

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

FIRST GENERAL PRESBYTERIAN COUNCIL

CONVENED AT EDINBURGH, JULY 1877.

WITH RELATIVE DOCUMENTS

BEARING ON THE AFFAIRS OF THE COUNCIL, AND THE STATE OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.

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The Minutes of Friday's sessions were read and approved.

On a Report from the Business Committee, the Council appointed a Committee on Creeds and Confessions, in terms of Mr. Taylor Innes's motion (*see Appendix*), Rev. Dr. Philip Schaff of New York, Convener.

The order of the day was then taken up, when a Paper was read by the Rev. DR. PATTON of Chicago, on

THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES OF INFIDELITY.

I HAVE prepared this paper with reference to the limitation of time, and without preface I propose to consider :—

I. *Unbelief as it concerns the question of personal faith in Christ.*—The doctrine of the Bible is salvation by faith. Faith is persuasion of the truth ; when it terminates on propositions, we call it assent ; when on persons, trust. Saving faith is not faith in propositions, but trust in a person. It is confidence in a divine Christ. This is the heart of the gospel. Hence the ethical significance of unbelief. In the presence of the appalling amount of unbelief of this kind, no question is more important than the inquiry, How are we to deal with it ? What are we to do ? (1.) In addition to the presentation of motives to men to believe in Christ, by showing that Christ is entitled to their confidence, we can show that conceiving of God as embarking in the work of man's redemption and providing for his salvation, the most natural thing in the world is that he should ask men to have confidence in him. This relieves the subject of the arbitrary aspect which it sometimes seems to have. (2.) While representing faith in exercise as a very simple thing, it is but right that we should recognise that the state of mind which we call confidence in God is, when we look at it, a psychological marvel. This will serve a double purpose. It will expose the fallacy of those who represent us as conditioning salvation on external acts too trifling, as they think, to affect the salvation of the soul, by showing them that it is the state of mind which presupposes the act, and not the act itself, to which God looks ; and it will pave the way for the next point which I wish to present. (3.) We must recognise the sovereign nature of regeneration in an act of God's Holy Spirit, and do ample justice to the office-work of the third person of the Trinity. If by an act of will we cannot bring ourselves into a state of confidence in a fellow-man who does not have our confidence, we may reasonably argue that it is not in our power to bring ourselves into the attitude of confidence in God,

particularly in view of those Scriptures which describe us in our fallen nature as at enmity with God. (4.) And finally, in undertaking to explain why men do not believe, we must be careful lest, in referring to the neglect of the Church and the want of consistency among Christians, we overlook the generic cause of unbelief in the subjective state of the sinner ; a depraved nature which, in the first place, makes him undesirous of hearing the gospel ; in the second place, puts him in a false argumentative attitude in respect to the gospel ; and in the third place prevents his hearty acceptance of the gospel, though intellectually convinced of its truth.

II. *Unbelief as it concerns the question of the divine authority of the Bible.*—The unbelief which discredits the Bible comes naturally after the view of unbelief just considered. For when asked to believe in Christ, a man may inquire, How do I know that I need salvation, and how do I know that Christ, and Christ alone, will save ? Our answer is—Because God has said so in his Word. Hence faith in the Bible and faith in Christ are so closely allied that sometimes there is confusion of thought in regard to their relations. Saving faith is confidence in Christ, and not belief in the authority of Scripture. The two things are distinct. For a man may believe the Scriptures and not trust Christ, and a man may trust Christ who never saw the Scriptures. We must keep these things separate for two reasons—(1.) Lest we rashly misjudge that a man thus lost his hope in Christ because he has never held, or has ceased to hold, the received view in regard to all or a part of the Scriptures. (2.) Lest in our anxiety to serve the truth we put ourselves in a false argumentative position. For I hold that if a man's Bible should be reduced to the three synoptic Gospels, it would still be his duty to believe in a risen Saviour and to trust him for salvation. And if the cause of Christianity is so strong when reduced to such a compass, how unassailable are its claims when we have all the books, and all the books inspired ! To tie faith in Christ to faith in the canon and the inspiration of it is a dialectical blunder which we should guard against. We say this while yielding to none in our belief in the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, and in our appreciation of all forms of unbelief which grow out of or which necessitate a denial of the infallible authority of the Word of God. We cannot enter at any length upon the question of modern doubt respecting the Bible. But men are forming conclusions which ignore, contradict, or exclude the truths of the Bible. The reasons for this are various—(1.) Men are adopting philosophical opinions which exclude the Bible. There is no use for the

Bible among men who believe in nothing but their five senses. (2.) They are led by what is called the higher criticism to discredit books or portions of books which compose the Bible. (3.) They come, with foregone conclusions, which make them incapable for receiving the teaching of the Bible. These categories would probably accommodate most of the unbelief of the present day, and the germinal errors with which they are all chargeable are two—(1.) Mistake as to the proper office of reason in matters of faith. (2.) Mistake as to the proper attitude of mind in respect to evidence. I cannot say much on these points, and with reference to the first I need not. The denial of the right to erect a subjective standard of truth is one of the commonplaces of apologetics. We are entitled to ask three questions in regard to a proposition to which our assent is asked—(1.) Does it contradict known truth? (2.) Is it vouched for by adequate and appropriate evidence? (3.) What does it mean? That is all. But men make a mistake in regard to evidence, in that they do not recognise the mental and moral obligation to believe well-attested truth. They act the part of the advocate instead of the judge, and they are determined that error shall have the benefit of the doubt. I maintain that our duty in argument ceases when we have made a case of moral certainty, and that if after that a man insists on our carrying the matter to the point of mathematical demonstration, we weaken our position by continuing to argue. The man who says he will go to sea on a raft because I cannot demonstrate that the Cunard-liner will carry him safely, must go on a raft. The literature of apologetics wants a book which will expound Bishop Butler's aphorism—"Probability is the guide of life." And now, how is unbelief of the sort of which I am speaking to be dealt with? 1. We must understand the province of argument. It will help the man who wants light, but it will not help the man who is blind. Where unbelief is not due to lack of evidence, increasing the evidence will not help him. He that hears not Moses and the prophets will not believe though one rose from the dead. You cannot cure a man's eyes by operating on his ears. 2. We must make clear our position in respect to faith, for the very terminology we use is being turned into an argument against us. An object of faith is very commonly regarded as something believed but not known, believed but not seen, or believed but not proved. And so men come to look on a profession of faith as a confession of ignorance. This is wrong. Faith is persuasion of the truth. And there are these three reasons for being persuaded:—(1.) The thing believed may be an irre-

ducible fact of consciousness. (2.) It may be a logical inference from sound premises. (3.) It may be attested by competent and trustworthy witnesses. These are the grounds on which we are persuaded of the truth of Christianity, and the conclusions of science rest on no other if they are sound. We deny the antithesis between faith and knowledge, and when bad use is made of our terminology, we will substitute for it the inspired dogmatism of the Apostle, and say—We know. 3. We must meet unbelief. It will not do to say that we must offer no protest against false philosophy by any direct discussion of its errors. To do it wisely may be difficult, but it will not do to say that it lies beyond our province as ministers of the gospel. If cerebral psychology wars against the soul, we must war against it. If utilitarian ethics are undermining religion, let us help those who are making a stand for intuitionism. If infidel erudition is trying to discredit the books of the Bible, let Christian erudition go to the rescue. There is, however, another, and perhaps a better way. If we can defend the historical Gospels everything is secured. For we go at once from the integrity of Christ's manhood to his Supreme Divinity. And if Christ is God, we have in his utterances God's veto against Materialism and false philosophy, and the higher criticism as well. There is hardly a controversy which may not be fought, and fought victoriously, on the battle-ground of Calvary. 4. We must make more use than hitherto has been made of the argument of congruity. The Christian system furnishes the only consistent explanation of all the phenomena of life and history. The key that fits the lock is the right key. Materialism explains some facts, but it leaves a great many unnoticed. There are no facts in the physical, mental, moral, and spiritual world which are not compatible with the Christian scheme. And no other scheme will adjust these facts one to another. It is time for our apologists to turn their attention to this matter. If we may venture to say it, there is not much to be gained beyond interesting information in isolated illustrations of the argument of design. The argument is good, but it is a mistake to suppose that its argumentative value is in the ratio of the illustrations of it which we gather. The man who sees no design in the watch of an ordinary maker, will not be likely to see it in a chronometer. It is design as seen in a cosmical system of thoughts and things which we wish to see illustrated by some one who has the information and the generalising power which will qualify him for the task.

III. *Unbelief as regards misinterpretation of the Bible.*—Men may accept the Bible as authoritative, but through misinterpretation fail to believe its

teachings. It may seem as though we had no right to make our interpretation the rule by which we judge another man's unbelief. But we do not hesitate to say to a man, You ought to believe in the divinity of Christ because the Bible teaches it, and we do not exonerate him from the duty, because he says, "I do not believe that the Bible teaches it." Men ought to believe what the Bible teaches. But the Bible teaches this, that, and the other (in our opinion). Therefore, men ought to believe this and that (in our opinion). There is no escape from this except we are prepared to say that these are open questions, and that our own creeds are only held in a tentative and provisional way. Before we consider any doctrinal aberrations as culpable, there is a prior question, and that is, whether we regard our formulated statements as true. We cannot be safe in our measurement of men if we are not sure about the unit of measurement at the start. Hence it is that a more important and practical question can hardly be imagined than that which concerns the fixedness and finality of doctrinal formulas.

1. The first thing needed in dealing with fundamental error within the Church, and arising out of misinterpretation, is a clear apprehension of the question so much mooted to-day, and which is known under the general name of progress in theology. We all agree that there is no room for progress in theology so far as objective revelation is concerned. The canon is complete, and we do not allow that we can make any contributions to its teachings by any Church authority, by any process of development, or by individual speculation. And we must all agree, moreover, that so far as the apprehension of the meaning of Revelation is concerned, the history of the Church has been a history of progress. This needs no comment. The question is, How much territory in the domain of dogmatic theology remains unoccupied, or whether old conclusions are to be reconsidered? On these points this may be said—(1.) No one denies that there are depths of the Divine Word we have not fathomed, and meanings we have not penetrated. (2.) No one denies that well-ascertained facts in the physical world may help us in the interpretation of Scripture, and even modify our formerly received interpretations. (3.) But it must be apparent, at the same time, that it does not follow that there is room for progress in the apprehension of the Bible because there is room for progress in the investigation of the physical system. The two fields of inquiry overlap each other only to a very limited extent. Yet the analogy, notwithstanding its argumentative weakness, has a very popular effect. And more than this. We believe that in regard to the doctrines which constitute the Reformed

or Calvinistic system our conclusions are final, that is, that we know what the Word of God teaches. If we should say, We believe that Christ is God, and say at the same time, We believe that our views on the subject may change, we should in effect be saying that Christ is God and Christ may not be God. To be persuaded that a doctrine is true is to be persuaded that our belief is indefectible. Now, this belief that the doctrines of our Reformed system are true, and stand in no need of being reconstructed or recast, is quite compatible with the recognition of the fact that the sea of human opinion is restless, and that men do not think to-day precisely as they thought a century ago. There has been a subsidence of old issues, and new ones are attracting attention. Calvinists are Calvinists still, and Arminians are Arminians still, but the points which differentiate them are not those around which controversial interest gathers to-day. The stream of religious thought among those who recognise the Bible at all seems to run in three great channels. We have the Socinian with salvation by character as his watchword, the Sacramentarian with a gospel of mediation and symbol, and the Evangelical, who emphasises the incarnation, a sacrificial atonement, and justification by faith alone, doing battle against the other two.

Again, we have the same truths in different polemic surroundings. The same figures are on the canvas, but in different perspective. If we were making a confession of faith to-day we should put into it the chapter on the Scriptures, but we should, if we wrote it after the style of the Westminster Divines, guard against Rationalism as well as against Romanism. We should not change the statement of justification by faith, but we should pronounce against the mystical and Socinian theology of to-day, as well as against the Tridentine theology. We should introduce the doctrine of the future state, but annihilation would receive attention as well as purgatory. It is impossible to deny that our confession is not only a dogmatic statement of truth, but a statement of truth together with polemic relations to contemporary and earlier error. We have no fault to find with this, but it is a fact which serves to illustrate the sense in which it is true that the theology of to-day is different from the theology of yesterday. In the sense referred to in this paper it is true; in the sense that our doctrinal conclusions are provisional and uncertain it is not true. And if it were, it would be impossible to go a step beyond the assertion that men should believe the Bible without undertaking to say what the Bible teaches. It is the bearing of the subject upon our treatment of those who challenge our interpretation, or the Calvinistic, or the Pro-

testant, or the Christian, interpretation of the Scriptures, which justifies the introduction of these remarks in a paper on unbelief.

2. There is another thing to be done by those who would defend the truth against an insidious unbelief. For that an insidious Socinianism is in the Protestant Churches, and is seeking to undermine the faith of God's people, particularly in the atonement of Christ, there can be no doubt. The inspiration of the Scriptures, the doctrine of the atonement, the doctrine of future retribution—these are the doctrines which are giving orthodox people most trouble, and these are the doctrines which are most open to the attacks of false teachers. It is important that men should know the sources of doctrinal aberration. False assumptions, one-sided views of truth, and the tendency of thought to logical consistency—these are some of the causes which explain the progress of heterodox belief. The last is the only one I can notice. The question was discussed in our papers on the other side of the Atlantic whether there had not been a mutual approach on the part of Unitarians and some of the orthodox Churches. It was argued that the charge that this approach had taken place was untrue, since in the latter Churches the divinity of Christ was still preached. But what is the fact? The fact is that a thoroughly Socinian view of the atonement is creeping into the Churches. Now a Socinian doctrine of the atonement has no need of a Divine Christ as its doctrinal correlative. And the doctrine of a Divine Christ will not live in a creed very long after it ceases to be needed.

3. A revival of the study of dogmatic theology and of doctrinal preaching is needed. I do not speak of dogmatic theology as distinguished from exegesis. For dogmatic conclusions must rest on exegetical premises. But we must study the Scriptures not in the way of reading isolated proof-texts, or even of reading books of the Bible after the commentary style. We must carry on an inductive study of the Scripture in order that we may ascertain what is the mind of the Spirit in the points of inquiry. Dogmatic theology is an inductive science, but like other inductive sciences it is deductive too. And if the people are to be strong in the faith, they must not only see individual truths supported by appropriate proof-texts, but they must see those truths in their relations and correlations, supporting one another. When a man sees that the doctrine of the atonement takes hold of other doctrines, he will be careful how he gives up the orthodox doctrine of the atonement, because he will see that if he gives it up, the contiguous doctrines will go too. It is perhaps a misfortune that the prejudice against dogma has been fostered until the people get less

of it than they need. In this connection, and before I close, let me advert to the common mistake of supposing that to deal in system and deductively is to deal speculatively with truth, and in a way which disparages God's Word. To arrange the truths which God has given in the works of nature and the Bible under their proper categories is not only a proper thing, but a thing of the highest importance. If we were looking for a new argument in support of the doctrines of our system, it would be hard to find a better one than the logical concatenation of truth in a system would furnish. Herbert Spencer's philosophy has been attractive to men, not because of the great dialectical power it displayed, but because he brought a constructive mind to the systematising of the facts of experience. His work is a failure, as any work must be which does not take cognisance of all the facts, and in taking cognisance of them does not give the right place to the personality of God, and does not read human history as the incarnation of divine ideas. But who shall say that the time will not come when some one with God's two books before him—the book of nature and the Bible—shall co-ordinate facts of both in a system which will show that God executes his providence in the sphere of material order on the one hand, and in the sphere of moral order on the other? Who shall say that a new argument for the Christian shall not be presented when some architect shall take the materials which are furnished by specialists in the various fields of inquiry, and build them into a cathedral the majesty and symmetry of which shall be its best vindication?

The following Paper was read by the Rev. JAMES M'COSE, LL.D., on the view which religious men should take of

DISCOVERIES IN SCIENCE AND SPECULATIONS IN PHILOSOPHY.

I. How are we to look on discoveries in physical science? We should realise and acknowledge that science has its method, and when this is followed the result is certain. This method was first clearly expounded by Bacon, and has since been improved by practising it, and by carefully noticing the way in which discoveries have been made. No wise man will set himself against a law established by induction. I believe that the Word of God has ample evidence on its behalf. But I also believe that such laws as gravitation, and chemical affinity, and the conservation of energy, are supported by proof which no sane man will dispute. Religious men have often injured their cause by denying truths of science which have been established by com-