

CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

SAMUEL G. CRAIG, Editor

H. McALLISTER GRIFFITHS, Managing Editor

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The Outlook for Christianity

EVERY judgment as to the present status of Christianity is necessarily determined by the answer given to the question, What is Christianity? If everything called Christianity is really Christianity, it is safe to say that its status was never as favorable as at the present time. The statisticians tell us that there are more people in the world today who call themselves Christians than ever before. Moreover despite the situation in Russia and public opposition to Christianity in certain circles in Europe and America, there is relatively little professed antagonism to Christianity. Practically everybody, including those who are hostile to the Church in all its branches, claim that their views are "essentially" Christian. There is much criticism of this and that expression of Christianity but there is little professed criticism of Christianity as such. Surely if all that is called Christianity is rightly so called the outlook for Christianity is the most favorable that has been known since Pentecost.

If, then, we define Christianity (as many do in effect) as what is held in common by those who profess and call themselves Christians, we will judge that the outlook for Christianity is exceedingly optimistic. Suppose, however, that some of those who call themselves Christians are not Christians at all—as the Scriptures lead us to expect. Then what is held in common would contain nothing but what is held by non-Christians as well as Christians. But even if it be true (as of course it is not) that all who profess and call themselves

Christians are really Christians, the definition of Christianity that would result would express only the minimum of Christianity, the very least that a man can hold and still rightly call himself a Christian. Otherwise the least adequate forms of Christianity would be excluded. Suppose we ask the question, What is a man? Do we merely want to know what all men have in common? If so we are seeking for a definition of a man that will adequately describe only the poorest, meanest, least developed specimen of a man that exists. Surely, however, when we ask such a question we want to know what a normal or representative man is. It is not otherwise when we ask, What is Christianity? We want to know what normal Christianity is, not the most attenuated form of thought that can possibly be called Christianity. A definition of Christianity that gives expression only to what is held in common by those who call themselves Christian will at the most express only the minimum of Christianity, even if all those who call themselves Christians are

actually such. Inasmuch, however, as "they are not all Israel that are of Israel" it is obvious that it will not express even that. It will merely express what Christianity has in common with natural religion and so will lack everything that is distinctive of Christianity.

The mere fact, then, that so many people profess and call themselves Christians today affords no real warrant for supposing that the outlook for Christianity is highly favorable—true as it is that this fact is in itself fitted to justify the belief that the fortunes of Christianity are now at flood tide.

"Modernists" and "Fundamentalists," moreover, are at least agreed in maintaining that the number of those who profess and call themselves Christians warrants no definite conclusion as to the actual status of Christianity. According to the "Modernists," almost immediately after his death the "religion of Jesus" (i.e. the religion that Jesus is alleged to have taught and exemplified) was transformed, re-fashioned, radically altered by his earliest disciples, under the influence of their pre-Christian beliefs, a tendency that was continued under the influence of the theological notions of PAUL (largely pagan in origin according to the Modernists) and that reached its culmination in the historical creeds of the churches—with the result that the knowledge of real Christianity was almost completely lost until it was re-discovered by the Modernists, dug up as it were out of the debris under which it had been covered for some eighteen hundred years. When it is remembered that according to the

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The Confessional Statement of the United Presbyterian Church

By John Murray, M.A., Th.M.

[We are happy to be able to publish this incisive and informing article from the pen of Mr. Murray, who is in charge of instruction in Systematic Theology in Westminster Theological Seminary. Another article by him, concerning especially the "Preamble" to the Confessional Statement, will appear in our next issue.]

BY constitutional action consummated on June 2nd 1925 The United Presbyterian Church of North America in accordance with its claim that it is the "right and duty of a living church to restate its faith from time to time, so as to display any additional attainments in truth it may have made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit," adopted the abovementioned confessional statement. This statement does not profess to be a substitute for the Westminster symbols for according to the preamble the church "declares afresh its adherence to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, Larger and Shorter, as setting forth the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures." It claims to be supplementary to them, containing the substance of the Westminster Standards and certain present-day convictions of the Church. These convictions are presumably either in accord with these Standards, but not at all or at least not sufficiently expressed in them, or at variance with them. "Wherever it deviates," the preamble says, "from the Westminster Standards its declarations are to prevail."

It is our purpose in this article to review from the more or less theological point of view this Confessional Statement, and that more particularly in order to institute a comparison between it and the Westminster Standards, to which in the judgment of this Church it forms a supplement, and of which at certain points it supplies the corrective. We agree that on certain topics the Statement does express the substance of the Westminster Symbols, and do not call for comment on our part. We agree also that some of the additional convictions expressed are acceptable statements of Christian truth and duty. It

is necessary to concentrate attention on a few articles and statements that merit criticism.

Art. II "Of Divine Revelation"

This article we feel is distinctly faulty in that the clear-cut qualitative distinction between natural and supernatural revelation is not drawn with clearness and definiteness. It is true that the insufficiency of the revelation in nature, the mind of man, and the history of nations is declared; but the impression created by the weak comparative in the words, "that a clearer revelation came from men who spake from God," is that the difference in content is one of degree and not one of kind. Any statement of the content of divine revelation that fails to distinguish very expressly and sharply between the revelation that is natural and universal, but falling short of salvation, and the revelation that is special, supernatural, and redemptive is decidedly culpable and justifiably liable to suspicion. This holds with special force in these times when, under the influence of the evolutionary bias in the study of comparative religion, the lines of distinction between heathen religion and Christianity tend to be obliterated. When the Westminster Standards were framed, there may have been less ostensible occasion for emphasis upon this distinction; and yet how favourably does the Confession compare in the matter. "Although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God as to leave men inexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of His will which is necessary unto salvation: therefore it pleased the Lord, at

sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself and to declare that His will unto his Church," etc. (Conf. of Faith. I.1.) Here one has the satisfaction that the line of distinction is boldly drawn.

Art. III. "Of Holy Scripture"

We must confess to considerable hesitancy with regard to the import of the words that the writers of Holy Scripture "though moved by the Holy Spirit, wrought in accordance with the laws of the human mind." We are thoroughly appreciative of them in so far as they guard against a purely mechanical theory of inspiration. It is true that the Scriptures have come to us through human instrumentality, and that they bear unmistakable marks of this as well as express testimony to it. It is true also that Scripture having that human aspect involved for the writers labour in accordance with the laws of the human mind. But what we dispute is the legitimacy of making a statement of the way in which the Word of God came to us through human instrumentality in terms of this one mode of activity, namely, operation in accordance with the laws of the human mind. When we think of Scripture as the product of men who wrote as the organs of the Divine Spirit, we must leave room for a great multiplicity of process and activity, and it is just because this statement appears to us too narrow to allow for that multiplicity and variety that we take exception to it. We must not confine God's activity in this matter, nor His use of human organs as the channels of His revelation to the laws inherent in the human mind. If the words we criticise were not intended to do this, then we are glad; but at the same time contend

that that ought to be explicitly expressed, and the possibility of the interpretation we have criticised entirely eliminated.

This article concludes by speaking of the Scriptures as "an infallible rule of faith and practice, and the supreme source of authority in spiritual truth." Why does it speak of the Scriptures as "an infallible rule of faith and practice," when the preamble speaks of them as "the only infallible and final rule of faith and practice"? Does it not, so far as the "Statement" is concerned, leave open the possibility of another infallible rule of faith and practice, and if so is not the permission of the possibility of such an interpretation too precarious? The Westminster Standards do not leave open this possibility; but we have been told in the preamble that wherever "the Statement" deviates from the Westminster Standards, its declarations are to prevail. Does this not constitute a deviation?

If the designation of the Scriptures as "the supreme source of authority in spiritual truth" implies, as it to us very definitely suggests, that the authority of scripture applies only to the sphere of spiritual truth, then we hasten to register our emphatic protest. It is impossible to isolate the teaching of Scripture on what is generally called moral and spiritual truth from its teaching on other questions. If it is the Word of God and infallible in the realm of spiritual truth, it is the Word of God and infallible throughout on all questions of which it speaks, and in all its statements in the sense in which they were intended. Consequently it must be authoritative, and supremely authoritative on other questions, besides those in the realm of spiritual truth, in so far as it treats of them. For example, what it expresses or clearly implies in the realm of nature and history is infallible and therefore authoritative. The attempt to limit the authority of Scripture to spiritual truth pure and simple, besides being wholly unscientific from the exegetical and dogmatic standpoints, is distinctly pernicious in its tendency to overthrow the very principle of the authority of Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice.

Art. IV "Of Creation"

In this article we simply comment upon the last sentence that man was created "free and able to choose between good and evil, and therefore morally responsible." The ground upon which the "therefore" of the last clause rests is probably all the foregoing definitions of that in which man's spiritual nature consists, and not simply the assertion that he was created "free and able to choose between good and evil." But even if this latter assertion is not the sole ground affirmed, yet it must be included as part of it, and coming next to the final conclusion will we think bear the greater part of the burden in the thought of the reader.

Now it may be instructive to be reminded that the power of contrary choice is not the ground of moral responsibility. We do not hold that the power of contrary choice was given man at the beginning to constitute him a free agent and thus ground his moral responsibility. Man would have been a free agent and therefore morally responsible, even though he had been immutably confirmed in holiness and righteousness. He was given the power of contrary choice for purposes of probation. Since the fall man is wholly indisposed and made opposite to all good, and unable by reason of innate corruption to choose what is well-pleasing to God, so that with respect to those things that are of highest moment, he has not the power to choose between good and evil. Yet with respect to these things and in that realm he is undeniably a free agent and morally responsible. In glory "the will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to do good alone,"¹ and yet the glorified saints are free agents and morally responsible. One cannot but entertain the fear that the framers of this statement have not grasped the real significance of the very vital distinction drawn in the Western Church between freedom or liberty and ability. Liberty on which responsibility is grounded is voluntary self-determination, self-motion, and this remains even where man has the moral ability for only one course of action. Freedom just means that man acts according to his

nature or character without external compulsion. It was one of the errors of Pelagius that he failed to understand this, and very closely related to this were his fundamental theses that ability limits obligation and that man has plenary ability to do all that God requires of him. It is lamentable to observe that the Pelagian virus has surreptitiously and in an apparently harmless way found its way into the thought of branches of the Christian church where Pelagianism in its bald form is expressly repudiated. We must ever be on our guard against it for it is simply naturalism, and naturalism is the sworn and ever-active foe of Christianity.

Art. IX "Of Salvation"

Here our salvation is rightly traced to its ultimate source in the infinite love of God which moved Him to enter into a covenant of grace with His Only-begotten Son. But it does, to say the least, appear strange that the reference to this covenant should be wholly lacking in any reference to election and predestination to life. In the Reformed theology the covenant made with the Son is conceived of as in subordination to the decree of election and predestination to life of those elected. Our Westminster Standards are explicit in this regard. "God doth not leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery into which they fell by the breach of the first covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Works: but of his mere love and mercy delivereth his elect out of it, and bringeth them into an estate of salvation by the second covenant commonly called the Covenant of Grace." "The Covenant of Grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed." "The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that He freely provideth and offereth unto sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by Him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in Him, promiseth and giveth His Holy Spirit to all the elect to work in them that faith with all other saving graces etc."² "God having out of his mere good pleasure

² Larger Cat. Qs.30-32.

¹ Conf. of Faith. IX. 5.

(Continued on page 13)

are somehow thought to become virtues when they serve ecclesiastical ends; an odour of sanctity in the Church is thought to take the place of humble moral considerations which prevail generally between man and man.

That error must be rooted out of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. if it is to be a Christian church in fact as well as in name. Secret courts, depriving a man of his right to an open trial, are disgraceful and outrageous in the world at large; they are even more disgraceful and outrageous in a church that bears the name of Christ. Wrong does not become right merely by being within ecclesiastical walls.

The second error which needs to be rooted out of our minds and hearts is the error that makes loving words a substitute for loving deeds. We hear much about love in the Church today; but is it really love? Oh, no, my friends. If a man really loved the Church of Jesus Christ, if he really loved with his whole heart the little ones for whom Christ died, he would never repeat the vain swelling words of a foolish optimism; he would never cry "Peace, peace," when there is no peace; he would never conceal from the Church its deadly peril; he would never exalt the smooth working of ecclesiastical machinery above the simple principles of openness and fair play; he would never cherish the wicked and heartless dream of a monopolistic church union; he would never consent to force a single congregation into a church union against its conscience or seek to take its property from it if it declined to conform; he would never deprive any man of his right to an open trial. Instead, he would present the real facts without fear or favor; he would love with a love like that of the Apostle Paul, who wrote to the Corinthian Christians a truthful letter that cost him many tears. Above all, in this crisis of the Church's life he would come before God in a very agony of prayer—not the prayer that is an evasion of witness-bearing but the prayer that makes even weak men brave. He would pray that those who are leading the Church astray may be convicted of their deadly error; he would pray that the great attack just launched in the name of church union

against the Faith of our Church may by God's grace be brought to naught; he would pray that the coldness and indifference of us who hold to the old gospel might be burned away in the flame of the divine love; he would pray that such a thing as secret courts may hardly so much as be named among us; he would pray that the Church may renounce the things of darkness and may return to the light and openness and liberty of the gospel of Christ.

Who, in this time of crisis, will engage, very earnestly and very humbly, in such a prayer?

The Confessional Statement of the U. P. Church—Continued

from all eternity elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer."³

The consequence of this defect appears later on in the same article in the obscurity and ambiguity that surround the statement that "the Son standing as the representative of sinners and their Mediator with God freely consented to secure for them a full salvation." For whom did Christ secure a full salvation? Assuredly we must always maintain, as this article very truly does, that the salvation wrought out by Christ is "sufficient for all and adapted to all"; but when we come to speak of full salvation being rendered secure, we cannot universalise this specific quality, neither can we afford to deal with it in indefinite and loose language. We cannot too carefully and unequivocally refer it to those and to those only who are actually saved. The clause at the end of the sentence, namely, "for all who believe on him," is so far removed that it is only a possible answer to the question we have asked. According to the construction of the sentence as a whole we are not shut down to that as the only possible interpretation. Consequently we hold there is obscurity and ambiguity where positive clearness and definiteness are demanded.

³ Shorter Cat. Q.20.

Art. XIV "Of the Atonement"

From what we have just said we naturally pass on to the consideration of this topic. This article defines atonement in terms of ransom, propitiatory sacrifice, substitution for sinful man, satisfaction to divine justice and holiness, and explicitly affirms that atonement thus defined is for all and made for the sin of the world. That is to say atonement defined in such terms has a wider reference with respect to mankind than the circle of those to whom as a matter of fact it is efficaciously applied; we can put no other interpretation on the words that "this atonement though made for the sin of the world, becomes efficacious to those only who are led by the Holy Spirit to believe in Christ as their Saviour." In other words the atonement as such has a universal reference, though its application is limited to those who believe. We can call it then surely with justice a doctrine of universal atonement. Probably our suspicion of the statements of article IX was not mistaken.

It becomes imperative to compare this doctrine of the atonement with that of the Westminster Confession. It runs: "The Lord Jesus by His perfect obedience and sacrifice of Himself, which He through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God hath fully satisfied the justice of His Father, and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto Him." "To all those for whom Christ hath purchased redemption He doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same," etc.⁴

When in a later chapter the Confession gives further definition of the nature of this satisfaction, it says, "Christ by His obedience did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real and full satisfaction to the Father's justice in their behalf."⁵ The doctrine is plain that those for whom Christ discharged the debt and made satisfaction are those who are justified and the justified are the effectually called. "Those whom God effectually calleth, He also freely

⁴ Conf. of Faith VIII. 5, 8.

⁵ Conf. of Faith XI. 3.