

ADDRESSES

AT THE

CELEBRATION OF THE

Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary

OF THE

WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

BY THE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

OF THE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE U. S. A.

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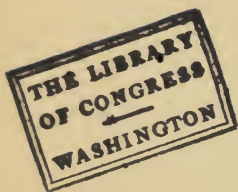
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FUNDAMENTAL DOCTRINES OF THE
WESTMINSTER CONFESSION
AND CATECHISMS.

BY THE

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WASHINGTON, PENNSYLVANIA.

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MODERATOR, FATHERS AND BRETHREN:

IF the Westminster standards were new to the world, my task would require me to set forth in proper order and in due proportion the several articles of faith defined in them; but after two hundred and fifty years of public proclamation, no such recital in detail can be needed—much less can it be needed before a representative body of Presbyterians. We may therefore confine our attention somewhat strictly to those doctrines which may be considered distinctive or characteristic.

We ought not, however, to allow ourselves to overlook the fact that our points of agreement with other Protestant Evangelical churches are more numerous and more valuable than the points wherein we differ from them. In a general way, it may be said that the Westminster divines aimed at embodying in

their creed pretty much all that was of an affirmative character in all the creeds of Christendom which were then formulated.

Approaching now that Calvinistic system which is embodied in our standards, I recall two mathematical figures which have been employed to illustrate how our distinctive doctrines have been brought together into a system. It was an opponent of our system, a prominent minister of a sister church, who likened our system to a circle, inasmuch as the several doctrines are held firmly together by their common relationship to the doctrine of divine sovereignty. And he added, that it is useless to try to break that circle, held together by the rigid logic by which its several parts are connected with the undeniable supremacy of God. "If you do not wish to accept it as a whole, you must simply ignore it, or cast it aside as a whole. Arrange your doctrines in your own way—make the evangelical system grow out of the love of God—or construct a system of theology that shall be Christocentric, and let the people of the world make their choice between your system, and the old, unbroken, unbreakable Calvinistic system."

Such a mode of representing our system—which I give only in substance—was very gratifying at the time, as indicating a loss of confidence on the part of an opponent in the wisdom of a direct attack upon our system. It was, moreover, generally regarded as a satisfactory general description of our system of

doctrine as having its center and bond of union in the doctrine of God's sovereignty.

But another man of prominence, speaking from within the Presbyterian fold, proposed amendment, by suggesting that our system may better be symbolized by the ellipse. The circle has a single center; the ellipse has two foci. The Westminster Calvinism regards the supremacy of God and the freedom of man as complemental truths, and is as loyal to the latter doctrine as to the former one.

Both these mathematical symbols are after all but symbols, each having its own appropriateness, and both having value as setting forth our peculiar system for general view.

From one point of view, however, it will not do to represent man's freedom as a co-ordinate with God's sovereignty, for the freedom of man is the gift of the sovereign God. Man possesses only so much freedom as God has seen fit to bestow upon him. God's supremacy is, therefore, a primary fact, and man's freedom wholly dependent on it. The one doctrine is at the center, and the other belongs to the circumference.

But from another point of view, we may treat the two doctrines as side by side. Since God has given freedom, it is now as truly a fact to be reckoned with as the divine sovereignty. No interpretation can properly be put upon the one that logically compels us to ignore or tone down the other fact. God him-

self respects his own gift, and never exercises his sovereign power in any way to break down that freedom. The Confession of Faith expressly teaches that God's sovereignty is not of a kind to "offer any violence to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established." Within the realm of theological thought there is no fact more remarkable than the respect which the sovereign God has ever shown to man's limited freedom. It is indeed a limited freedom (commensurate at least with human responsibility), but within this God-given limit man himself is a sovereign. God has so far respected his own gift to man that he would not prevent the introduction of sin in our world; nor will he interpose to cast it out by any exercise of power inconsistent with man's freedom; and men who prefer to sin may even do so eternally.

Whilst, therefore, it is certainly Calvinistic to put the doctrine of divine sovereignty at the center as the ultimate source of everything else that we value, it is just as good Calvinism to put alongside of it the doctrine of human freedom, when once we have accounted for it as God's gift, and determined its limitations as God has ordained them; and it is our right—indeed, it is our duty—to insist upon it that all interpretations and applications of Calvinistic doctrines, by friend or foe, shall recognize the fact that the two are now co-ordinate. Considered meta-

physically, or in their origin, God's sovereignty is primal; man's freedom derived and limited. Considered phenomenally, with reference to the existing order, one fact is just as stubborn as the other, and neither one can be ignored without misconception resulting.

After this general view of our system of doctrine, let us consider its principal details. I think it can be shown that every distinctive doctrine of our system grows out of the endeavor of the Westminster Assembly to present the character of God to the intelligent world as the one complete and perfect being.

As far as the elements properly belonging to the idea of sovereignty are concerned, there is entire agreement among all theists. That God is the ultimate source of all authority, that he is independent in the exercise of his authority and power, and that there is no being to whom he is accountable for the ultimate issue of his acts, cannot be doubted by any one who believes in his existence and attaches any meaning to the term God. But in much of our theological discussion of God's sovereignty, and in much of the popular conception as to what we do believe, there can be no doubt that undue prominence has been given to the will of God. It has been very common to speak of the sovereign will of God, and so to magnify the mere element of will, the sheer power or authority, as to create feelings of repugnance on the

part of many who reject our creed, and induce in those who still accept it a kind of fatalistic submission to the inevitable. Under this false emphasis the will of God has taken on the aspect of wilfulness, and the independence of God has been distorted into an indifference as to what may be the effect of his decrees upon his creatures. The true doctrine, which attributes sovereignty to God's person, considered in its entirety, thus becomes narrowed to a doctrine ascribing sovereignty to a personified power, and throws open the way to the fear or belief that this power is often arbitrarily or capriciously exercised. It is possible to submit to the will of God, considered as mere power or authority; but if we are to acquiesce in that will, it will have to appear either to our reason or our faith as more than authority, as an expression of wisdom and goodness.

The false conception of Calvinism, which has grown up in the minds of so many Christian people, and even in the case of many who have been trained in Presbyterian families, is largely due to a defective psychology belonging to the past centuries and only now passing away. It is the psychology which has distinguished somewhat too sharply between the faculties of intellect, sensibility, and will. It is true, indeed, that the older psychologists held firmly to the unity and simplicity of the soul, and did not intend to represent the faculties as distinct organs of mind; but the three so-called faculties were treated

separately and the operations of each described with little or no reference to those of the other faculties, so that it is not very strange that there should be an almost irresistible tendency to think of each faculty as independent in its activity. Free will has become almost a household term, and even in theological discussion is often so employed as to suggest a measure of independence of intellect and emotion quite inconsistent with the facts of consciousness. In the later psychology, knowing, feeling, and willing are only functions of the soul: nor are they separate and independent functions. They are interdependent. If any real state of mind when active be considered, all three of these functions will invariably be represented; and our only way of distinguishing one state of mind from another is by the fact that one function seems to be more prominent than the others. Thus in the ideal student's mind knowing is predominant, but his intense study is due to the activity of his will, and this activity is due to the power of his emotional nature stimulated by the free play of his intellectual powers. In the ideal business man will may be predominant, but his activity and persistence in the prosecution of his business are due to the fact that his heart is in the work, and has set both intellect and will to work. Will, in its normal state, is never alone, never free from the influence of the character of him who exerts it. Willing is the function of personality, and with full knowledge on our part always indicates the

character of him whose willing it is, and indicates that character because it is determined by it.

With these modern distinctions in view, we may object to the application of the term sovereign to the will of God, on the ground that it is the person of God which is sovereign. His will cannot fail to manifest his character, for what God knows and how God feels, must be thought of as lying back of and determining all the choices, purposes, and activities of his will. It is the sovereignty and supremacy of God, the perfect being, the complete person, combining harmoniously in his person all the excellencies and perfections which can be conceived as belonging to personality, which Calvinism makes central in its teachings, and no mere almightiness and authority.

I know there are a few phrases in our Confession which seem to lend support to the false view I have been criticizing, but they are to be interpreted in the light of the fact that our Confession invariably traces God's decrees and acts, not merely to his will, but to some element of his character, to his goodness, to his love, to his justice, to his grace. These are all impulses of his perfect nature, which draw him on to gratify them and thus give rise to his eternal decrees and his works in time.

It is our contention that analysis of the perfect character of God will give us the basis of every distinctive doctrine of our Calvinistic system. Is God a rational being? Is he completely rational; has rea-

son in him reached its highest conceivable perfection? Then he must be thought of by us as looking ahead, planning the future, foreseeing every possible contingency. He must work according to plan. He must have some sufficient end in view. And his plan must embrace every detail; there can be no after-thoughts, no unforeseen contingencies arising to necessitate repair or change of purpose. We cannot conceive of the ruler of this universe, who is perfect as a ruler, being surprised by the occurrence of some unforeseen events. But this is universal predestination, a doctrine designed to set forth the completeness in all respects with which God governs his world and directs the course of its progress.

Is there in God a combination of varied powers? Is his character broad enough to include every trait of personality which we find entering into human personality, with the proviso that each trait in God's personality has reached its highest stage of perfection? Surely no one can withhold an affirmative answer to these questions. Then it must be held to be extremely probable that there will be some variety of mode in God's dealing with men.

As he is righteous, there can be no doubt of his dealing justly with all, holy and sinful alike. But as God is good, kind, loving, these impulses must also move him to go beyond the demands of justice, where the law of righteousness does not forbid. And as God is gracious, it is not strange that he should seek

and find a way of helping and benefiting the unworthy. Since then our Calvinism has ever emphasized the evangelical doctrine that all men are to be dealt with either according to the principles of law or according to the principles of grace; and that each adult must make his own choice as to whether his merits and demerits shall be considered, or wholly disregarded in order that he may rely on grace alone; we have but carried our conception of God's character into our interpretation of his Word and our evangelistic work.

It may be going too far to say that our church has been more loyal than others to the doctrine of the Atonement. But certainly Westminster Calvinism has wavered less under the assaults of rationalism on this doctrine than many others. The stiffest modes of stating the doctrine have found defenders in our church, and zeal for this fundamental truth may have carried some theologians too far. But the powerful hold the doctrine has maintained upon men loyal to the Westminster Confession has been due, not only to the clearness and earnestness with which the doctrine is set forth in the Scriptures, but also to its close connection in our minds with the character of God as we conceive it. Believing as we do that God is perfectly righteous, we cannot think of him as otherwise than infinitely more earnest than we can be in his approval of all right-doing and his disapproval of all wrong-doing. Nor can we conceive

of him as failing in any degree to express his approval and his disapproval in his treatment of the good or the evil agents. Therefore it is simply inconceivable to us, when we fix our thought on the perfect character of God, that he should ever forgive a single sin without an adequate expression of his disapproval of it. This expression we find in the death of Jesus Christ, and nowhere else can we even look for it.

But as this expression would be useless if sinful men did not voluntarily seek forgiveness under it, fairness to Christ demanded that a great multitude of human beings should somehow be induced to put themselves under the operations of God's grace. But this is the doctrine of election. It grows out of the conviction that God is both righteous and loving, the former impelling him to secure to Jesus a sufficient reward, and the latter impelling him to secure the blessings of the Atonement to a great multitude, whom no man can number. It is the unmistakable fact that God brings more gracious influences to bear on some men than on others to lead them to accept Christ as their personal Saviour, which lies at the basis of, and receives explanation in, the doctrine of election.

If now we combine with God's love his respect for human freedom, we lay the foundation for the correlative doctrine of preterition. I know how easy it is to present these correlative doctrines so as to create

an impression that God's ways with men are not equal. It may even be difficult for many who accept the doctrines because they are taught in the Scriptures, to keep out of the mind the suspicion that God is partial in a way we do not tolerate in our fellow-men. And I confess I know of no way to find relief from a suspicion no one of us cares to entertain, except by putting the doctrine of human freedom alongside that of divine sovereignty, and insisting that it be given due weight. If electing grace is not of a character to abridge freedom, and it certainly is not, then preterition may be connected with God's respect for his own gift, and this conclusion follows: the elect are willing to be saved by grace, and the non-elect are either unwilling to be saved from sin or are not willing to be saved by grace. The line that divides the adult world into the two classes of elect and non-elect, corresponds exactly to the line that divides that same world into the willing and the unwilling. If we are pressed to explain how it comes about that some are willing and others are unwilling, we may reply that each individual case may furnish its own reasons, which do not admit of generalization. Individual experiences differ both before and after acceptance of Christ, and each man may give some account of his own choices. Or we may fall back upon a strictly Christian and philosophical agnosticism. We cannot lift ourselves outside of our created universe and take our stand beside God's throne and explain, as from

God's point of view, the details of his government of free, intelligent beings. It is enough for us to know that for every act of his a sufficient reason can be found in his own perfections, and it is folly and sin for us to scale down the loftiest conception of his character we can form or entertain, in order to make our earthly life somewhat freer from mystery.

It is sometimes objected to our Confession that it does not give sufficient prominence to the love of God. And it has been questioned whether a thoroughgoing Calvinist can love the God he pictures to his mind. I shall not reply to this question by citing the multitudes, who, by patient endurance of persecutions, and perseverance in missionary and philanthropic labor, have given practical proofs of their love of God. It cannot be doubted that these martyrs and missionaries of the past, nerved themselves to endurance and fidelity by their hearty acceptance of our fundamental doctrines. There may be more need to show the intimate, but not very apparent, connection which exists between the Westminster conception of God and a practical and deep-seated love of God. You cannot induce men to love God by giving them verbal descriptions of his love, however poetic your phraseology may be. There is a way of talking about God's love that is for most men too sentimental to be effective. It is not mere love which men crave, and men do not value it because of its intensity. All love owes its value to the personality

which lies back of it. No one cares for the love of any being whom he does not respect. True love may be generally defined as an impulse to use one's powers for the benefit of another person. So far as this is a proper definition, it makes apparent that the value of any love will be determined by the personal powers which are devoted to our benefit, and the motive and character of the person who is thus willing to employ his powers in our behalf. We actually turn away from the proffered love of mean and low and vicious natures. We prefer the hatred of the devil to his love, however intense it might be. The value therefore of the simple proclamation that God loves us lies in the fact that it is God, whose powers are perfect and whose character is attractive, who is declared to love. It is not necessary that a confession dwell upon the love, if it sets before us clearly and fully the excellencies and perfections of his character. Let there be chapters which set before us his wisdom, power, righteousness, providence, and provisions for the salvation of sinners, if there be but a single clause—"God is love"—it is enough. Short as the declaration is, it carries the mind back to all the revelation of his personality and thus makes the love assume larger and larger proportions. There may not be much of the poetic, the passionate, the sentimental in the love kindled in the soul by a sympathetic study of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, but it will be intelligent, permanent, prac-

tical, and a constantly acting and constraining force in our daily life.

It is true the Westminster Confession emphasizes the condition of man, possibly to such an extent as to constitute a distinctive feature. More than any other creed has it elaborated human sinfulness and reduced human ability to its zero point. It has even seemed to some to deny all ethical value to truthfulness, honesty, and kindness when practised by the unregenerate. So far as this is characteristic, it may seem to be an exception to the general statement, that our distinctive features grow out of our analysis of God's character. But after all, it is reasonably clear that this dark, black picture of human nature, has resulted from bringing man into judgment where the standard is not a human ideal of morality, but the perfect righteousness of God himself. The worthlessness of human deeds is not based on their valuation for purposes of this life, but considered as human efforts to attain salvation. And the primary purpose of this humbling view of man is to magnify the grace of God, to make it clear that his salvation is in no degree based on his own merit, and to emphasize his complete indebtedness to God.

From the fact that acceptance of our standards is exacted only of our ministers and elders, and this not in all its words and phrases, but as a system of doctrines, it may fairly be inferred that the main purpose is to secure a certain content in all preaching

and teaching. The underlying assumption seems to be that if this system of doctrine is faithfully preached, its direct tendency will be to bring God and man together upon terms most favorable to promote God's glory, and to secure in man the development of the highest type of Christian character. In order to this, man must be brought as a humble suppliant before God, ready to receive grace, because realizing most deeply his need of it. But mere humility and receptivity will not make a strong, active, persevering saint. All-powerful faith and hope and love must be planted and nourished in the soul, and these results can come only from intelligent convictions concerning the character of God. Upon God rather than upon his own soul must man's attentive gaze be fixed. What we think of ourselves depends primarily on what we think of God. Self-knowledge that is valuable can come to us only as we bring ourselves in contrast with God. And growth in Christian nobility and effective service of our generation, according to the will of God, are nourished by our increasing knowledge of God. Believing as I do that the Westminster system of doctrine is the outgrowth of an earnest and intelligent attempt to analyze for the world the characteristics of the Most Perfect Being, I cannot but long for a revival to some extent of doctrinal preaching that shall follow the general type of theological thinking set before us in our standards. More modern phraseology and more modern concep-

tions may be desirable, but close adherence to the essential thoughts of our Confession can scarcely fail to give to our Sabbath-day hearers a grander, nobler, truer, and more scriptural conception of God, than many of them are now forming under a style of preaching that is better adapted to give a conception of the character of modern leaders and events.