

V.

CONFESSIONAL SUBSCRIPTION AND
REVISION.*

THE chief reason why I am personally opposed to revision of the Confession of Faith is because I believe its doctrine to be the truth of God, and because I believe its forms of statement of that doctrine to be at once exact and catholic—broad enough to include all soundly Calvinistic thinking, and precise enough to exclude all tampering with the Calvinistic truth. I am confirmed in my conviction that the Confession clothes the true doctrine in admirably chosen language by the straits and inconsistencies to which those are driven who are trying to point out passages in it which need revision. I am sure it is not the Confession that is at fault, for example, when men praise the first section of the third chapter, and then cry out against the third section. This is but denying in detail what is affirmed in the mass. If it be indeed true that God has “freely and unchangeably” ordained “whatsoever comes to pass,” then we can be offended by the assertion that He has predestined some men and angels unto everlasting life, and foreordained others to everlasting death, only if we are prepared to deny that “it comes to pass” that some go to everlasting life and some to everlasting death. The Confession brings to admirable expression the system of doctrine which I find delivered in the Word of God. And my own personal

* Printed in *The Presbyterian Banner* for November 13, 1889.

argument against revision, satisfactory to myself—and I trust I do not stand anything like alone among the thousands of Israel in this—is that the Confession does not need revision.

Nevertheless, when it fell to my lot to set forth a statement of reasons why revision is not called for,* I did not confine myself to this one reason. There are other reasons equally valid; and I stated some of them, too. One of these is, that as office-bearers in the Presbyterian Church, we do not accept the Confession for its *ipsissima verba*, but only for its “system of doctrine”; and, therefore, so long as we cordially hold to its system of doctrine, we really have no stringent reason for revising it, even though we may fancy ourselves able to improve upon its forms of statement. This is a perfectly valid argument; and it has been proved to be worth stating by the circumstance that the majority of those who have advocated revision have been careful to say that they are not dissatisfied with the system of doctrine, or, indeed, with any one doctrine of the Confession, but are only desirous of changing some of its forms of statement. Now certainly it is worth while saying to these brethren that they have no grievance, that they have not accepted the Confession for more than the system of doctrine, and that seeing that they are not asked to assert that its forms of statement are absolutely perfect and incapable of improvement, they ought to think twice, or even thrice, before they enter into the unsettling path of revision, without prospect, or indeed possibility, of at all bettering their relation to it. I believe this to be, indeed, an absolutely unanswerable argument; one which takes away all color of real necessity for any of the revisions proposed by men who are sound in the faith.

* For the text of these reasons, see above, p. 39.

I find, however, that this argument of mine has been the occasion of some misunderstanding which seems to need correcting. On the one hand, it has been said that I am favoring a lax administration of our formula of acceptance. On the other, that I have represented our formula as itself a lax form of subscription. A word or two on both of these points need be said.

1. In the first place, I am certainly not in favor of a lax administration of any formula. I feel bound to say frankly that I cannot help believing that a lax administration of our formula would be a demoralizing step. I cannot think it consistent with essential honesty to accept a creed, or to continue to live under a creed which we have accepted, for system of doctrine—the system of doctrine of which we do not believe. For a Church to impose a formula which she does not intend to be taken in its strictest sense and to require to be lived up to, it seems to me, would be dishonest in her, and would be a betrayal of her trust as the pillar and ground of truth. And for an individual to accept it when it did not express his hearty conviction, would be dishonest in him. No plea of the *animus imponendi* can relieve the individual conscience of its responsibility in making its own professions. Whatever else we do, let us not sap the very springs of our honor and credit. Let all creeds perish ere we consent to profess what we do not believe.

2. In the second place, I am certainly not in favor of relaxing our present formula. There would not, of course, attach any dishonesty to the use of a laxer formula. But the adoption of such an one would certainly imperil the continued empire of sound doctrine among us. We all know what has happened in the Church of Holland since the formula, by which its hereditary Reformed Creed was accepted, was changed from asserting that they received it

because it is Scriptural, to asserting that they receive it *in so far* as it is Scriptural. A relaxing of the formula beyond such limits as secure strict acceptance of the Creed in its essential meaning as Scriptural and true, is simply breaking down all barriers and demitting the whole function of the Church as guardian of the truth.

3. It may easily be inferred from what I have just said that I do not think our present formula a lax one. It is a liberal one; as liberal as it ought to be; as liberal as it is safe to be; as liberal as is consistent with the Church's witness to and guardianship over the truth of God. But it is in no sense a lax formula. It is, on the contrary, a binding formula—a strict formula—in the use of which no man can honestly accept our Confession of Faith and not be a sound Calvinist. And I need not say that this is just what I think it ought to be.

4. But I think it very important that we should not allow our minds to be confused as to what it is to which this strict formula so strictly binds us. What this is, is to be settled not by our preferences, but by its own terms. What the ordainee is required "sincerely to receive and adopt" is "the Confession of Faith of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures" (Form of Government, xv.). This is not the same as requiring him to receive the Confession of Faith in its *ipsissima verba*, or in all its forms of statement. That would scarcely be a liberal formula. Nor is it the same as merely requiring the reception of the Confession for *substance* of doctrine. That would not be a safe formula. What is "nominated in the bond" is "*system of doctrine*"; and that is historically what has always been understood by it. As such, it is both a liberal and a safe formula. Liberal, because it does not bind to the mere letter; safe, because it strictly holds the ordainee to the system of doc-

trine and to every doctrine that enters as a constituent part into that system. No one can sign this formula who is not a strict Calvinist; no one who denies any one of the doctrines which enter into the structure of the Calvinistic system as taught in the Confession of Faith. And if he thinks he can, the Church courts must teach him better, as indeed so may the civil courts. But, on the other hand, no Calvinist who has accepted the Creed in the use of this formula, can possibly be disturbed by what he deems infelicities of the language or of the forms of statement in which the system of doctrine is stated. He has not signed it for “forms of statement,” nor for “mode of arrangement,” nor for “organizing principle,” but specifically for “system of doctrine.” It is a safe formula, because it binds strictly to the whole doctrinal system of the Confession, and to all and every one of the doctrines entering as essential constituent parts into that system. It is liberal, because it allows for all sorts of variation in preferred ways of stating the system, consistent with preserving the system intact. It, therefore, allows all the liberty consistent with the preservation of the whole truth, and thus evinces itself as the ideal formula.

5. I am aware that some express themselves sometimes as if they thought “system of doctrine” a rather evanescent thing, not to be identified apart from the words and forms of statement and modes of arrangement by which it is brought to expression. But surely this is not thoughtfully said. We all know what Calvinism is—what Arminianism is—what Pelagianism is—apart from any one statement of any of them. If any one asked me to give him a work teaching “the Calvinistic system,” my only embarrassment would be to determine *which* work to give him. I might take Dr. Charles Hodge’s *Systematic Theology* in one hand, Dr. Shedd’s *Dogmatic Theology* in the other, Dr. Dabney’s *Syllabus* under one arm, and Dr. Henry B. Smith’s *System*

under the other, and truly say, Take your choice! What! the same system amid so much diversity? Undoubtedly. Perhaps no single sentence would be found expressed in identically the same words in any two of these works; certainly there are great variations to be found in them in forms of statement, even in conception, even (within limits) in doctrine itself. But the system abides in all. And it so abides in all as to be just as easily identifiable and just as strict a conception, as the special mode of statement of any one of the works separately. Why, one might as well say that he has no clear conception of a horse apart from one special horse, as that he has no strict conception of “the system of doctrine” apart from any one expression of it. No, the conception of the “system” is as clear as that of the *ipsissima verba*; and therefore subscription for system of doctrine is *strict* subscription. But it is also liberal subscription, which subscription to the *ipsissima verba* would not be.

All this being so, is it not a fair argument against revision that, if we still remain Calvinists, there is no call for revision of our Confession in order to relieve the consciences of our office-bearers? There may be other reasons why we *desire* revision—though good and sufficient reasons have not been published to the world as yet; but since we sign only for system of doctrine, there cannot be any stringent necessity for revision arising out of wounded consciences, *provided* those consciences be Calvinistic, and heartily believe the system of doctrine which lies expressed in our Confession.