

IV.

THE PRESBYTERIAN WORLD AND THE WESTMINSTER CONFSSION.*

THE last few years have been marked, throughout the Presbyterian world, by a widespread agitation regarding the relation of the churches to the Westminster Standards, which has seemed to culminate during the ecclesiastical year that has just closed. Its formal beginnings[†] may be assigned to the movement which issued in the adoption by the Scottish United Presbyterian Church, in 1879, of a Declaratory Act, giving forth an authorized explanation in regard to certain subjects in the Standards, respecting which it was found desirable to set forth more fully and clearly the view which the Synod took of the teaching of Holy Scripture. The subjects treated in this document are especially the love of God for all mankind, and His provision, by the gift of His Son, of a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all, and offered freely to all; man's responsibility; infant salvation and the salvability of the heathen; Church and State; and such minor matters as creation in six days, and the like. This was followed in 1882 by the passage of a somewhat similar act by the Presbyterian Church of Victoria. Since 1883 the Presbyterian Church of England, while "unabatedly adhering to the doctrine contained in the Westminster Confession," has been busily

* Printed in *The Presbyterian Review*, October, 1889, vol. X., p. 646.

† Compare an interesting account of the movement in Scotland, from the competent hand of A. Taylor Innis, Esq., in *The Andover Review* for July, 1889, pp. 1-15.

engaged in considering its relation to that document; in the course of which consideration it has framed for itself a brief compendium of fundamental doctrines, designed, “not of necessity to supersede the Westminster Confession as the standard of orthodox teaching from the pulpit, yet for sundry other practical uses,” “as, for example, the clear presentation to the public of the Church’s exact doctrinal teaching, or for the indoctrination of catechumens, or even for an intelligent profession of their faith by ruling elders and deacons.”* Accordingly, it was proposed to the Synod at its last meeting to adopt these new “Articles of Faith,” “as a sufficiently full statement of this Church’s belief on fundamental doctrines to serve for a testimony to those beyond her communion, and for a summary of her creed to be recited upon special occasions of public worship”—in a word, to take some such place as its *Summary of Principles* does in the United Presbyterian Church. At the other end of the world, again, the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Otago and Southland in Southern New Zealand appointed a committee at their meeting in the autumn of 1888, to consider the whole subject of the relation of the Church to its subordinate Standards, and report to the Synod of 1889.† In Scotland, the Established Church has

* Dr. J. Oswald Dykes, in *The Catholic Presbyterian*, ix. 469, June, 1883.

† A somewhat similar overture to that sent up to the Synod of Otago and Southland by the Presbytery of Dunedin, on the basis of which the action mentioned above was taken, was sent up by the Presbytery of Auckland to the last General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, but was set aside on the ground that the modified formula of subscription in use in that church secures all that is necessary. That formula reserves liberty of opinion “on the teaching of the said Confession in regard to the duty of the civil magistrate, marriage with a deceased wife’s sister, and *the forms of expression in which the several doctrines are stated.*”

during the last year voted to revert for ministerial subscription, from the formula framed in 1711, which required acceptance of the whole doctrine of the Confession as truths of God, to the simpler one which has hitherto been used by the elders, and which rests on the act of the Assembly of 1694; while the elders hereafter are only to express their approbation of the Confession. The Free Church, after a year's debate, has appointed a large committee to report to the next Assembly what relief is needed. In America, two overtures looking toward revision were presented to the Canadian Presbytery of Toronto, but voted down; while the General Assembly of our own Church has overtured its Presbyteries with a view to discovering whether there is any widespread or important call for revision among us.

Such a chronicle as this is apt to leave upon the mind an impression of a deep and almost universal disaffection under the pressure of the Westminster Standards. It certainly does prove that there are men everywhere who are dissatisfied either with the Standards themselves or with the relation they find themselves occupying to them. But we must not imagine that the causes which produce this restlessness are everywhere the same, or that all are agreed as to what is needed for relief or that anything is needed. Even among those who really object to the Standards themselves, different men object to widely different things, so that if the attempt were made to exclude everything concerning which any individual cherished doubt, "it would be a poor church," in the paradoxical language of Dr. Macgregor,* "which has not in its adult membership a sufficient amount

* *Freedom in the Truth* (Dunedin: 12 mo, pp. 72), being Dr. Macgregor's speech in the Synod of Otago and Southland in opposition to the overture of the Presbytery of Dunedin, on which the Synod's action was based.

of immaturity to cast out by this process the whole round of Christian doctrine.” And it is more important still to remember that the circumstances of the several churches are widely different, and the relations they bear to the Standards very diverse, so that the causes of restlessness that are operative in one are wholly absent in another. There is obviously, for example, a very great difference between objecting to be bound to an extended doctrinal treatise in all its propositions and rejecting the whole Calvinistic theology. If we, however, range the world over and gather together indiscriminately all the objections that have been made to the Westminster Confession during these last years, we are in danger of confusing even such opposite points of view as these. In the midst of such an agitation for change as has arisen in the American Church during the last months, therefore, it seems necessary for us to take a general glance over the Presbyterian world with a view to tracing the causes which are working in one place or another, to the production of this restlessness. In so doing we can scarcely fail to learn more accurately to estimate at its true value much that might otherwise be misunderstood, and perhaps also we may learn to value more highly our own inheritance in our creed and in our relation to it as fixed in the formula by which we accept it in ordination.

I.

OVERSTRICTNESS OF FORMULA OF ACCEPTANCE.

Among the causes of the present restlessness with reference to the Westminster Standards, the first place is undoubtedly due to the overstrictness prevailing in some churches, in the formula of subscription which is required of office-bearers. And it is worthy of notice that where the formula seems most overstrict, dissatisfaction seems to be most widespread, most pronounced, and most difficult to

satisfy. The Established and Free Churches of Scotland, for example, have hitherto required of their ministry “sincerely to own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith. . . .to be the truths of God.” Dr. Candlish has, indeed, argued that in its historical sense, even this formula asks only acceptance of the Confession as a whole;^{*} but, as it seems to us, unsuccessfully, and certainly without effect on the convictions of the churches. We do not wonder, therefore, that the ministry of these churches are earnest in seeking relief. It may savor of exaggeration to say with Mr. Taylor Innis (presuming that he means single propositions), 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 surely apt to be true of an extended confession, and we must certainly agree with the words which he adds in a note: “Properly speaking, the Confession is not the confession of faith of any one who signs it, but of all. None of them exactly agree with it, but none of them contradict it.” In a word, a public confession, by virtue of the very fact that it is public, cannot be, and ought not to be pretended to be, just the expression of his faith which each one who accepts it as representing his faith would have framed had he only himself to consider. The most we can expect, and the most we have right to ask, is that each one may be able to recognize it as an expression of the system of truth which he believes. To go beyond this and seek to make each of a large body of signers accept the Confession in all its propositions as the profession of his personal belief, cannot fail to result in serious evils—not least among which are the twin evils

^{*} *The Relation of the Presbyterian Churches to the Confession of Faith.* Glasgow, 1886, p. 6.

[†] *The Law of Creeds in Scotland*, p. 479.

that, on the one hand, too strict subscription overreaches itself and becomes little better than no subscription; and, on the other, that it begets a spirit of petty, carping criticism which raises objection to forms of statement that in other circumstances would not appear objectionable.

Where the formula of acceptance is such that no one signs without some mental reservation, some soon learn to sign without reference to mental reservation; and gross heterodoxy becomes gradually safe, because there is no one so wholly without sin that his conscience permits him to cast the first stone. That such a state of things has not been unknown, the history of Scottish Moderatism may teach us. That in the estimation of some, some of its features are not wholly unknown now, there are not lacking phenomena which may indicate. It is even occasionally openly asserted. Thus Dr. Watt is reported as declaring on the floor of the Established Presbytery of Glasgow that "he took it, that no man signed the formula without mental reservation more or less";* and Professor Storey is reported† as pleading in one of his opening addresses, that "some such terms of official subscription of the Confession should be adopted as shall openly sanction the liberty which is tacitly exercised in qualifying or modifying some of its propositions." Now, such a state of affairs is a great evil; and the dangers attending it have never been better pointed out than by Dr. Charles Hodge, who writes: "To adopt every proposition contained in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms is more than the vast majority of our ministers either do or can do. To make them profess to do it is a great sin. It hurts their consciences. It fosters a spirit of evasion and subterfuge. It forces them

* *The Glasgow Herald*, March 28, 1889.

† *Ibid.*, November 13, 1888.

to take creeds in a 'non-natural sense.' It at once vitiates and degrades. There are few greater evils connected with establishments than the overwhelming temptations which they offer to make men profess what they do not believe. Under such strict requirements, men make light of professions, and are ready to adopt any creed which opens the door to wealth or office. The overstrict the world over are the least faithful.”*

Not less surely, however, does overstrictness of formula wound tender consciences and produce a restlessness as over against the creed itself to all the propositions of which they are obliged to assent as the profession of their faith, even when they would not find these propositions objectionable when considered only as one statement of the faith they profess. Tender consciences must revolt from a confession to which they are too closely bound, if they do not find themselves in absolute agreement with its every word; and revolt once begun battens on what it feeds on, until a great war breaks out against the Confession with which, nevertheless, most of the combatants are in substantial agreement. Thus overstrictness in the formula is the real account often to be given of what emerges as objection against the creed, rather than against the formula. Relief is to be sought in such a relaxation of the formula as will give all the liberty to individuals which is consistent with the Church's witness to the truth. What is needed seems to us admirably expressed by Dr. Marshall Lang in a speech in the Established Presbytery of Glasgow, advocating the change of formula which has since been accomplished in that Church: “The point they desired to emphasize was this,” he is reported as saying,[†] “that they did not bind men to the mere letter. They did not insist that a man should accept all the propo-

* *Church Polity*, p. 332.

† *The Glasgow Herald*, March 28, 1889.

sitions and all the phraseology of the Confession. What they asked was, that a man should honestly and truly subscribe to the system of truth that was presented in the Confession of Faith, and not merely to the words of the letter in which it was presented. He thought a substantial relief was given to persons of scrupulous conscience.” So far as the present agitation in the Scotch churches arises from this cause and tends to this result, it is an effort to attain a situation as over against the Standards which the American churches have always enjoyed, and it must have the hearty sympathy of every American Presbyterian.

In this advocacy of a liberal formula, however, we are not to be understood as if we could at all accord with those who would so relax the formula as to make the Confession of Faith little more than a venerable relic of a past age, still honored as such by the Church. Such a change as that made in 1816 by the Church of Holland by which ministers were no longer pledged to the Standards, *because (quia)*, but only *in so far as (quatenus)* they accord with the Word, is justly pointed to by Mr. McEwan* as fatal. That there are, nevertheless, some in the Scotch churches who might desire it, seems to be hinted by some words of Mr. Taylor Innis.† Unfortunately there are some even who act as if this were all that the present very strict formula bound them to, as was evinced, for example, by the amazing plea put in by Mr. James Stuart, author of that very remarkable book, *The Principles of Christianity*, when arraigned before the Presbytery of Edinburgh.‡

* *The New Movement in the Free Church* (Edinburgh, 1889), pp. 10 and 11.

† *The Theological Review*, November, 1888.

‡ As reported in *The Scotsman* for January 31, 1889. Mr. Stuart is reported as saying: “He could not see how the subordinate standard and the ultimate standard were on an equality. He regarded the sub-

Nevertheless, it is surely not nearly so difficult as Principal David Brown expresses himself as thinking, to frame a formula which will “let in all right men and keep out all wrong.” The American churches have such a formula. Of course it lies in the courts of the Church to decide what is and what is not “of the system,” and Church courts are not infallible, nor always faithful. But Church courts can afford, and do venture, to hold men strictly to the terms of a liberal formula, when they could not to an illiberal one. Overstrictness demands and begets laxity in performance; while a truly liberal but conservative formula binds all essentially sound men together against laxity. In pleading for a liberal formula, therefore, we wish it distinctly understood that we do not plead either for a lax formula, or much less for a lax administration of any formula—within which an essential dishonesty seems to lurk. The American formula appears to us the ideal one, and as nothing more lax than it would be acceptable or safe, certainly a lax administration of it would be unendurable, and, as we have said, essentially dishonest.

ordinate one as valid only in so far as it was based on the ultimate one.” Thus he confused his duty to himself and his God, with his duty to the Church as a society; and so refused to withdraw from a Church whose formularies he no longer accepted. For reply, we should only need point Mr. Stuart to the brochure of his brother “liberal” Mr. Macintosh’s *The Obsolescence of the Confession of Faith*, p. 63, one of the few bright spots of truth in this remarkable pamphlet. We hardly know what to think of such words as are ascribed to Rev. T.P. Kilpatrick, of Aberdeen, on the floor of the Free Church Assembly (*The Scotsman* for May 31, 1889), who is reported as saying that he spoke for himself and for many of the younger ministers of the Church, and that “they were adherents of no system of theology that was at present in existence.” Yet they had signed the Confession of Faith by the strictest of formulas.

II.

SCHOLASTIC FORM OF THE CONFESSION.

Overstrictness of formula is not, however, the cause of all the restlessness, as over against the Westminster Standards, which is, at present, exhibiting itself in the churches, nor even of all that arises apart from doctrinal disharmony with the Westminster Confession. It has grown quite common to hear objections directed wholly against its form; it is alleged that it is too long, too full, too detailed, too analytical, too scholastic, too logical, or too polemic to serve properly as a creed for the profession of a Church's faith. In one form or another, and on one ground or another (by no means always on the same ground), this objection has found much expression during the past year. Thus the Presbytery of Brechin even overtured the Free Church Assembly to revert to the Reformation Confession of the Scotch Church; and it has not been uncommon to hear contrasts drawn between it as a document which is vital, religious, and biblical, and the Westminster Confession as scholastic, theological, logical—between the one as the natural product of a period of living faith and earnest preaching and the other as the equally natural product of a period of controversy. Perhaps this phase of opinion has never been better expressed than by Mr. J. Murray Garden in seconding Dr. Brown's overture in the Free Church Presbytery of Aberdeen. "If the Westminster Confession is a perfect building," he is reported as saying,* "perfect in all its parts, and true in all its proportions, I should rather prefer to liken the Confession of John Knox to a tree, living and springing and adapted to the life of the Church. If the Westminster Confession is clear, it is cold;

* The (Aberdeen) *Daily Free Press* for February 6, 1889.

if it is purifying to the intellect, it is very often chilling to the faith; whereas such a document as I have referred to is bright and warming like a living fire, and you cannot wonder, for it was born at a time when men were instinct with life.” There is not apparent here any objection to the doctrines of the Confession, but only to its forms of statement. It is no doubt a very pleasing picture that Mr. Garden paints for us of the model Confession; but wherein does the Westminster Confession not fully satisfy it? We very much fear that in most cases when this general position finds expression, it is founded on an erroneous idea of what a Confession, like ours is and the purposes which it is intended to serve, if not also upon an insufficient appreciation of the true character of the Westminster Confession itself. “Fancy attempting to recite the Westminster Confession as part of the worship of God,” cries Mr. Robert Macintosh,* and many more appear to share his idea that a creed must be in its essence “an immediate utterance of faith,” couched in “religious form,” and intended as a vehicle through which the people at large periodically bring their belief to verbal expression. It could be wished that so good a treatise as Dunlop’s *A Full Account of the Several Ends and Uses of Confessions of Faith*, should not be permitted to grow obsolescent until in some way men attained a somewhat rounded view of the functions of Confessions. It ought to require very little consideration, however, to discover that they are not intended to take the place either of the sermon, applying the truth of God to the heart, or of the professional element of prayer, in which we acknowledge God’s truth to Him. Their three chief ends are rather to serve as testimonies, tests, and text-books. As

* *The Obsolescence of the Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, 1888), p. 28.

testimonies, they (we revert to old Dunlop's words) "give a fair and authentic account of the doctrine maintained," and clear misapprehensions and clumsies; they enable Christian societies "in the most solemn manner to make profession of the true religion and glory in it before the world"—a duty especially binding when the truth is ridiculed and despised in the world, or is being deserted by the churches; and they bring together and bind into one communion those who stand for the truth, contributing to their mutual comfort and edification. As tests, they are established as Standards of sound teaching and bulwarks against error; and especially as protections to the people against ecclesiastical tyranny and the vagaries of individual teachers, enabling them to demand and secure that they be fed with the sincere milk of the Word. As text-books, they provide the people with short and useful summaries of the true doctrines of religion, and so maintain purity of faith among them. For all and for each of these purposes, they ought to be full, detailed, theological, clear, logical, discriminating—not without the breath of vital piety blowing through them; but not merely a summary of those truths necessary for salvation, but rather of the whole circle of the fundamental truths of God. It is because, strong in moderation and true catholicity, the Westminster Standards are creeds of this sort, that they were "cried up," as Baillie tells us, at the time, as the best yet extant, even by the "opposites" of the divines who framed them, and have continued to win the praise of their candid-minded "opposites" ever since. The late Dr. Curry, for example, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, bore testimony that the Westminster Confession is "the ablest, clearest, and most comprehensive system of Christian doctrine ever framed," "a comprehensive embodiment of nearly all the precious truths of the gospel." It is "its intrinsic worth alone,"

as Dr. Schaff reminds us,^{*} that “can explain the fact that it has supplanted the older Standards of John Knox and John Craig in the land of their birth, and has been adopted by three distinct denominations.” Even its very completeness and length is one of its excellences; how otherwise shall we bear testimony to the whole truth of God? Mr. Taylor Innis, certainly no prejudiced witness in such a matter, truly says:[†] “In the history of Scotland, and in the Reformed Churches generally, it does not appear that the men who sought for the minimum of truth to confess, were the men who had the most of the Divine spirit of truth. The greatest men and the best men (with some exceptions, like Baxter) seem hitherto to have been in favor of full creeds. Churchmen of capacity and earnestness—the men in whose heart the question, *How is THE KING’S Government to be carried on?* continuously burned—have felt their practical need of creeds for keeping the Church together, and have argued that they are essential, if not to the being (*esse*), at least to the well-being of the Church. And, on the other hand, the men of tenderness of conscience and pure heart toward God and men, have leaned not only to the Confession of the permanently central truths, but to the eager and solemn Confession of whatever truth the time and its trial called for—to its Confession not only individually, but by the unanimous and accordant voice of the witnessing Church of Christ.”

As for those who find the Westminster Confession a harsh or extreme document, or a cold and undevout one—or who speak of it as the product of controversialists rather

^{*} *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. I., p. 788. “For its sake,” says Mr. Taylor Innis, “Scotland, long before the revolution of 1688, was willing to forget its own national Confession—that laid by John Knox on the table of the Parliament, 1560.” (*The Andover Review*, July, 1889, p. 1)

[†] *The Laws of Creeds in Scotland*, p. 480.

than of godly preachers of the Word—we simply cannot understand them. It marks the extreme of Calvinistic development only in the sense that it embodies the cream of Calvinistic thinking. Framed, as Dr. Alexander F. Mitchell so eloquently tells us,* “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” and “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”[†]; and primarily for the purpose of vindicating the doctrine of the Church of England as in harmony with the consensus of Reformed Christendom, and therefore with a constant effort to make its decisions unanimous[‡] and to secure moderation and catholicity;[‡] it not only stands to-day as the representative (in Dr. Schaff’s words) of “the most vigorous and yet moderate form of Calvinism,” as (in Dr. Macgregor’s words) “a model of guarded strength in moderation,” but also as a document so filled with vital godliness that its every section seems to have been framed in the consciousness of God’s presence, and no one can feed on it without feeling that he is in the very temple of the Most High.[§] If men would only study

* *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, etc. Introduction: p. lxxv.

[†] *Ibid.*, p. xlv.

[‡] *Ibid.*, pp. liv., lv., lxxiv.

[§] Cf. Dr. Candlish (the elder): “I think it worthy of special notice how our Westminster Standards, sometimes held to consist of hard and dry abstractions, place so much stress on personal union to Christ as the explanation of our being made partakers of the benefits of redemption.” (*The Fatherhood of God*, edition 5, p. 196.) The whole passage, pp. 192-197, will repay perusal in this connection.

the Confession! Take a single example of how recklessly it is not infrequently quoted. In speaking of the interpretation of the Scriptures (I., ix.) it sets aside the patristic and mediaeval method of torturing a “multiple sense”—literal and spiritual, allegorical and anagogical—out of each text of Scripture, by the decided assertion that the sense “of *any* Scripture” “is not manifold, but one.” On this perfectly obvious and thoroughly scientific statement Mr. Robert Macintosh founds page after page of assault on the Confession, incredibly misinterpreting it to mean that all parts of the Bible teach the same thing! This is just one-quarter of his whole argument to prove the Confession to be obsolete.* The assertions which have become so common of late that the Confession is supralapsarian in the third chapter, teaches by implication the damnation of some that die in infancy in the third section of the tenth chapter, and gives insufficient recognition to the love of God as over against His sovereignty, scarcely differ in kind from this proceeding of Mr. Macintosh’s.

III.

EXCLUSIVENESS OF THE CREED.

There is still another attitude which has led to objection in some quarters, during the last year, to the Westminster Standards, without necessarily implying lack of harmony with their doctrine. This is a feeling that the creed is too exclusive, and a desire for Church union and greater catholicity of Church life, based on the undoubted facts that on the one hand the Westminster Standards, while moderately and catholically Calvinistic, are yet exclusively Calvinistic, and on the other, that Christendom is broader than Calvin-

* *The Obsolescence of the Confession of Faith*, pp. 44-55.

ism. This position is fairly represented by the overture presented by Mr. Macdonnell to the Presbytery of Toronto,* which was based primarily on the proposition that “the Church of Christ should be careful not to exclude from the ministry any man whom the Lord of the Church would receive.” Mr. Macdonnell illustrated his meaning by pointing to godly men in the Methodist and other churches, admired by us all, and gladly acknowledged to be true ministers of the Gospel, whom, nevertheless, we would not admit as teachers into our hedged and walled portion of the Church. We cannot but think, however, that we should be as loyal to God’s truth as charitable to our fellow-men. This position, moreover, appears to us to be founded on a mistaken view of the nature of the Church and of Church unity, as well as on an insufficient realization of the difficulties of minimum Confessions. Its apparent liberality may, after all, prove not to be wholly out of affinity with the illiberal conception which identifies “our” Church with the Church of God, and seeks the fusion of all denominations into one external body on account of difficulty in conceiving of the Church as one amid a multiplicity of forms of organization, creed, and life. The last few years have given birth to many schemes to secure Church unity by some external means, or in some external sense—by inclusion in a common organization, as if unity were attainable “by building a great house around a divided family,” or by enforced uniformity in forms of worship, or the like—none of them the product of a truly liberal spirit. We have but to open our eyes to see that the living Church of God is already one in the unity of the Spirit, or awaits, for its full realization, only the spirit of oneness in our hearts. If it were, indeed, true that “our Church” constitutes the

* Reported by *The Toronto Mail* for April 3, 1889.

whole true Church of God, then we should beware of excluding from our pulpits any whom God has called to preach His Word. But if we all who, under many names, hold fast to the one head, are, by common communion with Him, united into one spiritual body, it by no means follows that each member is not required to do its own work in its own appointed way. Every colonel in an army has not an inherent right to command every regiment; and yet the army is one. In a word, the matter so put raises the whole question of the right of denominational existence. If we have a defensible right to be Presbyterians, we have as just a right to our separate creed as to our separate organization.

And who is to determine for us the minimum of truth which Christian men are bound to confess? Is it so easy a matter to distinguish between such essential doctrines as we dare not mar our witness to, and the unessential ones which we may suppress public confession of for the sake of outward unity of organization? Does not the line of division fluctuate from age to age? May not even a secondary question—say such as circumcision—on occasion become vital (Gal. v. 2)? Can we innocently consent permanently to testify in a public manner to no truth except the most fundamental, nay, the most commonly recognized, and therefore the least in need of our testimony? And, finally, if all these difficulties were surmounted, and we had attained a minimum creed, would it not be embarrassing to possess a creed from which we could allow no deviation—deviation from which *ipso facto* (just because it is the *minimum*) excludes from heaven—of the whole of which we must say, “Which faith, unless every one do keep whole and entire, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly”? We should consider well whether this liberal pathway leads not, in the end, to tyranny.

It would not require very extended investigation into the

nature of doctrinal standards to learn that they must needs contain much more than the minimum of faith. The attempt to pare down our testimony to truth to the narrowest limits is similar to the attempt to enter heaven on the minimum of morality. And how could a minimum creed serve as a text-book of doctrine, or protect the people in the exercise of their rights as against the misbelief of a pastor? The necessary contents of a doctrinal standard are determined by a threefold test: (1). It must contain our confession of essential Christianity—all the holy truths that lie at the basis of our Christian religion must find their places in it. (2). It must mark our highest attainments in divine truth: whatever we have come clearly to see to be the truth of God must be unwaveringly testified to in it; after Nice no creed is tolerable which does not bear witness to the Trinity; after Chalcedon, none which does not testify to the holy truth of Christ's person; after Augustine, which does not confess to the sovereignty of God; after the Reformation, which does not clearly proclaim justification by faith. To falter in our witness to God's truth after we have once attained to a clear conception of it, is not a venial fault. (3). It must contain, also, much of very subordinate importance *per se*, which the administrative function of the doctrinal standard renders a necessary part of its contents. For one great use of a doctrinal standard is to determine the fitness of men to exercise, not the office of pastor, but the office of pastor in this or that church. For instance, the Presbyterian people believe that God has commanded the observation of the Lord's Supper "till He come." A Quaker is ineligible to a pastorate in this church, therefore, and our doctrinal standard must be so framed as to protect the people from having their rights invaded in this particular. Again, the Presbyterian people believe that it is not only their privilege, but their duty, to

consecrate their children to Christ in holy baptism. No one, accordingly, who denies the ordinance of infant baptism to them can possibly be permitted to occupy the position of pastor among them; and our doctrinal standard must be so framed as to protect the people from invasion of their rights in this particular. In a word, a creed, in the sense of a doctrinal standard, as distinguished from a liturgical form, must be extensive enough not only to witness to the essential Christianity of a people, but to enable them, on the one hand, to testify through it to the truth of God as they have attained knowledge of it—for testimony to truth against heresy and error from within is only second in importance to testimony to truth against heathenism and error from without—and to protect them, on the other hand, in their Christian rights in the administration of the Gospel. Two propositions may, in fact, be laid down here which are worthy of our most careful meditation before we yield to present clamors for brief and primary creeds. *The people's right to no Christian ordinance is safe which is not guaranteed to them in the standards of the Church.* Without this guarantee, the eligible pastors may hold any views and attain to any tyranny in the matter of the administration of ordinances. *And the Christian knowledge of no people can be permanently maintained at a higher level than the contents of their doctrinal standards.* Continuity and harmony of teaching is only attainable within the limits of the doctrinal standards. With respect to all that is beyond or outside them, successive teachers may and do differ; the people are confused, and grow first doubtful, then agnostic, and then oppositive. If we would have the people pass beyond the first principles of the faith, we must pass just in that proportion beyond them in our Creed—which is not only our official testimony to the truth, and our official text-book of doctrine, but our stand-

ard of teaching to all our pastors. The cry for brief, primary creeds is, therefore, a movement which must be characterized not only as undoctinal, but anti-doctrinal. It is a direct blow at the right of the people to the whole truth of God.

IV.

DOCTRINAL OBJECTIONS.

We must not fail, however, to recognize frankly that, after all these causes of dissatisfaction with the Westminster Standards are eliminated, there remains a residuum—a small residuum—of objections which arise out of doctrinal grounds. There are, no doubt, several kinds of objections to be recognized even here. Some arise merely from the opinion that the truths of the Gospel do not receive the same relative emphasis in the Confession as in the Bible; and these are probably the most frequently urged of all forms of doctrinal objection. Dr. Candlish, in supporting his overture in the Free Church Presbytery of Glasgow, supplies a good example of how they are presented. “The Confession,” he is reported as saying, “did not express, in their scriptural proportions, some aspects of the Gospel, and these were such vital and precious truths as the love of God to the world, His free offer of salvation to all men, and the responsibility of every one who heard this gracious call for accepting or refusing it. It was not meant that these truths were not contained in the Confession. He strongly contended that they were in it, but they were not so prominent in it proportionally to the statement of other truths—those of the sovereignty and almighty power of God’s grace—as they were in the Bible”^{*} It will be remembered that it is with these points that the Declaratory Acts of the United Presbyterians and the Presby-

^{*} *The Glasgow Herald* for February 12, 1889.

terian Church of Victoria deal. Other objections arise out of real recalcitration from some of the doctrinal statements, or even from some of the doctrines stated in the Confession. A fair example of these is supplied by the overture of the Presbytery of Nassau, praying the American Assembly to revise Chapter III., *Of God's Eternal Decree*; and others would seek a far more thorough, if not more radical, revision. Lastly, some objectors are objectors because they have consciously drifted into a wholly un-Calvinistic, or even anti-Calvinistic, position. A fair example of this attitude is supplied by Mr. Robert Macintosh, who, in his pamphlet on *The Obsolescence of the Westminster Confession of Faith*, constantly speaks of "Calvinism" from the outside, and thinks that the Bible, "but for its occasional language as to election, coincides not with Calvinism, but with evangelical Arminianism."^{*} And other examples could be adduced.

That the objectors of all these sorts, even of the most radical, have made their voice heard in the course of the last few months, is surely in no wise strange. When the Confession was framed there were those who did not accept its system of doctrine; and it is no wonder that there are such to-day. If those who are wholly out of sympathy with it are to hold office under it, of course it must be "revised," as to have obtained a like result two hundred years ago, it would need to have been very differently framed. The only peculiarity of the present situation is, that the churches seem now troubled by the objections of this small minority whom we have always with us, and who so confidently demand a revolution of our whole scheme of doctrine for their personal comfort and ease of conscience, that they appear at times almost in danger of getting it. Such a situa-

^{*} *Op. cit.*, p. 50.

tion appears, however, not so much to put the Confession of Faith, as the churches, on trial; and its issue is apt to determine less whether the Westminster doctrines be true than whether the churches which profess them remain faithful. After all, the Church exists for the truth: it is “the pillar and ground of the truth.” And although it is the duty of every church, as of every individual, to see to it that she does not profess a faith she does not believe, yet her convictions are not the measure of the truth. Its norm and standard are elsewhere; and a church’s convictions are rather the measure of herself than of the truth. It is the duty of every church to believe and profess faith in all that the Bible teaches. And when we speak of revising a creed, the real question is not (as has been often supposed) whether the church still believes the creed, but whether the Bible still teaches it; and the true remedy may therefore be found not in revising the creed, but in recalling the church to the perception and embracing of the whole truth of God as revealed in His word. Woe to every church which formally and deliberately excinds from her public profession, any truth of God that He has revealed for the instruction of His people.

These obvious principles, important enough in themselves, have an especial importance to the American Presbyterian Churches, in which acceptance of the doctrinal standards is not made a condition of church membership. Perhaps, at bottom, we are face to face here, in more or less developed form, with one application of the modern doctrine of the “Christian consciousness.” But at all events it has little fitness among us. Presbyterians do not look upon their creed as the expression of what their people believe: but rather as the expression of what they ought to believe. Like the perfect moral standard of life—the divine perfection; this creed strives to represent

the perfect intellectual standard of faith—the divine truth. We do not ask our people to profess faith in all its articles at the outset of their Christian course: we ask them to set their faces toward it—as they set their faces toward sanctification—as the goal of their understanding of divine truth. It is the standard of the teaching they are to receive, not of the knowledge they have already assimilated: it represents not the minimum of knowledge that the Church demands ere she receives a soul into her communion, but the maximum that she expects to train her people to in the prosecution of her work as a teacher sent from God. Some other churches have creeds which they use as the test of fitness for membership in the society of Christ: and it is, perhaps, not altogether strange that some who have come from them to us should have some slight initial difficulty in apprehending our different practice. But it is strange that those born and bred among us should occasionally fall into the same error. It would be a revolution of our whole point of view were the American Presbyterian Church to undertake a revision of the Confession, or to attempt to frame a new and more primary Confession to substitute for it, on the ground that the present Confession is not throughout believed by our people, or that it is too abstruse or difficult to be easily understood by the less instructed and less advanced among them. The Confession is not a popular document. It does not represent the stage of Christian faith attained by our babes in Christ. It is our standard of *teaching*, not of *membership*; and it is addressed to those who, trained in the word of God, present themselves as men learned in the Scriptures to become teachers of others. To them it offers itself as a succinct statement of the teaching of the Word, and as such demands their suffrages. The only legitimate criticism of it will therefore turn on the simple question, whether the doctrine taught in it is the doctrine of the Bible.

It is, of course, easy to say that in all these remarks we have assumed that the Confession does embody the truth of God. This is perfectly true. We are addressing now a body of men all of whom have set their seal to it as “containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures”: and it is no violent assumption that they hold fast their profession, until they give us notice to the contrary. In such circumstances it is surely within the mark to say that revision of the doctrine of the Confession is for us a question of our own faithfulness as much as it is of its truth. If its doctrines are not true, in God’s name let it be shown out of the Scriptures, that we may all be saved from the confession of a lie. But until that is done (and as yet it has not been done, though generations of opponents from without have essayed it with quite as much learning and force as are now embarked in the effort from within), let not those who believe them to be the truth of God, as revealed in His Word, be misled into revising them on any such plea as that the Creed ought to be conformed to the living faith of the Church. If the Creed be conformed to the truth of God, that is a better thing. In such case (and we believe this to be such a case) the living faith of the Church needs rather to be conformed to the Creed.