

HOW SHALL WE REVISE?

A BUNDLE OF PAPERS

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LLEWELLYN J. EVANS

ERSKINE N. WHITE

MARVIN R. VINCENT

CHARLES H. PARKHURST

SAMUEL M. HAMILTON

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OF FAITH ?

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IX.

A NEW CREED.

BY THE REV. CHARLES L. THOMPSON, D.D.

THE Presbyterian Church is asserting again the right which Presbyterians have always been swift to maintain ; viz. the right to sit in judgment on any human declaration and bring it to the bar of "the law and the testimony." It will be a sad day when that right is seriously resisted. In defence of it, Presbyterians have been willing to die. There is only one sacred book. All councils and assemblies have erred. It is of the very genius of our church to hold them to account. The right of the examination of our standards for purposes of revision or restatement is not a new claim. It belongs to us by right of all our history.

Let it be granted there should be no examination of standards without good reason. It is believed by very many that such a reason does exist. That reason may be broadly expressed thus : The Confession of Faith no longer adequately expresses the faith of our church. There is no other explanation of the broad debate in the midst of which we find ourselves. It is the same conviction that for the past ten years, and more, has been agitating the mind and directing the action of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Free Church of Scotland, the Established Church of Scotland, and the Presbyterian Church of England. This conviction is partly due to a change of position.

Every creed gets some color from its atmosphere. Every intellectual atmosphere has refracting power. We look back to the discussions of the Westminster Assembly, and while we see the general outlines of truth as they saw them, the refraction of the centuries has thrown those truths somewhat out of line and position. The battle front of that day is not the battle front of this day. They were called upon to enthrone and defend the sovereignty of God against the sovereignty of the Pope and the divine right of kings. The points for stress and emphasis now are, first, the existence of God as against an infidelity that denies Him, and secondly, the goodness and love of God as against a science that admits into its estimate of nature only an implacable law, whether that law be personal in God or impersonal in nature. We need not try to say the sovereignty of God. We cannot say it louder than nature says it. We need to say that sovereignty is wise, good, and loving.

Again, it is not only a change of emphasis that is needed. The debate is not due entirely to a change of position. Refraction breaking the line of vision does not account for the whole of it. There are some theological changes. Many are not satisfied with some expressions of the Confession of Faith; not because they are obscure or doubtful; not because their grammar or rhetoric could be improved; not because changes of time have wrought changes in the meaning or force of language. There is a good deal of disbelief of the plain and historic meaning of some of the passages. For example, there is no quarrel about divine sovereignty, general or in election. But when that sovereignty is pushed into the philosophic inferences of the third chapter in which the Confession goes on to give the reasons in God's mind for His sovereignty in election, then there is a pretty wide dissent. So also "elect

infants." The best that can be said about that phrase is that it needs a commentary wherever it goes. The worst that can be said about it is that, historically considered, it states clearly enough the minds of many, perhaps a majority, of the Westminster Assembly; that they used the phrase intelligently, that they were not playing Delphic oracle with posterity, — they said "elect infants" because they believed some infants dying in infancy were not elect and were not saved.

Again, the church no longer believes with the Westminster divines in regard to the salvability of the heathen. We have very little divine light given us regarding the future of the heathen. For that reason we are no longer willing to speak dogmatically on the subject.

There are very many other points in which some ministers and laymen would like to see some modifications of our standards. It is true, the strongest objection is to a few points. But in a small committee, examining a few weeks ago the Confession of Faith with reference to revision, there were over thirty points, affecting nearly every chapter, which were pointed out for revision. This number is likely to increase.

Another desire for revision or new statement arises from what may be called the negative defects of the Confession. It is said the love of God, the free offer of salvation, and the duty of the church to preach the Gospel to every creature are present in the Confession rather by inference than by direct and emphatic expression. These ideas, it is claimed, should be inserted somewhere. Those who have looked for places where these various expressions could be logically inserted have found some difficulty. The Confession is tremendously compact. It is not easy at any point to break the connection and insert other or kindred ideas without the break becoming apparent and interrupting the continuity and force of the statements.

It is manifest revision does present some difficulties. They are not, however, those which anti-revisionists usually find. Thus it is said, our Confession was formed at a great heat, by men of great ability, and is so welded that it cannot be improved. We are told the temper of the times is not right for readjusting doctrinal statements, and whatever the Westminster divines may have failed in, there is no hope that divines of to-day can succeed in. The Westminster divines were undoubtedly justly eminent for scholarship and devotion ; but the world is not going backward in the matter of Biblical learning. On the score of scholarship, we are quite as competent to put our faith into clear and intelligent expression as have been the divines of any past age. And then, the fires of fierce debate in which our Confession was welded, though excellent for giving logical form to a symbol, may not be the most conducive to that calm, broad view which best discloses the true proportions of faith.

The difficulties of revision are not then those that belong to our theological position. We know what we believe, and are quite competent to say it.

The real difficulties in the case are just two. First, the difficulty of revising our standards till they shall exactly express the present faith of the church, and at the same time keeping those standards in their integrity. By this it is not affirmed that the present demand for revision necessarily implies any radical changes of doctrine. But even those changes already proposed, and on which there is most general agreement, would so change the Confession that it would cease to be the precise historic symbol of our faith, revered on account of the share it had in shaping the theological thinking of the past two centuries. Thus the third chapter if recast, as demanded by some of our Presbyteries, would no longer be the chapter framed by the

Westminster divines, and that underlies the theology of Edwards and others. As revised, it doubtless would better express the faith of the church now, but we would by so much cut loose historically from the past. It would be like phonetic spelling in its effect on our literature. We would be sundered from the roots of theological thinking. Why should we lose those roots any more than those that are in the other historic creeds all the way back to the apostles?

The second difficulty connected with revision is in the prolonged theological ferment in which it would be likely to keep us. A few changes in a few chapters could easily and promptly be made. But as I have intimated, the demand for revision is one that steadily increases in area. There is scarce a chapter that has escaped criticism and suggestion for revision. If revision were for the present confined to the third and tenth chapters, since that very effort to revise those chapters assumes that we are trying to bring our Confession into exact line with our present thinking, it would let loose upon the church an increasing debate and keep us in indefinite agitation. For notice the assumption of revision is that the Confession must square to our thought. That canon of criticism admitted will tend to make us intolerant of many expressions which we have heretofore quietly carried on account of their historic truth, but which under the idea underlying revision we would be willing to carry no longer. The result would be a perpetual tinkering process. How many years would it take under that process to destroy the historic identity of the standards?

For the reasons now given it seems wise to a good many who are anxious that something should be done, that that something should take the form of a new statement, the relation of which to our standards should not be supplant-

ing, but supplemental and explanatory. Those who are opposed to revision are, for the most part, opposed also to a new creed. Dr. Warfield, in a recent article, declares the demand for a new statement to be revolutionary. Revision in his mind means a doctrinal revolution. A new creed means an ecclesiastical revolution. He finds in it, by a logic one cannot follow, an attack upon our denominational existence. It can be a revolutionary attack on our denominational integrity only on two assumptions, which are utterly groundless, and have again and again been repudiated by those who favor a consensus creed. The first is, that the new creed shall wholly take the place of standards; that neither the Confession of Faith nor the Larger or Shorter Catechism shall have any authoritative standing in our church; that they shall all be relegated to the garret of theological lumber. The Presbytery of New York has guarded itself against the imputation of any such design as strenuously as language can do it. But Dr. Warfield objects that such must logically be the result. No matter what the avowed purpose of the new creed, its effect will be to take the place of the standards. This argument is a boomerang. It argues strongly against the vitality and power of our standards. We do not think so poorly of them as to believe that, if a compendium of their doctrine is put before the church for practical use, they will at once sink out of sight. They will not have less vitality because we have accompanied them with a brief statement of the sense in which we hold them, — but more: I believe they will spring into new life and power.

The second assumption underlying the absurd idea that a new creed is revolutionary and threatens our denominational existence, is the utterly baseless one, that no distinctive Calvinistic doctrine can or will be put into the brief creed. Those who think our denominational existence

depends on our doctrines being extended to all the philosophical ramifications of extreme Calvinism may find some ground for their fears in the necessary limitations of a briefer creed. It is to be hoped their number is small, that there are not many who believe that our denominational integrity depends on the logical or illogical inferences of the various sections of the third chapter. It is to be hoped the doctrine of reprobation, for example, is not an integral and essential part of our system, and that we can be sound Calvinists without pronouncing dogmatically, not only on the divine decrees, but also on the motives which moved God to do as He has done.

There is, if I mistake not, some danger to the harmony of our church in pressing unduly the view Dr. Warfield takes of the revolutionary character of a new creed. If representative theologians among us take the position that we cannot keep our denominational life without carrying with us all the deductions of our Confession ; if, in a word, to be a Calvinistic body we must be a hyper-Calvinistic body, —there will be a strong disposition to say, This is a yoke we are not able to bear. Our existence as a denomination never has depended on the Supra-Lapsarian implications of the Confession, and does not now so depend. We would be sound Calvinists, historic and actual, if we asserted God's sovereignty in election and struck out every other section of the third chapter of the Confession.

Others are opposed to the new creed, or are in doubt as to its utility, on grounds less radical. They fear that in some way it will militate against the Confession, and will ultimately displace it. The friends of a new creed have been careful to disavow any purpose to have it interfere with the integrity or vitality of our standards.

They have no wish to supplant the standards — only to supplement and explain. Indeed, some who favor a new

statement of doctrine are moved rather by their love of the Confession, and their unwillingness to see it mutilated by revision.

It may still be said, however, — no matter what the purposes or desires of the advocates of a new creed may be, — this purpose or desire cannot avert the inevitable tendency, and that the adoption of a new creed will necessarily tend to retire the old one. In reply, it is to be said : If the new statement were a new system of doctrine, this would follow. For the theological change which created the new system would necessarily push aside the old one. But such a result is not to be apprehended, if, as is proposed, the new creed simply reaffirms in briefer forms the doctrines of our standards. Such reaffirmation, after thorough and fearless discussion of the cardinal doctrines of our system, would give them additional vitality and power. People now may say we are living on an inherited system that has been put into no recent crucible of criticism. They would not be able to say it, if, after the keenest fire of the theological criticism of to-day, our standards, as to all essential characteristics, were again affirmed. Nor would this happy result be in the slightest jeopardized, if the new creed should lay less emphasis on the secret counsels of the Divine Will, and more emphasis on the declared love of God for all mankind. The compendium of a constitution never retires it. If justly drawn, it increases its power. The fact is, that underneath all these expressed fears that a new statement would operate disastrously on our present standards, is the implication that friends of the new creed are trying to bring the Trojan horse within our walls ; that, however their language may be guarded, they favor a creed without distinctive doctrinal character. This has been so often disavowed, that the disavowal need not be repeated. The character of some

of these men, however, as sound theologians and upright Christians, should make the disavowal unnecessary.

A few words on the advantages of such a creed may properly close this paper.

1st, It is an irenic measure. Something is going to be done. It may be taken as settled that the church will require some sort of change; that change will be either by revision, slight or more thorough, by a supplementary declaration, or by a new creed. I have alluded to the difficulties that beset revision. If slight revision of a few phrases be agreed upon, there will still be a demand for a compact statement of our doctrine that can be used in our churches, and readily comprehended by those who may desire to know the principal points of our doctrine. Those who are opposed to revision can accept a new creed because the Confession will be left intact. Those who are in favor of revision may find in the new creed the relief they seek. If they feel that the Confession is deficient in its declaration of the love of God, the needed emphasis can be given in the new creed, an emphasis to which the most strenuous opponent of revision would find it hard to object.

2d, Such a creed will be in line with the theological tendencies of the day, and will put us distinctly in harmony with other Reformed churches. We will be in touch with the apostolic age, whose sharp, short creed carried the Gospel to Europe, and in three centuries established it on the throne of the Cæsars. We will be in line with evangelical Christianity the world around, which more and more is finding its way back to the simplicity of apostolic ideas for the conversion of the world. We will keep our theological armory and treasures; but when we go into the field, we will go in light, marching order, with a creed that can be easily handled, and can flash everywhither for the defence and victory of the truth. We will keep our

“impedimenta” in our theological camps. We do not want them around our feet when we march.

A creed thus framed, if possible by co-operation with all branches of the Presbyterian Church, a creed not of new doctrines, but of “the old doctrines, made in the light and in the spirit of our present Christian activities, of our high privileges, and our large obligations,” — a creed somewhat after the pattern of the excellent creed of our English brethren, — would infuse new vitality into our theology, would promote closer fellowship among our churches, and by the blessing of God would help us on to greater victories than we have ever known.