presbyterian Church is satisfied with her Standards, but that she loves them and finds in them the best statement—most moderate and most inclusive as well as most logical and most complete—of the truth of God as she apprehends it, that has ever been framed. Some of the reasons that must, as it seems to us, operate to lead her, not blindly and fanatically, but intelligently and liberally, to refuse to undertake any important revision of these time-honored formularies may be indicated as follows:

(1). So long as the Church remains as heartily convinced as she at present undoubtedly is, that what is known as the Calvinistic system of doctrine is the truth of God as delivered through the prophets and apostles, she is without grievance in her relations to her Standards. There is always an infelicity in requiring individuals to affirm of any public Confession that it is the confession, in all its parts, of their private faith. A *public* document by that very fact cannot be in all its parts just the expression of the *private* faith which every one of its signers would frame for himself. To require a large body of ministers to affirm of any public Confession that they accept its “whole doctrine” as “truths of God” is a strain too great to put upon conscience, and must foster on the one hand a spirit of evasion and subterfuge, and on the other hand a keen sense of every infelicity in language or conception in the Confession and a restless anxiety to have them removed—hopeless task though this obviously is, seeing that the very phraseology which is oppressive to one is the only tolerable expression

of the faith of another. The American Church has required of its office-bearers, from the beginning, however, subscription only to “all the essential and necessary articles,” or as, in our later formula, to “the system of doctrine” in the Confession, as “good forms of sound words.” In our view, this subscription is an ideal one. It does not ask us to affirm that the Westminster Confession is perfect or infallible, or that we adopt every proposition in it; but only that we heartily accept the system of doctrine taught in it, and all the doctrines that are essential to the integrity of that system. The office-bearer in the Presbyterian Church thus is merely asked to affirm that he recognizes in the Confession of Faith an expression—an adequate expression—of the system of truth which he believes God has given to the Church. He is at liberty to believe, if he will, that the Heidelberg Catechism is an equally good or better expression of the same system; or the Canons of the Synod of Dort; or the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England; or any other sound Reformed creed. But he must believe in this system. So long as we are Calvinists, then, we say, the relation that Presbyterian office-holders bear to the Confession is an ideal one; their subscription is just such as must operate, when honestly taken and administered, to keep out all the wrong men and to keep in all the right ones.

(2). So long as we are Calvinists, we may add, our whole situation with reference to our Creed is one that is incapable of improvement. The individual’s relation to the Creed might conceivably be improved, by letting him frame his own creed, which with care might be made an exact transcript of his personal faith; but just in proportion as this individual *credo* fitted the idiosyncrasies of his personal conceptions and modes of expression, it would be unacceptable in its details and forms to every other individual. No public creed can be framed which every individual of

some thousands of office-bearers can adopt as the exact expression of his personal faith. We need not go to the extreme of Mr. Taylor Innis, who says that “there is no honest or sane man who will pretend that any proposition in religious truth constructed by others, exactly expresses his own view of that religious truth”; but this is certainly in a measure true of all extended Confessions. However, then, we should alter the Confession of Faith, whether little or much, however we burdened it with *Declaratory Statements*, whether many or few, to whatever extent we should substitute for it other creeds, whether new or old, whether long or short, we should be at the end of the process exactly where we were in the beginning. We should still be face to face with a creed which we all could accept for system of doctrine, and which no one of us could accept in all its propositions and phrases. If our present Creed is acceptable to us, then, for system of doctrine—and that it is, ought to be evinced by the mere fact that we have all accepted it as such—it is hardly worth while to embark on extensive projects of revision in order to arrive at precisely the same haven from which we started out.

(3). And so long as we are Calvinists, we may add again, it seems hopeless to expect to improve upon the Westminster Confession in stating the system which we believe. The fact is that the Westminster Confession of Faith registers the high-water mark of the confessional statement of Calvinistic doctrine. Men have spoken of it in these latter days, indeed, as cold, scholastic, logical—standing at an extreme point in the development of Calvinism; and they have repeated these statements until many are ready to believe them. But it is almost impossible to avoid suspecting that such deliverances rest on insufficient acquaintance with the document itself. Logical no doubt it is—is to be logical a fault?—but it is no less devout than logical. The

product of an age “when” (as Dr. Alex. F. Mitchell describes it) “the Church was still under the happy influence of a marvellous revival, when the Word of God was felt as a living, quickening, transforming power, and preached, not as a tradition but as the very power and wisdom of God,” and framed “by men of ripe scholarship and devoted piety, who have remained our models of earnest preaching, and our guides in practical godliness, even until this day,” it would be strange, indeed, if it lacked that atmosphere and tone of vital godliness which, as a matter of fact, fills every phrase of it, and enters unawares into the heart of every one who really feeds on it. And it stands at an extreme point in the development of Calvinism, not in the sense that it embodies an extreme Calvinism, but only in the sense that it has skimmed the cream of moderate and tolerant Calvinistic thought. No Calvinism is sweeter, purer, more devout, more catholic, than the Calvinism of the Westminster Standards. The Confession of Faith is, as it has been well phrased, “a model of guarded strength in moderation.” Baillie tells us that it was “cried up,” at the time, “by many of their greatest opposites, as the best Confession yet extant”; and from that day to this, it has never ceased to command the admiration of even those who could not accept it—as, for example, of the late Dr. Curry, who characterized it as “the ablest, clearest, and most comprehensive system of Christian doctrine ever framed.” So intent were its framers on so stating doctrine as to throw the stress on the practical and religious value of it, and so careful were they to state it so moderately as to make it inclusive of all forms of truly Calvinistic thought, that it seems scarcely possible to touch one of their guarded clauses without both hardening and narrowing it. When once some specific revision is seriously attempted, the Church is likely to fall back on Dr. Mitchell’s advice: “It will be

time enough to think of change, when a school of theologians of riper scholarship and more patient study of higher culture and deeper piety, shall arise among us”;—which time is not yet. We will certainly do well to cling to the Westminster Confession until we can better it.

(4). In circumstances such as these, the historical integrity of so venerable and noble a document will appeal to the Church as worth preserving. Presbyterians are no relic-worshippers; they claim the right, and have exercised it, of adapting their Creed to their living faith. But when nothing is to be gained and perhaps much lost they will not fail to consider it a certain vandalism to throw away, merely in the license of change, a flag under which so many battles have been fought and so many glorious victories won, and perhaps even more glorious defeats suffered. They will not keep the old, merely because it is old; but they will not exchange the tried and loved old banner for a doubtful new one, merely because it is new.

(5). Lastly, in learning to appreciate anew, as renewed study of it will enable it to do, the true breadth and catholicity of the Westminster Confession, the Church is apt to remember too, its value as a rallying-point for Christian unity. It was framed distinctly as an *irenicon*. The purpose of those engaged on it was to vindicate the faith of the English Church as not out of harmony with the Consensus of the Reformed churches, and to bring together under one Confession the various bodies then in Great Britain. Its history is that of an *irenicon*. By its means the Churches of England and Scotland were brought for the first and only time under the bonds of a single Confession. It was adopted by three distinct denominations. It remains to-day the creed of all the great Presbyterian Churches of the English-speaking world. Only yesterday two great denominations of American Presbyterians were

able to unite on the Westminster Standards, pure and simple. If we are to have another reunion of Presbyterians in America shortly, it must be on the same basis. Nay, such is its moderation and catholicity, that we may even hope that it may serve as a basis for even broader federations of Reformed churches. Certainly, we may well listen to Dr. Mitchell's wise words: "Our only hope of a really united Presbyterian Church lies in substantial adherence to the Confession." We do not think Presbyterians will forget this in making up their minds how to deal with their Confession.

Doubtless, as time passes, Presbyterians will think of other, perhaps more cogent reasons, for holding fast to what is so good. But the reasons already alleged will suffice to supply some ground for our judgment that we are not embarked upon a discussion that is to see our old foundations of faith broken up. Meanwhile let us say that we earnestly hope discussion will nowhere be suppressed. The more the Westminster Confession of Faith is studied, and the better it is understood, the less likely is it to be either abandoned, explained away, or patched up with scraps of cruder new thinking. "Destroy it not, for a blessing is in it."