

## II.

## WHAT IS THE CONFESSION OF FAITH?\*

THE call which the General Assembly has made upon the Presbyteries to consider, during this year, whether they desire any change made in the Westminster Confession of Faith, must operate primarily to lead serious men to renew their study of this venerable document. Whatever may issue from the year's discussions, certainly nothing but good can come from this renewed study of the history and teaching of the standards to which all Presbyterian office-bearers have assented as "containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures." And certainly the results of the study cannot fail to quicken in our hearts gratitude to God for His gracious dealings with our fathers in enabling them to frame and to transmit through so many years to us, so complete and vitally devout a testimony to His truth as it has been revealed in His Word. We may be excused for feeling some pride in formularies which have commanded not only the assent of all classes of Calvinists for two hundred years, but also the admiration of the liberal-minded among other forms of faith, such as, for instance, Dean Stanley, who declares that the Westminster Confession of Faith "exhibits far more depth of theological insight than any other" Protestant Confession, and the

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late Dr. Curry, editor of the New York *Christian Advocate*, who calls it, “the ablest, clearest, and most comprehensive system of Christian doctrine ever framed.”

PROVIDENTIAL PREPARATION FOR FRAMING THE WESTMINSTER  
CONFESSION.

So remarkable a product, of course, was not obtained without a providential preparation, by which the framing of the Confession fell upon times and into the hands of men specially fitted to the task. No one who looks back upon the history of early Protestantism can fail to perceive that the times were ripening toward the middle of the seventeenth century, and especially in England, for just such an enterprise. During the century or more that had elapsed since the Reformation, the Reformed Theology had developed into a mature and maturely tested system of truth, tried everywhere by the Scriptures and in the fires of controversy. The multitudes of Confessions which had been produced by the first age of the Reformation had served their purpose of testifying to the essential Christianity and to the Augustinianism of the scattered congregations, and of uniting them in the bonds of a common sympathy and effort; some of them had been rewrought or practically superseded by documents fuller or better adapted to the changing conditions; and all were being collected, compared, harmonized under the pressure of the felt need of a comprehensive and universally acceptable statement of the Reformed faith.

The course of controversy had also reached a stage peculiarly favorable for the confessional statement of truth. The first bitterness of both the Romish and Arminian controversies was over; and while the results of these debates were garnered for the advantage of exact and carefully balanced statement, the sharpness of the anti-Romish polemic

of early Protestantism and of the Dutch anti-Arminian polemic was no longer felt necessary. Especially in England, where the Romanizing and Arminianizing school of Laud had recently been in the ascendancy, and had not scrupled to make tyrannical use of its power, men of all shades of Augustinianism were compacted together in a common love, and were little inclined to narrowness or ecclesiastical tyranny. They had “been burnt in the hand by that kind before,” as Dr. Tuckney, one of the chief members of the Assembly, expressed it. Thus, in the good providence of God, three important prerequisites to the framing of a Confession of permanent value were brought into conjunction: (1). The truth was prepared for well-considered and moderate statement, as over against its three permanent enemies—Romanism, Arminianism, and Prelacy. No Confession framed before the threshing out of these three controversies would have at all served the needs of the period which has intervened between the meeting of the Westminster Assembly and to-day; and no Confession framed with its chief polemical sides turned toward them can be said to be growing obsolescent so long as these tendencies are as aggressive as they are to-day. (2). In the course of these controversies, all the important forms of Calvinism had been developed, so that a Confession framed with the intention of including them all is still inclusive of all the important types of Calvinistic thought. And (3). The experience of the Calvinists during the Laudian oppression had compacted them into a single body, enabled them to look upon their differences as relatively unimportant, and inclined them to seek to frame a Confession which should be inclusive of all soundly Calvinistic thought, and which should exclude only those errors which cut to the roots of the system which all Calvinists unite in believing to be the truth of God.

But above all else, the theological thinking of the times was suffused, as perhaps has never been equally true, with the breath of vital piety. Great as it was in theology, this was the age of great preachers, even more than of great theologians. “We fall very far short,” says Dr. A.F. Mitchell, very justly, “of the true conception of that time, unless we remember that it was a season of spiritual revival, as deep and extensive as any that has since occurred in the history of the British churches.” Or if we prefer to hear a secular historian: “The distinctive feature of Puritanism,” says Mr. S.R. Gardiner, “was not to be found in its logical severity of doctrine, or in its peculiar forms of worship, but in its clear conception of the immediate relation existing between every individual soul and its God, and in its firm persuasion that every man was intrusted with a work, which he was bound to carry out for the benefit of his fellow-creatures.” The sermons of the day are still looked back to as among the most godly and powerful ever preached, and as Dr. Mitchell reminds us, “No writings in practical divinity have been so extensively read, none have so long maintained their hold on the minds of the religiously disposed in Britain and America, as those of the great Puritan divines of the seventeenth century.” Thus, while the theology of the Reformed churches was being matured, and the course of controversy was bringing it about that the deepest and broadest lines of thought, which run through all the Christian ages, were engrossing the minds of men, a body of pious and devoted preachers of the word was being prepared, who could not state the precious truths of the Gospel without suffusing their statement with the breath of true godliness. As Dr. Mitchell eloquently sums up: “The Assembly of divines which framed the Confession, may be said, humanly speaking, to have come just at the last moment of time when such an

Assembly was possible, when 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, by men of ripe scholarship and devoted piety, who have remained our models of earnest preaching and our guides in practical godliness, even unto this day.”

SPIRIT AND INTENTION OF THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY.

The English Reformation was from the beginning Augustinian; and it was the Anglo-Catholic irruption which first broke its cordial relations with the other Reformed Churches as well as its internal harmony. The doctrinal (as distinguished from the more pressing ecclesiastical) object for which the Westminster Assembly was called together and to the subserving of which it addressed itself, was the two-fold one of vindicating the Protestant soundness of the Church of England before the general body of the Reformed Churches, as well as the restoration of its internal harmony and the institution of a doctrinal uniformity with the Church of Scotland. Catholicity and harmony were, therefore, its key-notes. Of course there was no intention of embracing the errors of Romanism, or of Arminianism, or of Prelacy; these were the causes and occasions of all the difficulties which the English Church had had to suffer. But its formularies were meant to be as broad and catholic as the accepted theology of the Reformation would permit; and it was hoped that by its labors all true Protestants in Britain might be united in defense of the sum and substance of the doctrine of the Reformed Churches. “If its members,” says Dr. Mitchell advisedly, “had one idea more dominant than another, it was not, as they are sometimes still caricatured, that of setting forth with greater one-sided-

ness and exaggeration the doctrines of election and preterition (for they did little more as to these mysterious topics than repeat what Ussher had already formulated), but that of setting forth the whole scheme of reformed doctrine in harmonious development in a form of which their country should have no cause to be ashamed in presence of any of the sister Churches of the Continent, and above all in a form which would conduce greatly to the fostering of Christian knowledge and Christian life.” Working in this spirit, and especially with a desire to retain the essence of the earlier English and Irish Articles (possibly as a vindication of their historical continuity as the Church of England), everything narrow or one-sided was excluded, and a strong effort was made to include all legitimate shades of Calvinistic opinion. The publication of the Minutes of the Assembly reveals this catholic and inclusive tendency in a very strong light. At every point care was taken to reach substantial unanimity, and it was ever deemed a sufficient objection to a mode of statement that it was exclusive of one or another type of Calvinism. Free speech was permitted to or rather demanded of all; and perhaps in no council before or since have all doctrinal points been more thoroughly debated, more anxiously canvassed or more carefully stated. The result is that these Standards are a model of guarded strength in moderation, and have by their own inherent merit won their way to acceptance in more churches and retained their vigor through longer years than perhaps any other Protestant creed. As they are the most complete, so are they the most carefully framed, and the most inclusive, and the most acceptable, of all the standards of the Reformation. It can scarcely be necessary to stop to point out in detail the characteristic excellences of the Confession: its clear analysis, its lucid definitions, its atmosphere of devout piety, its complete-

ness, its logical exactness, the richness of its phraseology. It will perhaps be more useful to occupy ourselves with some remarks upon a few of the chief objections that are most commonly brought against it. Thus, by a negative path, we may yet, perhaps, find our way to some increased appreciation of its excellences.

#### THE CONFESSION A DOCTRINAL STANDARD.

1. It is frequently said, for instance, that the Confession is too formal, logical, analytical, theological in its form; and a creed more vital and religious is desiderated. It is not infrequently contrasted with the earlier Reformation creeds in this respect. There is this much truth underlying this objection: that the earlier Reformers needed to vindicate their position as Christians, in breaking away from the historical Church, and the form and contents of the creeds of the first age are affected by this fact; whereas by the middle of the seventeenth century it was not their Christianity that the Puritans needed to vindicate (that was evident to all men), but their doctrine that they desired to bring to a clear expression. In this sense the Westminster Confession is a theological rather than a religious document. It is a *doctrinal* standard; its purpose is to *define* truth rather than to *apply* it. As such it is analytical and logical in its order and forms of statement, and seeks to present the truths of God in a concatenated system which will appeal to the devout mind and instruct it in the truth, rather than directly to lay them on the heart. This can be esteemed a fault only if we misconceive the purpose and uses of a Confession as analogous to those of a sermon. If we understand, as we ought, a Confession to be a document intended to testify to the truth, to stand as a test of sound teaching, and to serve as a text-book of doctrine, we shall ask it to be more “religious” than “theological” in form

as little as we would ask the same, say for instance, of Dr. A.A. Hodge's "Outlines of Theology." That it should be filled from end to end with the breath of devotion—that the whole and every part should be redolent of the everywhere present Spirit—is true; but in this sense the Confession is the most "religious" of books, and no one who has really fed upon it has failed to draw from it draughts of spiritual strength.\* The objection is thus founded on a misapprehension of what a Confession is, if not also on an insufficient appreciation of the character of this particular Confession. There seems to be, in a word, some confusion of mind abroad which confounds a doctrinal standard with an exhortation on the one hand, or with a liturgical *credo* on the other—a confusion of thought, which, if carried to its logical conclusions, would ban all dogmatic treatises in favor of the sermons and liturgies of the world. Thus the Confession is condemned for not being what it does not profess to be, and what it could not be and continue to serve the ends for which it was framed and for which it continues to exist. The real question is, whether Churches need doctrinal standards as well as sermons and prayers—a theology as well as a life.

THE CONFESSION BASED ON THE LOVE OF GOD.

2. It is frequently objected again that the Confession makes too little relatively of the love of God and too much relatively of His sovereignty, and thus reverses the emphasis of the Bible. The framers of the Confession are not responsible, however, for this separation of God's love and sovereignty; to them His sovereignty seemed a loving sovereignty, and His love a sovereign love, and in founding the whole fabric of their Confession on the idea of God's

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\* Compare for example, Palmer's *Thornwell's Life and Letters*, pp. 162 and 165.



undeserved favor to lost sinners, they understood themselves to be glorifying his love to sinners. It is perfectly true that they seldom make use of the term “love”; but this is due to the exactness of their phraseology, by which they prefer to speak of God’s “goodness” and “grace”—by the one of which terms they designate His general love and by the other His special love for His people. When this is understood, so far are they from neglecting to emphasize the love of God, that it is rather within the truth to say that there is no other one subject so repeatedly and emphatically and lovingly dwelt upon. The “goodness” of God is one of His essential attributes (II., i.) and is infinite (V., iv.); nay, all “goodness” is in and of Him (II., ii.). It was in order to manifest His “goodness” that He created the world (IV., i.); and hence it is manifested by the light of nature (I., i.)—even that He is good and doeth good to all (XXI., i.); as also by the course of providence (I., I; V., iv.), which is so administered as to redound to the praise of His “goodness” (IV., i.). Even His dealings with sin manifest His goodness (V., iv.). Especially does His treatment of the elect, however, flow from His free and unchangeable love (XVII., ii.; III., v.; V., v.); His love follows them at every step, and every separate blessing bestowed upon them is a “grace”: effectual calling (X., ii.), faith (XIV., i.), justification (XI., iv.), pardon (XV., iii.), adoption (XII., i.), each is reckoned among the saving graces (XIII., i; XVI., iii; XVII., I; IX., iv.). All His acts to His children are those of a gracious God (V., v.), all things being made to work together for their good (V., vii.), even His correctings being gracious (V., v.) and all to the praise of His glorious grace (III., v.). There is certainly no lack of emphasis on God’s love here; though no doubt it is His sovereign love that is emphasized. Nor it is at all true that in glorifying God’s infinite love for His

children, the Confession minimizes or fails to give due recognition to His unspeakable love for all His reasonable creatures. His is the God of love: “Most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, the rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” (II., i.). Moved by this love He has voluntarily condescended to covenant with men as men, with a view to their fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward (VII., i.); and when men had spurned this offered favor, He was pleased to make a second covenant, “wherein he freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved” (VII., iii.)—an assertion of the universal sincere offer of salvation in Christ which is not taken away, but rather established, by the immediately subsequent assertion that God has further taken care that it shall not in all cases remain without fruition. To overlook these and similar passages in the effort to represent the Confession as disregarding the proportion of faith is most seriously to misrepresent its teaching. As a matter of fact the Confession builds its whole fabric on God’s love, and emphasizes His general love quite as strongly as the Scriptures themselves; although, like the Scriptures, it does not substitute a general benevolence for the whole round of Divine attributes, or deny His sovereignty or His justice in proclaiming His love.

#### THE CONFESSION NOT SUPRALAPSARIAN

3. The most remarkable objection which has been brought of late against the Confession, however, is directed against the statement of the doctrine of the “Decree of God” in the third chapter. In apparent forgetfulness of the ninth chapter of Romans and similar scriptures, it is said that this statement goes beyond Scripture; it is said that the

Westminster Confession stands alone among the Calvinistic Confessions of the Reformation in its statement of this doctrine; it is even said that the language of the Confession is here *supralapsarian*. What can be meant by some of these objections it is somewhat difficult to understand. Many—of whom Mr. Hardwick and Dr. Schaff are examples—seem to consider it illegitimate to state the doctrine of reprobation at all in a Confession. But the Westminster Confession does not stand alone in doing this; in varying measures of fullness, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Gallic and Belgic Confessions, the Irish Articles, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Formula Consensus Helvetica, state the doctrine. Nor can this view be consistently defended. No doubt, as the English delegates advised the divines of Dort, both “the sublime mystery of predestination,” and still more “the mystery of reprobation,” are subjects that ought to be “handled sparingly and prudently,” and treated of only “in the proper time and place, with tenderness and judgment,” and thus, indeed, the Confession (III., viii.) unites with them in advising; but is not a confession “a proper time and place”? No less an one than Calvin teaches us how impossible it is to avoid confessing the doctrine of sovereign reprobation if we confess the doctrine of election, of which it is not the logical inference, but the *other half*—writing with some sharpness: “Many, as if they wished to avert odium from God, so confess election as to deny that any one is reprobated. But this is puerile and absurd, because election itself could not exist without being opposed to reprobation. God is said to separate those whom He adopts to salvation. It were worse than absurd to say that chance gives others, or their own efforts acquire for them, what election alone confers on a few. Whom God passes by, therefore, He reprobates, and from no other cause than His determination

to exclude them from the inheritance which He predestines for His children” (Instit., III., 23, 1). “That the only will of God,” says Dr. Whitaker, advisedly, “is the cause of reprobation, being taken as it is contrary to predestination,\* not only St. Paul and St. Augustine, but the best and learnedest of the schoolmen have largely and invincibly proved.” And not only the “schoolmen,” but the Reformed Church at large—in its theologians and Confessions—have recognized the same obvious fact. Let any body of typical, Reformed theologians be looked into, and the result is the same. A glance over the citations in Heppe’s “*Dogmatic of the Evangelical Reformed Church*” will be sufficient for most men. Or if we desire rather the testimony of certain prophets of our own, may not the general attitude of moderate Calvinists on the sovereignty of reprobation (preterition) be sufficiently attested by the following three somewhat typical American theologians? “That as God has sovereignly destined certain persons, called the elect, through grace to salvation, so he has sovereignly decreed to withhold his grace from the rest; and that this withholding rests upon the unsearchable counsel of his own will, and is for the glory of his sovereign power” (Dr. A.A. Hodge, *Commentary on Conf. of Faith*, pp. 107-108). “Reprobation. This includes two parts, Preterition and Reprobation (Final Condemnation). The preterition is a sovereign act; the reprobation is a judicial act” (Dr. H.B. Smith, *System of Christian Theology*, p. 508). “The Reformed doctrine assumes that some

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\* Let this clause be observed: both Calvin and Whitaker teach that *reprobation* is sovereign, not *punishment*. Punishment rests “on their sins,” reprobation on God’s will. It is perhaps more usual, and less liable to mistake, to use the terms *negative reprobation* and *positive reprobation*, or the terms *preterition* and *reprobation* to express the two stages. But the doctrine is the same, under whatever phraseology.

men perish for their sins; and that those who are thus left to perish are passed by not because they are worse than others, but in the sovereignty of God” (Dr. C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II., 652; cf. pp. 712, 720, 723, *sq.*).

Is the Westminster Confession singular, then, in the place that is given to the statement of this deep mystery in the ordering of the matter of the Confession? By no means—both the Irish Articles and the Formula Consensus Helvetica give it precisely the same place—the place given it, moreover, by the great body of systematic theologians; as, for instance, to mention only a few names—Turretine, Amesius, Marck, De Moore, Mastricht, Maccovius, Marenius, Burmann, and John Milton, and John Norton among the oldest; Dick Ridgley, John Brown, John Gill, Dwight, in the last age; and in our own day, A.A. Hodge, Dabney, Strong, Hovey, Patton, Shedd, Van Oosterzee, and even the Lutherans, Luthardt and Weidner! No one of them likely to be charged with supralapsarianism! The fact of the matter is, this is the proper logical order in which to treat of the Decree of God, under which general head Predestination and Reprobation fall; and every Confession which treats the Decree of God in general, treats of it here, and with the one exception of the Shorter Catechism, they all treat of Predestination and Reprobation in immediate subordination to this caption. The Shorter Catechism (like the theologian Pictet) illustrates another possible distribution of the matter, viz., to treat of God’s decree in general here and to postpone the treatment of the special decree which relates to human destiny until the doctrine of salvation is taken up. And this variation is only a question of convenience of treatment, without dogmatic significance one way or the other. To erect this mere matter of preferred order of statement into a substantial difference between the Confession and the

Shorter Catechism is a most remarkable procedure; and to propose to revise the Confession because it treats the whole subject of the decree together and at the head of God's works, is more remarkable still. Shall we revise all the theologians mentioned above, who adopt the same arrangement of matter, along with the Confession? This quarrel is not with the Confession, but with the whole body and the very conception of Reformed theology.

But "the language of the Confession is supralapsarian." If this were so, it would certainly be remarkable. It is confessed that "the great body of the members" of the Assembly that framed it "were on the other side." It is confessed that the Shorter Catechism, framed by the same body, is infralapsarian. It is confessed that the formularies were formed with the utmost care—and with the utmost care to make them exhibit the accordance of the doctrine of the English Church with the other Reformed Churches, the creeds of none of which, it is confessed, are supralapsarian. It is proven that this very section is based upon and drawn from the Irish Articles, which were prepared by the moderate hand of Ussher, who certainly was no supralapsarian. The publication of the minutes of the Westminster Assembly reveals to us very clearly that those who framed this language intended that it should not be supralapsarian. A number of amendments were made in the original draught (which itself was not supralapsarian) with the expressed purpose of preventing it from even seeming to tend that way. Thus the words "in the *same* decree," and the words, "*to bring this to pass* God ordained to permit the fall," were stricken out. Their professed purpose was, as Mr. Reynolds expressed it, not to "put disputes and scholastic things into a Confession of Faith"; or as Mr. Calamy said, "that nothing be put in one way or the other." Finally, no one seems previously to have discovered the lan-

guage to be supralapsarian. To quote only three witnesses: Dr. Charles Hodge (“Systematic Theology,” ii. 317)—“The symbols of that Assembly, *while they clearly imply the infralapsarian view*, were yet so framed as to avoid offence to those who adopted the supralapsarian theory.” Dr. Philip Schaff (“Creeds of Christendom,” I., 454)—“The doctrine of predestination, *in its milder, infralapsarian form*, was incorporated into the Geneva Consensus, the Second Helvetic, the French, Belgic, and Scotch Confessions, *the Lambeth Articles, the Irish Articles*, the Canons of Dort, and *the Westminster Standards.*” (Cf., I., 635, *et passim.*) Dr. Alex. F. Mitchell (“Minutes,” p. 55)—“The same care was taken to avoid the insertion of anything which could be regarded as indicating a preference for *supralapsarianism.*” Last of all, the language itself is not supralapsarian, but such careful, moderate, guarded language as all Calvinists may adopt, not to say as natural religion itself forces on those who believe in an infinite personal God. Twisse himself, for example, points out to us that the statements here are not disputed, but common, ground among the Calvinistic parties. “It is true,” he says, “there is no cause of breach either of unity or amity between our divines upon this difference”—of supra- and infra-lapsarianism—“as I showed in my digressions (‘De Prædestination,’ Digress. 1), seeing neither of them derogates either from the prerogatives of God’s grace or of His sovereignty over His creatures, to give grace to whom He will, or to deny it to whom He will; and, consequently, to make whom He will vessels of mercy, and whom He will vessels of wrath; *but equally they stand for the divine prerogative in each.* And as for the ordering of God’s decrees of creation, permission of the fall of Adam, giving grace of faith and repentance unto some and denying it to others, and finally, saving some and damn-

ing others, *whereupon only arise the different opinions* as touching the object of predestination and reprobation, it is merely *apex logicus*, a point of logic. And were it not a mere madness to make a breach of unity or charity in the Church of God merely for a point of logic?\*" Some in these last days seem scarcely to share either Twisse's clearness of apprehension or his charity.

How, then, are we to account for the frequent assertion to-day that "the language is supralapsarian"? Partly by a strange confusion which confounds the order in which the decrees are stated with the statements of the order of the decrees; and which thus, because predestination is *treated* of before creation, asserts that predestination is "placed" before creation. As well might it be argued that because Chap. I. Treats of the Scriptures, and Chap. II. of God, therefore the Confession teaches that the Scriptures are the "logical *prius*" to God. Partly again, by an unwillingness to take the trouble to read the Confession as we would any other book, *consecutively*, following its line of thought and analysis. This third chapter, for example, is ordered thus: *First*, the nature and scope of God's decree, in general, is defined in Sections 1 and 2; *secondly*, the application of these general facts is made to the special fact of human destiny in Sections 3-8. In making the application, *first*, the *fact is asserted* that God's sovereign, particular, and unchangeable decree embraces also the destiny of His creatures, in Sections 3 and 4; and *then* the details of how God deals with those whose varying destinies are included in the decree, and on what grounds the varying destinies are dealt to them, are asserted in Sections 5-7; a final section being added on the care with which such mys-

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\* Twisse, *The Riches of God's Love unto the Vessels of Mercy*, etc., p. 35; quoted by Cunningham: *The Reformers*, etc., p. 363.



terious subjects should be dealt with in preaching (Sec. 8). This whole objection to the Confession reduces thus to the opinion that the Confession ought not to state the *fact* that God's decree embraces the destiny of His creatures until after it has stated the grounds on which He deals diversely with His creatures—predestinating some men to life “out of His mere free grace and love” (Sec. 5); and “ordaining others to dishonor and wrath” for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice (Sec. 7). With this opinion most will disagree—while, in the end, all will conclude that it raises a very petty point.

But why, it may be asked, leave the Confession in a form that needs this explanation? The answer is, that it does not need this explanation; the matter is obvious to every one who will read the chapter consecutively. It needs a commentary to make it *misunderstood*. And let it be observed, in conclusion, that as all objections to this section arise from strange misapprehensions, so all proposed remedies for the assumed evil result in materially narrowing the Confession. It is so phrased now as to cover the ground common to supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism, without condemning or asserting either as over against the other: \* the alterations would positively exclude supralapsarianism. This is an alteration in the wrong direction.

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\* Let it be observed that this is not to say that the language is *ambiguous*, as has sometimes been presumed. The language is not ambiguous, but perfectly straightforward and unmistakable. What the Assembly did was, not to seek phraseology which was capable of either a supra- or an infra-lapsarian interpretation, but to confine themselves to stating *the positive common ground on which both alike stand*. The third chapter of the Confession, thus, is simple, essential Calvinism—the common belief of all Calvinistic parties. Supra- and infralapsarianism disagree in some things and they agree in some things. This is what they agree in.

## THE CONFESSION DOES NOT CONDEMN INFANTS.

4. This narrowing tendency of most of the presently proposed revisions of the Confession is especially evident in the objections brought against the Section (X., iii.) on “elect infants.” This section was added to the Confession during the course of the debate on an order from the Assembly to its Committee “that something be expressed in fit place concerning infants’ regeneration in their infancy.” The purpose of its addition, therefore, was in the interests of infant salvation—in order to show that though incapable of the outward call of the Word, they might nevertheless be saved by the inward call of the Holy Spirit. The phrase, as originally reported, reads in the *Minutes*, “Elect *of* infants,” and the “of” may have been subsequently dropped, Dr. Briggs thinks as a mere matter of style—possibly, however, as a means of making the statement somewhat more inclusive; while it is the most probable of all suggestions that the presence of the *of* in the *Minutes* is due only to the carelessness of the scribe.\* However this may be, the form in which the section was adopted is capable of such interpretation as to make it inclusive of several views. Those who believe that some of those who die in infancy are God’s elect and are saved by His grace, while others are left in their original sin to perish, can accept this statement; but they have no exclusive right to it, as has been so constantly asserted of late. The statement does not im-

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\* Certainly the scribe is very careless of exact phraseology elsewhere in his jotting down the subjects of debate. For example, if I have counted correctly, the third chapter is mentioned more or less formally by name ten times in the *Minutes*. In five the plural is used (pp. 114, 126, 127, 322, 323); in five the singular (pp. 126, 129, 130, 245, 246). The *Minutes*, as we have them, are somewhat loosely-kept notes, and it will not do to hang a theory on the exact phraseology they use in a case like the present.

ply that some infants, dying in infancy, are non-elect and exclude the opposite opinion. Those who believe that all those who die in infancy are elect, have also standing-ground here. The statement is colorless,\* and only fails clearly to assert that all that die in infancy are elect—leaving that to private opinion, while its purpose is only to assert that whoever of the elect die in infancy are saved nevertheless, even though incapable of the outward call of the Word. It is important to observe (what is often overlooked) that we are reading now the chapter on “Effectual Calling,” and the subject under treatment is God’s elect,—how they are brought to actual participation in salvation. God’s elect, (say Sections 1 and 2,) and they only, are saved, by being effectually called “by His Word and Spirit.” God’s elect, (Section 3 goes on to say,) who die in infancy, or are otherwise incapable of being called by the Word, are nevertheless saved by the inward call of the Spirit. The point, then, is not how many infants are elect, but what becomes of God’s elect if they die in infancy? They are saved, says the Confession in answer to this question, while the former question it does not raise, and, of course, does not answer. If we raise that question, then, it is left for us to answer it; and for all that the Confession says, we may answer it any way we choose. Nothing is implied; the ground is free. When it is proposed to revise the statement so as to make it assert that all that die in infancy are elect, then, (1) it is proposed to break in upon the beautiful, logical ordering of the matter of the

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\* “Colorless” is the right word, not “ambiguous.” There is no “ambiguity” of statement: what is asserted is clearly and directly said. But the statement has nothing to do with the question of whether there are non-elect infants dying in infancy; and leaves therefore, without “ambiguity,” room for any variety of opinions on that subject.

Confession, and make it treat a question of election, when it is treating of God's dealing with His elect. And (2) it is proposed to narrow the basis of the Confession, so as that it will exclude all, not only who believe that some that die in infancy are non-elect (happily, a very small number nowadays, even if any exist outside of sacramentarian churches), but also those who are doubtful as to whether we have any decisive Scripture teaching on the subject—of whom there are many. As the Confession stands, however, it asserts, what all Calvinists must admit to be true, viz.: that “elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit.” It is because Calvinists believe that this is strictly true and Scriptural that they lay away their little ones in grief mingled with chastened joy and praise God that He has suspended their salvation on no “means of grace.” On the other hand, it asserts and implies nothing that any Calvinist doubts. Those who say that it implies that some infants that die in infancy are non-elect, are not only bad exegetes, but have forgotten their English grammar. “Elect infants, dying in infancy” can mean nothing but “such elect infants as die in infancy,” and this does not imply that there are some infants dying in infancy that are not elect, but that there are some elect infants who do not die in infancy.

#### THE CONFESSION NOT INFALLIBLE OR PERFECT.

Let these instances of objections—probably the most serious that are now being urged against the Confession—serve as examples of what may be called the insufficiency of the plea on which we are asked to embark upon a revision of it. It will be impossible to pass in review here the whole body of more or less unimportant objections which have been added to them, such as those that concern the six days of creation (the language of which is Scriptural

and hence open to whatever explanation Scripture may receive), or the declaration that the Pope is Antichrist. Let us conclude, then, by observing that to reject the assertion that the Confession is in need of changes in these particulars or in others like them, is not tantamount to claiming that it is infallible or perfect. We are discussing this year a matter of expediency, not a matter of right. No one doubts that it is in the power and right of the Church to revise or rewrite her Confession. But that is not the point. The point is, does the Confession need revision in order to ease the consciences of our office-bearers in signing it, or to fit it to be our Confession, as a Church, of the system of faith taught in God's Word? This is the question which we answer in the negative. And here it is important for us to distinguish between a public and a private Confession. Presumably, few of us can read the Confession through without finding some form of words which, *had he himself only to consider*, he might conceive it well to improve. For one's own Confession, not moderate, inclusive catholicity, but sharp individual exclusiveness might be desirable. But for a public Confession the virtue of virtues is that it shall be as catholic and inclusive as loyalty to the truth of God, as we conceive it, will permit. The chief virtues of the Westminster Confession may be said to be three: (1) sound Calvinism; (2) moderation and inclusiveness in its statement of Calvinism; and (3) depth of religious atmosphere. By means of these three virtues it is made intrinsically the best Calvinistic Confession for public use ever framed, and any alteration of it runs great risk both of narrowing and worsening it. It may no doubt be amended successfully; it has been amended successfully in America. But as a public Confession it stands now in little need of amendment; and our free and safe relation to it as office-bearers—accepting it only for “system of doctrine”—re-

relieves us from all necessity of seeking to conform it in every point to our own individual, and therefore relatively narrow, views. Under these circumstances, it is submitted that the best answer to the overture of the General Assembly which the Presbyteries can give, is that they do not perceive the need of, and therefore do not desire, any revision of the Confession of Faith; and to this answer the present writer has suggested to his own Presbytery that the following reasons be attached, as *inter alia*, the reasons that determine its action,\* to wit:

REASONS FOR NOT REVISING THE CONFESSION.

1. Our free but safe formula of acceptance of the Confession of Faith, by which we “receive and adopt it” as “containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures” (Form of Government, XV., xii.), relieves us of all necessity for seeking, each one to conform the Confession in all its propositions to his individual preferences, and enables us to treat the Confession as a public document, designed, not to bring each of our idiosyncrasies to expression, but to express the general and common faith of the whole body—which it adequately and admirably does.

2. Enjoying this free yet hearty relation to the Confession, we consider that our situation toward our standards is incapable of improvement. However much or little the Confession were altered, we could not, as a body, accept the altered Confession in a closer sense than for system of doctrine; and the alterations could not better it as a public Confession, however much it might be made a closer expression of the faith of some individuals among us. In any case, it could not be made, in all its propositions and

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\* At their autumn meeting at New Brunswick, the Presbytery of New Brunswick adopted the paper here appended as part of its reply to the Assembly’s overture.

forms of statement, the exact expression of the personal faith of each one of our thousands of office-bearers.

3. In these circumstances we are unwilling to mar the integrity of so venerable and admirable a document, in the mere license of change, without prospect of substantially bettering our relation to it, or its fitness to serve as an adequate statement of the system of doctrine which we all heartily believe. The historical character and the hereditary value of the creed should, in such a case, be preserved.

4. We have little hope of substantially bettering the Confession, either in the doctrines it states or in the manner in which they are stated. When we consider the guardedness, moderation, fullness, lucidity, and catholicity of its statement of the Augustinian system of truth, and of the several doctrines which enter into it, we are convinced that the Westminster Confession is the best, safest, and most acceptable statement of the truths and the system which we most surely believe that has ever been formulated; and we despair of making any substantial improvements upon its form of sound words. On this account we not only do not desire changes on our own account, but should look with doubt and apprehension upon any efforts to improve upon it by the Church.

5. The moderate, catholic, and irenic character of the Westminster Confession has always made it a unifying document. Framed as an irenicon, it bound at once the Scotch and English Churches together; it was adopted and continues to be used by many Congregational and Baptist churches as the confession of their faith; with its accompanying Catechisms it has lately been made the basis of union between the two great Presbyterian bodies which united to constitute our Church; and we are convinced that if Presbyterian union is to go further, it must be on

the basis of the Westminster Standards, pure and simple. In the interests of Church union, therefore, as in the interests of a broad and irenical, moderate and catholic Calvinism, we deprecate any changes in our historical standards, to the system of doctrine contained in which we unabatedly adhere, and with the forms of statement of which we find ourselves in hearty accord.