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A Notable Tercentenary

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JULY 1, 1943, is a date that marks one of the most notable tercentenaries in the history of the Christian church. It was three hundred years ago on July 1, 1643, that the Westminster Assembly of Divines convened at Westminster, London, England.

That Assembly would have been a notable event even apart from the work that it produced in the four or five years that followed. The circumstances under which it was called and under which it met would have made it significant. But it is the work of the Assembly throughout the years that followed that makes this particular date of such lasting importance. It was the Westminster Assembly that gave to us some of our most priceless possessions, for it gave us the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. Language fails to assess the blessing that God in His sovereign providence and grace bestowed upon His church through these statements of the Christian faith. The influence exerted by them is beyond all human calculation. We should indeed be remiss if we did not make this tercentenary the occasion for grateful remembrance of God's inestimable favor. Other men labored and we have entered into their labors. Truly the lines are fallen unto us in pleasant places and we have a goodly heritage.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms are the flower and fruit of some fifteen centuries of creedal or confessional formulation of the Christian faith. This is just saying that the West-

minster divines, when they sat at Westminster in the fifth decade of the seventeenth century, were the heirs of the labors of God's servants for fifteen centuries as these servants of God had striven to set forth the truth of the Christian faith and guard it against error and distortion. The Westminster Assembly did not abstract itself from the history of the church but willingly and gratefully recognised itself as the debtor to all the wisdom and light that God in His providence had caused to be deposited in the expositions and formulations of the past.

More particularly, the Westminster divines were the heirs of all the other evangelical creeds of the Reformation period. The Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was peculiarly prolific in the production of confessions of faith. It was an age of ardent and polemic faith and the framing of creeds or confessions was the natural result. Nearly all of these creeds are notable and valuable exhibitions of Christian truth, and not a few of them are of priceless value. Many of them are to this day the accepted creedal symbols of the faith of the Protestant churches.

It is noteworthy, however, that the Westminster Confession and Catechisms are the last in the series of the great Reformation creeds. This fact of chronology is itself of great significance. The rich repertory of Protestant confessional statement covering more than a hundred years lay open before them. It was their happy lot to compare, to sift, to select and to evaluate in the

full light of more than a century of faithful and devoted labor on the part of others. But perhaps of even greater significance is the fact that no other Protestant or Reformed Confession had brought to bear upon its composition such a combination of devotion, care and erudition as was exhibited in the work of the Westminster Assembly.

The Westminster Confession and Catechisms are, therefore, the mature fruit of the whole movement of creed-formation throughout fifteen centuries of Christian history and, in particular, they are the crown of the greatest age of confessional exposition, the Protestant Reformation. No other similar documents have concentrated in them, and formulated with such precision, so much of the truth embodied in the Christian revelation.

This estimate of the Westminster standards might seem to accord to them a place so high that dishonor is paid to the Word of God, the Scriptures. Indeed the accusation has sometimes been made that, when we thus appraise the Westminster standards and appeal to them, we are placing the Confession and Catechisms in the place of the Bible. Such an accusation, to say the very least, is due to gross misunderstanding. It goes without saying that the Bible is the supreme standard of faith. The Bible alone is the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. The Westminster Confession and Catechisms have no normative character or authority in and of themselves. Their whole value resides in the conformity of their teaching with the Word of God, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The only reason why we give to them so high an appraisal is that they, more than any other similar documents in the history of the Christian church, set forth in precise and well-guarded language the truth of God revealed in the Holy Scriptures. They are, indeed, human documents. In that they differ absolutely from the Bible. They should never be regarded as sacrosanct. The Westminster divines were not infallible and they were not inspired as were the writers of Holy Scripture. The teaching of the Confession and Catechisms must always be subjected

to the scrutiny of the Word of God. If we ever regard them as in themselves sacrosanct and authoritative, then we have committed idolatry and have fallen into the error of the Church of Rome.

But the reason why the Confession and Catechisms should be so highly honored is that, to an amazing extent, their teaching does stand the scrutiny of the Word of God. They bear the marks of human infirmity and fallibility, but no other statements framed by men so adequately express the confession of Christian belief. For this reason they have been the confessions of faith of some of the most faithful churches upon earth since the Reformation.

Every branch of the visible church must confess its faith both as testimony to the Lord and as the bond of fellowship among believers. It is surely to be expected that the church will confess its faith in the form that is most adequate and competent. When Presbyterian and Reformed churches adopt these Westminster standards as the symbols and confessions of their faith, they are but using the instruments with which God in His providence has furnished the church for proclaiming, inculcating and preserving the truth revealed in the Word of God, they are but using these means for maintaining the purity of the church and they are but insur-

ing that the bonds of fellowship be those of well-proven soundness and stability. Let us prove all things; but let us also hold fast that which is good.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a series of articles by Professor Murray in observance of the tercentenary of the Westminster Assembly. The second will appear in an early issue.)

QUARRYVILLE CONFERENCE FEATURES FAMOUS SPEAKERS

THE Seventh Annual Young People's Conference at Quarryville, Pa., will be addressed by such prominent ministers of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church as Professor R. B. Kuiper of Westminster Seminary; Bruce F. Hunt, returned missionary, Floyd E. Hamilton of the Committee on Christian Education, Edward L. Kellogg, Donald C. Graham, Richard W. Gray, and Everett C. DeVelde. The conference will be conducted from June 28th to July 5th on the spacious conference grounds of Faith Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Quarryville, whose pastor, the Rev. Franklin S. Dyrness, is executive director of the conference.

The daily program is composed of Bible study hours, devotions, mission studies, evangelistic services, and recreation, and every delegate is assured a pleasant and refreshing vacation as well as a time of rich spiritual profit. Counsellors have been provided for the boys and girls, and a registered nurse will be in attendance. Music will be under the direction of Mr. Graham, and special music will be furnished by Mrs. Edward L. Kellogg and Mrs. Robert Strong.

Total cost for the eight days is eleven dollars, which includes a non-returnable registration fee of two dollars. Delegates should send their registrations at once to the Rev. Franklin S. Dyrness, Quarryville, Pa.

Another conference, designed especially for adults, will be held over Labor Day week-end. The speakers will include Dr. Robert Strong, the Rev. Robert S. Marsden, and the Rev. James W. Price.

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