

ON THE REVISION



OF THE

CONFESSION OF FAITH.

BY

Benjamin B. Warfield

BENJAMIN B. WARFIELD.

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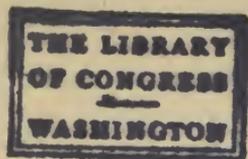
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BENJAMIN B. WARFIELD.





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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE papers which have been collected in this pamphlet were all written during the summer of 1889, and belong therefore to the first stages of the discussion concerning the revision of the Westminster Confession. Perhaps we have already entered into a new phase of the question. At all events these papers form a body by themselves. I have taken great liberties with them in reprinting them, freely altering and adding to them. I have not thought it well, however, to rewrite them; and have, therefore, added an indication of the place and circumstances in which each first appeared, so as partly to account to the reader for their occasional form. It belongs to the very nature of a body of reprinted articles, which originally appeared separately, that many repetitions should occur in them. I have not thought it necessary carefully to excise these. The papers are reprinted in the hope that in their collected form they may do something toward helping Presbyterians to appreciate their heritage in our noble Confession, and toward encouraging them to retain it in its integrity as the standard of their public teaching and their testimony to the truth of God to those who are without.

BENJAMIN B. WARFIELD.

PRINCETON, *January 1, 1890.*

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ON THE REVISION
OF
THE CONFESSION OF FAITH.

I.

THE PROPOSAL TO REVISE THE WESTMIN-
STER CONFSSION.*

IF we may judge by the comments of the secular and undenominational press, the recent action of the Presbyterian General Assembly in inquiring of its presbyteries whether they desire a revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith, is likely to be much misapprehended by those who are insufficiently acquainted with all the circumstances of the case. It may seem natural to infer from such an action, that the Presbyterians, speaking through their highest court, are proposing to themselves a rather thorough-going revision of the doctrinal basis on which they have so long stood; that such an agitation could not arise save in response to a wide-spread, spontaneous movement in the Church, by which a large body of its ministers and adherents have drifted into a position of opposition to

* Printed in *The Independent* for July 18, 1889.

the doctrines taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith, or at least of dissatisfaction with the way in which they are taught in it; and that the movement thus begun is sure to issue in extensive changes of the mode of statement or of the doctrines themselves of the Westminster Standards, if not in the total discarding of them as antiquated relics of a past age and the substitution for them of a new creed more accordant with the living faith of the Church. Nevertheless, no one of these inferences is justified by the facts. The sole legitimate deduction is rather that the Presbyterian Church is so true to its profession that God alone, speaking in His Word, is "Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men," and so jealous of the rights of the Church as over against its subordinate standards, which are its creation, not its mistress: that it keeps constantly before itself the expression of its testimony to doctrine, and thus secures that that testimony shall always remain the living voice of the Church bearing its witness to the truth of God, as it apprehends and lives by it.

I.

The present overture does not contemplate change of doctrine, and does not explicitly propose change even in the statement of doctrine. In its preamble it recites as the ground on which it bases itself:

"*Whereas*, Overtures have come to this General Assembly from fifteen Presbyteries . . . asking for some revision of the Confession of Faith; and *whereas*, in the opinion of many of our ministers and people, some forms of statement in our Confession of Faith are liable to misunderstanding, and expose our system of doctrine to unmerited criticism."

Here no dissatisfaction with the doctrine itself is recited; rather it is suggested that criticism of the doctrine is un-

merited and the fruit of misunderstanding, and may be remedied by a more careful and better statement of the same doctrine. It is only revision of "forms of statement," then, that is contemplated in the overture. And it avoids going so far as to propose even this. The preamble continues :

"And *whereas*, Before any definite steps should be taken for revision of our Standards, it is desirable to know whether there is any general desire for such revision."

The "revision of our Standards" here is, of course, the kind of revision defined in the preceding clause, and this sense is necessarily carried over to the concluding resolution :

"*Therefore, resolved*, That this General Assembly overture to the Presbyteries the following questions : 1. Do you desire a revision of the Confession of Faith ? 2. If so, in what respects and to what extent ?"

If anything were needed to vindicate the foregoing exposition of the meaning of the overture, it would be supplied by the brief debate that was held in the Assembly upon its adoption. It was adopted just in this form on the distinct ground that it was a colorless inquiry into the will of the presbyteries, and did not propose either revision or no revision to them ; and so little was it thought to concern the substance of any doctrine that the moderator ruled that the introduction of doctrinal discussion into the debate concerning it was out of order.

II.

That even this colorless overture was not the outgrowth of any general and spontaneous movement in the Church, the history of its origination in the Assembly sufficiently shows. Its origin is traced to an overture sent up by the

Presbytery of Nassau to the General Assembly of 1888, asking for the revision of the third chapter of the Confession of Faith (that on "God's Eternal Decree") on the ground that "in its present form it goes beyond the Word of God, and is opposed to the convictions and repugnant to the feelings of very many of our most worthy and thoughtful members." That the Assembly did not consider the matter very urgent is sufficiently evinced by its neglecting to act on it further than by referring it to the next Assembly. In the interval between the two Assemblies, the Presbytery of Nassau made a strong effort to enlist the Church at large in its overture, sending a circular letter out requesting the co-operation of the other presbyteries. The success of the effort was not striking—the great majority of the presbyteries paying no attention to the request, and the great majority of those who did take up the matter refusing in one way or another (usually by laying the appropriate motion on the table) to enter into the movement. Only some fifteen presbyteries out of upward of two hundred responded by appropriate action; and it was in answer to their request thus obtained that the Assembly passed the overture. Even this meagre result, we shrewdly suspect, does not represent an impulse wholly native to our soil or Church. In these days of easy communication the ends of the earth are brought very close together, and contagion is easy if not unavoidable. It is significant that the Committee of the Presbytery of Nassau, in urging co-operation on the other presbyteries, were not willing to rest their appeal on the merits of the case; but were careful to adduce the examples of the Scotch United Presbyterians and the Presbyterian Church of England. And the contagion of the present restlessness of the foreign Presbyterian Churches in their relation to the Confession of Faith, appears to us to be the source of all the apparent strength

the present movement has among us. The adduction of the example of these foreign Churches—and, much more, any attempt to imitate it—is, however, the fruit of a misapprehension. Their struggles now are simply efforts to attain some such free and yet safe relation to the Confession of Faith as the American Church has enjoyed ever since it adopted the Westminster Symbols in 1729. From the very beginning, the American Church, whose present formula asks of its office-bearers acceptance of the Westminster Standards only as containing “the system of doctrine” which they believe to be true and Scriptural, has possessed all the liberty which the Free and Established Churches of Scotland, for example, are now seeking. Up to to-day those Churches have required confession of sincere belief “of the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith to be the truths of God” and the confession of the signers’ personal faith. Despite Dr. Candlish’s efforts to explain it away, this obviously means and was intended by the Assembly of 1711, which framed the formula, to mean (in the present Principal Cunningham’s words), acceptance of “the whole doctrine” (“every detail and syllable,” as he elsewhere exaggeratingly expresses it,) of the Confession, not of its “doctrine as a whole.” Instead of being disturbed or infected by the restlessness of these Churches, bound to a confession with a strictness that must wound every tender conscience which finds any phraseology in the document to which it can raise any exception, we should pity them as brethren still in durance, and point out to them the safe pathway through which we escaped more than a century and a half ago. Certainly, so far as there are those among us who are led to believe that the Confession of Faith needs revision, because the foreign Churches are more or less restless under their relation to it, the movement is not only not a spontaneous one among us, but even a spurious one.

III.

What has already been said will suggest some of the reasons why we do not think that the issue of the present overture will be extensive doctrinal change, or even important verbal change, in the Standards of the Presbyterian Church. As discussion goes on, it can scarcely fail to become increasingly plain to all, not only that the Presbyterian Church is satisfied with her Standards, but that she loves them and finds in them the best statement—most moderate and most inclusive as well as most logical and most complete—of the truth of God as she apprehends it, that has ever been framed. Some of the reasons that must, as it seems to us, operate to lead her, not blindly and fanatically, but intelligently and liberally, to refuse to undertake any important revision of these time-honored formularies may be indicated as follows :

(1). So long as the Church remains as heartily convinced as she at present undoubtedly is, that what is known as the Calvinistic system of doctrine is the truth of God as delivered through the prophets and apostles, she is without grievance in her relation to her Standards. There is always an infelicity in requiring individuals to affirm of any public Confession that it is the confession, in all its parts, of their private faith. A *public* document by that very fact cannot be in all its parts just the expression of the *private* faith which every one of its signers would frame for himself. To require a large body of ministers to affirm of any public Confession that they accept its "whole doctrine" as "truths of God" is a strain too great to put upon conscience, and must foster on the one hand a spirit of evasion and subterfuge, and on the other a keen sense of every infelicity in language or conception in the Confession and a restless anxiety to have them removed—hopeless task though this obviously is, seeing that the very phraseology which is oppressive to one is the only tolerable expression

of the faith of another. The American Church has required of its office-bearers, from the beginning, however, subscription only to "all the essential and necessary articles," or as, in our later formula, to "the system of doctrine" in the Confession, as "good forms of sound words." In our view, this subscription is an ideal one. It does not ask us to affirm that the Westminster Confession is perfect or infallible, or that we adopt every proposition in it; but only that we heartily accept the system of doctrine taught in it, and all the doctrines that are essential to the integrity of that system. The office-bearer in the Presbyterian Church thus is merely asked to affirm that he recognizes in the Confession of Faith an expression—an adequate expression—of the system of truth which he believes God has given to the Church. He is at liberty to believe, if he will, that the Heidelberg Catechism is an equally good or better expression of the same system; or the Canons of the Synod of Dort; or the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England; or any other sound Reformed creed. But he must believe in this system. So long as we are Calvinists, then, we say, the relation that Presbyterian office-holders bear to the Confession is an ideal one; their subscription is just such as must operate, when honestly taken and administered, to keep out all the wrong men and to keep in all the right ones.

(2). So long as we are Calvinists, we may add, our whole situation with reference to our Creed is one that is incapable of improvement. The individual's relation to the Creed might conceivably be improved, by letting him frame his own creed, which with care might be made an exact transcript of his personal faith; but just in proportion as this individual *credo* fitted the idiosyncrasies of his personal conceptions and modes of expression, it would be unacceptable in its details and forms to every other individual. No public creed can be framed which every individual of

some thousands of office-bearers can adopt as the exact expression of his personal faith. We need not go to the extreme of Mr. Taylor Innis, who says that "there is no honest or sane man who will pretend that any proposition in religious truth constructed by others, exactly expresses his own view of that religious truth"; but this is certainly in a measure true of all extended Confessions. However, then, we should alter the Confession of Faith, whether little or much, however we burdened it with *Declaratory Statements*, whether many or few, to whatever extent we should substitute for it other creeds, whether new or old, whether long or short, we should be at the end of the process exactly where we were in the beginning. We should still be face to face with a creed which we all could accept for system of doctrine, and which no one of us could accept in all its propositions and phrases. If our present Creed is acceptable to us, then, for system of doctrine—and that it is, ought to be evinced by the mere fact that we have all accepted it as such—it is hardly worth while to embark on extensive projects of revision in order to arrive at precisely the same haven from which we started out.

(3). And so long as we are Calvinists, we may add again, it seems hopeless to expect to improve upon the Westminster Confession in stating the system which we believe. The fact is that the Westminster Confession of Faith registers the high-water mark of the confessional statement of Calvinistic doctrine. Men have spoken of it in these latter days, indeed, as cold, scholastic, logical—standing at an extreme point in the development of Calvinism; and they have repeated these statements until many are ready to believe them. But it is almost impossible to avoid suspecting that such deliverances rest on insufficient acquaintance with the document itself. Logical no doubt it is—is to be logical a fault?—but it is no less devout than logical. The

product of an age "when" (as Dr. Alex. F. Mitchell describes it) "the Church was still under the happy influence of a marvellous revival, when the Word of God was felt as a living, quickening, transforming power, and preached, not as a tradition but as the very power and wisdom of God," and framed "by men of ripe scholarship and devoted piety, who have remained our models of earnest preaching, and our guides in practical godliness, even until this day," it would be strange, indeed, if it lacked that atmosphere and tone of vital godliness which, as a matter of fact, fills every phrase of it, and enters unawares into the heart of every one who really feeds on it. And it stands at an extreme point in the development of Calvinism, not in the sense that it embodies an extreme Calvinism, but only in the sense that it has skimmed the cream of moderate and tolerant Calvinistic thought. No Calvinism is sweeter, purer, more devout, more catholic, than the Calvinism of the Westminster Standards. The Confession of Faith is, as it has been well phrased, "a model of guarded strength in moderation." Baillie tells us that it was "cried up," at the time, "by many of their greatest opposites, as the best Confession yet extant"; and from that day to this, it has never ceased to command the admiration of even those who could not accept it—as, for example, of the late Dr. Curry, who characterized it as "the ablest, clearest, and most comprehensive system of Christian doctrine ever framed." So intent were its framers on so stating doctrine as to throw the stress on the practical and religious value of it, and so careful were they to state it so moderately as to make it inclusive of all forms of truly Calvinistic thought, that it seems scarcely possible to touch one of their guarded clauses without both hardening and narrowing it. When once some specific revision is seriously attempted, the Church is likely to fall back on Dr. Mitchell's advice: "It will be

time enough to think of change, when a school of theologians of riper scholarship and more patient study, of higher culture and deeper piety, shall arise among us";—which time is not yet. We will certainly do well to cling to the Westminster Confession until we can better it.

(4). In circumstances such as these, the historical integrity of so venerable and noble a document will appeal to the Church as worth preserving. Presbyterians are no relic-worshippers; they claim the right, and have exercised it, of adapting their Creed to their living faith. But when nothing is to be gained and perhaps much lost they will not fail to consider it a certain vandalism to throw away, merely in the license of change, a flag under which so many battles have been fought and so many glorious victories won, and perhaps even more glorious defeats suffered. They will not keep the old, merely because it is old; but they will not exchange the tried and loved old banner for a doubtful new one, merely because it is new.

(5). Lastly, in learning to appreciate anew, as renewed study of it will enable it to do, the true breadth and catholicity of the Westminster Confession, the Church is apt to remember, too, its value as a rallying-point for Christian unity. It was framed distinctly as an *irenicon*. The purpose of those engaged on it was to vindicate the faith of the English Church as not out of harmony with the Consensus of the Reformed churches, and to bring together under one Confession the various bodies then in Great Britain. Its history is that of an *irenicon*. By its means the Churches of England and Scotland were brought for the first and only time under the bonds of a single Confession. It was adopted by three distinct denominations. It remains to-day the creed of all the great Presbyterian Churches of the English-speaking world. Only yesterday two great denominations of American Presbyterians were

able to unite on the Westminster Standards, pure and simple. If we are to have another reunion of Presbyterians in America shortly, it must be on the same basis. Nay, such is its moderation and catholicity, that we may even hope that it may serve as a basis for even broader federations of Reformed churches. Certainly, we may well listen to Dr. Mitchell's wise words: "Our only hope of a really united Presbyterian Church lies in substantial adherence to the Confession." We do not think Presbyterians will forget this in making up their minds how to deal with their Confession.

Doubtless, as time passes, Presbyterians will think of other, perhaps more cogent reasons, for holding fast to what is so good. But the reasons already alleged will suffice to supply some ground for our judgment that we are not embarked upon a discussion that is to see our old foundations of faith broken up. Meanwhile let us say that we earnestly hope discussion will nowhere be suppressed. The more the Westminster Confession of Faith is studied, and the better it is understood, the less likely is it to be either abandoned, explained away, or patched up with scraps of cruder new thinking. "Destroy it not, for a blessing is in it."

II.

WHAT IS THE CONFESSION OF FAITH?*

THE call which the General Assembly has made upon the Presbyteries to consider, during this year, whether they desire any changes made in the Westminster Confession of Faith, must operate primarily to lead serious men to renew their study of this venerable document. Whatever may issue from the year's discussions, certainly nothing but good can come from this renewed study of the history and teaching of the standards to which all Presbyterian office-bearers have assented as "containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures." And certainly the results of the study cannot fail to quicken in our hearts gratitude to God for His gracious dealings with our fathers in enabling them to frame and to transmit through so many years to us, so complete and vitally devout a testimony to His truth as it has been revealed in His Word. We may be excused for feeling some pride in formularies which have commanded not only the assent of all classes of Calvinists for two hundred years, but also the admiration of the liberal-minded among other forms of faith, such as, for instance, Dean Stanley, who declares that the Westminster Confession of Faith "exhibits far more depth of theological insight than any other" Protestant Confession, and the

*The substance of an address, delivered to the Presbytery of New Brunswick, at Dutch Neck, June 25, 1889: and afterward printed in *The Presbyterian Banner* for Sept. 4, 1889.

late Dr. Curry, editor of the New York *Christian Advocate*, who calls it "the ablest, clearest, and most comprehensive system of Christian doctrine ever framed."

PROVIDENTIAL PREPARATION FOR FRAMING THE WESTMINSTER
CONFESSION.

So remarkable a product, of course, was not obtained without a providential preparation, by which the framing of the Confession fell upon times and into the hands of men specially fitted for the task. No one who looks back upon the history of early Protestantism can fail to perceive that the times were ripening toward the middle of the seventeenth century, and especially in England, for just such an enterprise. During the century or more that had elapsed since the Reformation, the Reformed Theology had developed into a mature and maturely tested system of truth, tried everywhere by the Scriptures and in the fires of controversy. The multitudes of Confessions which had been produced by the first age of the Reformation had served their purpose of testifying to the essential Christianity and to the Augustinianism of the scattered congregations, and of uniting them in the bonds of a common sympathy and effort; some of them had been rewrought or practically superseded by documents fuller or better adapted to the changing conditions; and all were being collected, compared, harmonized under the pressure of the felt need of a comprehensive and universally acceptable statement of the Reformed faith.

The course of controversy had also reached a stage peculiarly favorable for the confessional statement of truth. The first bitterness of both the Romish and Arminian controversies was over; and while the results of these debates were garnered for the advantage of exact and carefully balanced statement, the sharpness of the anti-Romish polemic

of early Protestantism and of the Dutch anti-Arminian polemic was no longer felt necessary. Especially in England, where the Romanizing and Arminianizing school of Laud had recently been in the ascendancy, and had not scrupled to make tyrannical use of its power, men of all shades of Augustinianism were compacted together in a common love, and were little inclined to narrowness or ecclesiastical tyranny. They had "been burnt in the hand by that kind before," as Dr. Tuckney, one of the chief members of the Assembly, expressed it. Thus, in the good providence of God, three important prerequisites to the framing of a Confession of permanent value were brought into conjunction: (1). The truth was prepared for well-considered and moderate statement, as over against its three permanent enemies—Romanism, Arminianism, and Prelacy. No Confession framed before the threshing out of these three controversies would have at all served the needs of the period which has intervened between the meeting of the Westminster Assembly and to-day; and no Confession framed with its chief polemical sides turned toward them can be said to be growing obsolescent so long as these tendencies are as aggressive as they are to-day. (2). In the course of these controversies, all the important forms of Calvinism had been developed, so that a Confession framed with the intention of including them all is still inclusive of all the important types of Calvinistic thought. And (3). The experience of the Calvinists during the Laudian oppression had compacted them into a single body, enabled them to look upon their differences as relatively unimportant, and inclined them to seek to frame a Confession which should be inclusive of all soundly Calvinistic thought, and which should exclude only those errors which cut to the roots of the system which all Calvinists unite in believing to be the truth of God.

But above all else, the theological thinking of the times was suffused, as perhaps has never been equally true, with the breath of vital piety. Great as it was in theology, this was the age of great preachers, even more than of great theologians. "We fall very far short," says Dr. A. F. Mitchell, very justly, "of the true conception of that time, unless we remember that it was a season of spiritual revival, as deep and extensive as any that has since occurred in the history of the British churches." Or if we prefer to hear a secular historian: "The distinctive feature of Puritanism," says Mr. S. R. Gardiner, "was not to be found in its logical severity of doctrine, or in its peculiar forms of worship, but in its clear conception of the immediate relation existing between every individual soul and its God, and in its firm persuasion that every man was intrusted with a work, which he was bound to carry out for the benefit of his fellow-creatures." The sermons of the day are still looked back to as among the most godly and powerful ever preached, and as Dr. Mitchell reminds us, "No writings in practical divinity have been so extensively read, none have so long maintained their hold on the minds of the religiously disposed in Britain and America, as those of the great Puritan divines of the seventeenth century." Thus, while the theology of the Reformed churches was being matured, and the course of controversy was bringing it about that the deepest and broadest lines of thought, which run through all the Christian ages, were engrossing the minds of men, a body of pious and devoted preachers of the word was being prepared, who could not state the precious truths of the Gospel without suffusing their statement with the breath of true godliness. As Dr. Mitchell eloquently sums up: "The Assembly of divines which framed the Confession, may be said, humanly speaking, to have come just at the last moment of time when such an

Assembly was possible, when the Church was still under the happy influence of a marvellous revival, when the Word of God was felt as a living, quickening, transforming power, and preached not as a tradition, but as the very power and wisdom of God, by men of ripe scholarship and devoted piety, who have remained our models of earnest preaching and our guides in practical godliness, even unto this day."

SPIRIT AND INTENTION OF THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY.

The English Reformation was from the beginning Augustinian; and it was the Anglo-Catholic irruption which first broke its cordial relations with the other Reformed Churches as well as its internal harmony. The doctrinal (as distinguished from the more pressing ecclesiastical) object for which the Westminster Assembly was called together and to the subserving of which it addressed itself, was the two-fold one of vindicating the Protestant soundness of the Church of England before the general body of the Reformed Churches, as well as the restoration of its internal harmony and the institution of a doctrinal uniformity with the Church of Scotland. Catholicity and harmony were, therefore, its key-notes. Of course there was no intention of embracing the errors of Romanism, or of Arminianism, or of Prelacy; these were the causes and occasions of all the difficulties which the English Church had had to suffer. But its formularies were meant to be as broad and catholic as the accepted theology of the Reformation would permit; and it was hoped that by its labors all true Protestants in Britain might be united in defense of the sum and substance of the doctrine of the Reformed Churches. "If its members," says Dr. Mitchell advisedly, "had one idea more dominant than another, it was not, as they are sometimes still caricatured, that of setting forth with greater one-sided-

ness and exaggeration the doctrines of election and preterition (for they did little more as to these mysterious topics than repeat what Ussher had already formulated), but that of setting forth the whole scheme of reformed doctrine in harmonious development in a form of which their country should have no cause to be ashamed in presence of any of the sister Churches of the Continent, and above all in a form which would conduce greatly to the fostering of Christian knowledge and Christian life." Working in this spirit, and especially with a desire to retain the essence of the earlier English and Irish Articles (possibly as a vindication of their historical continuity as the Church of England), everything narrow or one-sided was excluded, and a strong effort was made to include all legitimate shades of Calvinistic opinion. The publication of the Minutes of the Assembly reveals this catholic and inclusive tendency in a very strong light. At every point care was taken to reach substantial unanimity, and it was ever deemed a sufficient objection to a mode of statement that it was exclusive of one or another type of Calvinism. Free speech was permitted to or rather demanded of all; and perhaps in no council before or since have all doctrinal points been more thoroughly debated, more anxiously canvassed or more carefully stated. The result is that these Standards are a model of guarded strength in moderation, and have by their own inherent merit won their way to acceptance in more churches and retained their vigor through longer years than perhaps any other Protestant creed. As they are the most complete, so are they the most carefully framed, and the most inclusive, and the most acceptable, of all the standards of the Reformation. It can scarcely be necessary to stop to point out in detail the characteristic excellences of the Confession: its clear analysis, its lucid definitions, its atmosphere of devout piety, its complete-

ness, its logical exactness, the richness of its phraseology. It will perhaps be more useful to occupy ourselves with some remarks upon a few of the chief objections that are most commonly brought against it. Thus, by a negative path, we may yet, perhaps, find our way to some increased appreciation of its excellences.

THE CONFESSION A DOCTRINAL STANDARD.

1. It is frequently said, for instance, that the Confession is too formal, logical, analytical, theological in its form; and a creed more vital and religious is desiderated. It is not infrequently contrasted with the earlier Reformation creeds in this respect. There is this much truth underlying this objection: that the earlier Reformers needed to vindicate their position as Christians, in breaking away from the historical Church, and the form and contents of the creeds of the first age are affected by this fact; whereas by the middle of the seventeenth century it was not their Christianity that the Puritans needed to vindicate (that was evident to all men), but their doctrine that they desired to bring to a clear expression. In this sense the Westminster Confession is a theological rather than a religious document. It is a *doctrinal* standard; its purpose is to *define* truth rather than to *apply* it. As such it is analytical and logical in its order and forms of statement, and seeks to present the truths of God in a concatenated system which will appeal to the devout mind and instruct it in the truth, rather than directly to lay them on the heart. This can be esteemed a fault only if we misconceive the purpose and uses of a Confession as analogous to those of a sermon. If we understand, as we ought, a Confession to be a document intended to testify to the truth, to stand as a test of sound teaching, and to serve as a text-book of doctrine, we shall ask it to be more "religious" than "theological" in form

as little as we would ask the same, say for instance, of Dr. A. A. Hodge's "Outlines of Theology." That it should be filled from end to end with the breath of devotion—that the whole and every part should be redolent of the everywhere present Spirit—is true; but in this sense the Confession is the most "religious" of books, and no one who has really fed upon it has failed to draw from it draughts of spiritual strength.* The objection is thus founded on a misapprehension of what a Confession is, if not also on an insufficient appreciation of the character of this particular Confession. There seems to be, in a word, some confusion of mind abroad which confounds a doctrinal standard with an exhortation on the one hand, or with a liturgical *credo* on the other—a confusion of thought, which, if carried to its logical conclusions, would ban all dogmatic treatises in favor of the sermons and liturgies of the world. Thus the Confession is condemned for not being what it does not profess to be, and what it could not be and continue to serve the ends for which it was framed and for which it continues to exist. The real question is, whether Churches need doctrinal standards as well as sermons and prayers—a theology as well as a life.

THE CONFESSION BASED ON THE LOVE OF GOD.

2. It is frequently objected again that the Confession makes too little relatively of the love of God and too much relatively of His sovereignty, and thus reverses the emphasis of the Bible. The framers of the Confession are not responsible, however, for this separation of God's love and sovereignty; to them His sovereignty seemed a loving sovereignty, and His love a sovereign love, and in founding the whole fabric of their Confession on the idea of God's

* Compare for example, Palmer's *Thornwell's Life and Letters*, pp. 162 and 165.

undeserved favor to lost sinners, they understood themselves to be glorifying His love to sinners. It is perfectly true that they seldom make use of the term "love"; but this is due to the exactness of their phraseology, by which they prefer to speak of God's "goodness" and "grace"—by the one of which terms they designate His general love and by the other His special love for His people. When this is understood, so far are they from neglecting to emphasize the love of God, that it is rather within the truth to say that there is no other one subject so repeatedly and emphatically and lovingly dwelt upon. The "goodness" of God is one of His essential attributes (II., i.) and is infinite (V., iv.); nay, all "goodness" is in and of Him (II., ii.). It was in order to manifest His "goodness" that He created the world (IV., i.); and hence it is manifested by the light of nature (I., i.)—even that He is good and doeth good to all (XXI., i.); as also by the course of providence (I., i.; V., iv.), which is so administered as to redound to the praise of His "goodness" (IV., i.). Even His dealings with sin manifest His goodness (V., iv.). Especially does His treatment of the elect, however, flow from His free and unchangeable love (XVII., ii.; III., v.; V., v.); His love follows them at every step, and every separate blessing bestowed upon them is a "grace": effectual calling (X., ii.), faith (XIV., i.), justification (XI., iv.), pardon (XV., iii.), adoption (XII., i.), each is reckoned among the saving graces (XIII., i.; XVI., iii.; XVII., i.; IX., iv.). All His acts to His children are those of a gracious God (V., v.), all things being made to work together for their good (V., vii.), even His correctings being gracious (V., v.) and all to the praise of His glorious grace (III., v.). There is certainly no lack of emphasis on God's love here; though no doubt it is His sovereign love that is emphasized. Nor is it at all true that in glorifying God's infinite love for His

children, the Confession minimizes or fails to give due recognition to His unspeakable love for all His reasonable creatures. He is the God of love: "Most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, the rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (II., i.). Moved by this love He has voluntarily condescended to covenant with men as men, with a view to their fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward (VII., i.); and when men had spurned this offered favor, He was pleased to make a second covenant, "wherein he freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved" (VII., iii.)—an assertion of the universal sincere offer of salvation in Christ which is not taken away, but rather established, by the immediately subsequent assertion that God has further taken care that it shall not in all cases remain without fruition. To overlook these and similar passages in the effort to represent the Confession as disregarding the proportion of faith is most seriously to misrepresent its teaching. As a matter of fact the Confession builds its whole fabric on God's love, and emphasizes His general love quite as strongly as the Scriptures themselves; although, like the Scriptures, it does not substitute a general benevolence for the whole round of Divine attributes, or deny His sovereignty or His justice in proclaiming His love.

THE CONFESSION NOT SUPRALAPSARIAN.

3. The most remarkable objection which has been brought of late against the Confession, however, is directed against the statement of the doctrine of the "Decree of God" in the third chapter. In apparent forgetfulness of the ninth chapter of Romans and similar scriptures, it is said that this statement goes beyond Scripture; it is said that the

Westminster Confession stands alone among the Calvinistic Confessions of the Reformation in its statement of this doctrine; it is even said that the language of the Confession is here *supralapsarian*. What can be meant by some of these objections it is somewhat difficult to understand. Many—of whom Mr. Hardwick and Dr. Schaff are examples—seem to consider it illegitimate to state the doctrine of reprobation at all in a Confession. But the Westminster Confession does not stand alone in doing this; in varying measures of fullness, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Gallic and Belgic Confessions, the Irish Articles, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Formula Consensus Helvetica, state the doctrine. Nor can this view be consistently defended. No doubt, as the English delegates advised the divines of Dort, both “the sublime mystery of predestination,” and still more “the mystery of reprobation,” are subjects that ought to be “handled sparingly and prudently,” and treated of only “in the proper time and place, with tenderness and judgment,” and thus, indeed, the Confession (III., viii.) unites with them in advising; but is not a confession “a proper time and place”? No less an one than Calvin teaches us how impossible it is to avoid confessing the doctrine of sovereign reprobation if we confess the doctrine of election, of which it is not the logical inference, but the *other half*—writing with some sharpness: “Many, as if they wished to avert odium from God, so confess election as to deny that any one is reprobated. But this is puerile and absurd, because election itself could not exist without being opposed to reprobation. God is said to separate those whom He adopts to salvation. It were worse than absurd to say that chance gives others, or their own efforts acquire for them, what election alone confers on a few. Whom God passes by, therefore, He reprobates, and from no other cause than His determination

to exclude them from the inheritance which He predestines for His children" (Instit., III., 23, 1). "That the only will of God," says Dr. Whitaker, advisedly, "is the cause of reprobation, being taken as it is contrary to predestination,* not only St. Paul and St. Augustine, but the best and learnedest of the schoolmen have largely and invincibly proved." And not only the "schoolmen," but the Reformed Church at large—in its theologians and Confessions—have recognized the same obvious fact. Let any body of typical, Reformed theologians be looked into, and the result is the same. A glance over the citations in Heppe's "*Dogmatic of the Evangelical Reformed Church*" will be sufficient for most men. Or if we desire rather the testimony of certain prophets of our own, may not the general attitude of moderate Calvinists on the sovereignty of reprobation (preterition) be sufficiently attested by the following three somewhat typical American theologians? "That as God has sovereignly destined certain persons, called the elect, through grace to salvation, so he has sovereignly decreed to withhold his grace from the rest; and that this withholding rests upon the unsearchable counsel of his own will, and is for the glory of his sovereign power" (Dr. A. A. Hodge, *Commentary on Conf. of Faith*, pp. 107-108). "Reprobation. This includes two parts, Preterition and Reprobation (Final Condemnation). The preterition is a sovereign act; the reprobation is a judicial act" (Dr. H. B. Smith, *System of Christian Theology*, p. 508). "The Reformed doctrine assumes that some

*Let this clause be observed: both Calvin and Whitaker teach that *reprobation* is sovereign, not *punishment*. Punishment rests "on their sins," reprobation on God's will. It is perhaps more usual, and less liable to mistake, to use the terms *negative reprobation* and *positive reprobation*, or the terms *preterition* and *reprobation* to express the two stages. But the doctrine is the same, under whatever phraseology.

men perish for their sins; and that those who are thus left to perish are passed by not because they are worse than others, but in the sovereignty of God" (Dr. C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II., 652; cf. pp. 712, 720, 723, sq.).

Is the Westminster Confession singular, then, in the place that is given to the statement of this deep mystery in the ordering of the matter of the Confession? By no means—both the Irish Articles and the Formula Consensus Helvetica give it precisely the same place—the place given it, moreover, by the great body of systematic theologians; as, for instance, to mention only a few names—Turretine, Amesius, Marck, De Moore, Maastricht, Maccovius, Marenius, Burmann, and John Milton and John Norton among the oldest; Dick, Ridgley, John Brown, John Gill, Dwight, in the last age; and in our own day, A. A. Hodge, Dabney, Strong, Hovey, Patton, Shedd, Van Oosterzee, and even the Lutherans, Luthardt and Weidner! No one of them likely to be charged with supralapsarianism! The fact of the matter is, this is the proper logical order in which to treat of the Decree of God, under which general head Predestination and Reprobation fall; and every Confession which treats the Decree of God in general, treats of it here, and with the one exception of the Shorter Catechism, they all treat of Predestination and Reprobation in immediate subordination to this caption. The Shorter Catechism (like the theologian Pictet) illustrates another possible distribution of the matter, viz., to treat of God's decree in general here and to postpone the treatment of the special decree which relates to human destiny until the doctrine of salvation is taken up. And this variation is only a question of convenience of treatment, without dogmatic significance one way or the other. To erect this mere matter of preferred order of statement into a substantial difference between the Confession and the

Shorter Catechism is a most remarkable procedure; and to propose to revise the Confession because it treats the whole subject of the decree together and at the head of God's works, is more remarkable still. Shall we revise all the theologians mentioned above, who adopt the same arrangement of matter, along with the Confession? This quarrel is not with the Confession, but with the whole body and the very conception of Reformed theology.

But "the language of the Confession is supralapsarian." If this were so, it would certainly be remarkable. It is confessed that "the great body of the members" of the Assembly that framed it "were on the other side." It is confessed that the Shorter Catechism, framed by the same body, is infralapsarian. It is confessed that the formularies were formed with the utmost care—and with the utmost care to make them exhibit the accordance of the doctrine of the English Church with the other Reformed Churches, the creeds of none of which, it is confessed, are supralapsarian. It is proven that this very section is based upon and drawn from the Irish Articles, which were prepared by the moderate hand of Ussher, who certainly was no supralapsarian. The publication of the minutes of the Westminster Assembly reveals to us very clearly that those who framed this language intended that it should not be supralapsarian. A number of amendments were made in the original draught (which itself was not supralapsarian) with the expressed purpose of preventing it from even seeming to tend that way. Thus the words "in the *same* decree," and the words "*to bring this to pass* God ordained to permit the fall," were stricken out. Their professed purpose was, as Mr. Reynolds expressed it, not to "put disputes and scholastic things into a Confession of Faith"; or as Mr. Calamy said, "that nothing be put in one way or the other." Finally, no one seems previously to have discovered the lan-

guage to be supralapsarian. To quote only three witnesses: Dr. Charles Hodge ("Systematic Theology," ii. 317)—
"The symbols of that Assembly, *while they clearly imply the infralapsarian view*, were yet so framed as to avoid offence to those who adopted the supralapsarian theory." Dr. Philip Schaff ("Creeds of Christendom," I., 454)—
"The doctrine of predestination, *in its milder, infralapsarian form*, was incorporated into the Geneva Consensus, the Second Helvetic, the French, Belgic, and Scotch Confessions, *the Lambeth Articles, the Irish Articles, the Canons of Dort, and the Westminster Standards.*" (Cf., I., 635, *et passim.*) Dr. Alex. F. Mitchell ("Minutes," p. 55)—
"The same care was taken to avoid the insertion of anything which could be regarded as indicating a preference for *supralapsarianism.*" Last of all, the language itself is not supralapsarian, but such careful, moderate, guarded language as all Calvinists may adopt, not to say as natural religion itself forces on those who believe in an infinite personal God. Twisse himself, for example, points out to us that the statements here are not disputed, but common, ground among the Calvinistic parties. "It is true," he says, "there is no cause of breach either of unity or amity between our divines upon this difference"—of supra- and infra-lapsarianism—"as I showed in my digressions ('De Prædestination,' Digress. 1), seeing neither of them derogates either from the prerogatives of God's grace or of His sovereignty over His creatures, to give grace to whom He will, or to deny it to whom He will; and, consequently, to make whom He will vessels of mercy, and whom He will vessels of wrath; *but equally they stand for the divine prerogative in each.* And as for the ordering of God's decrees of creation, permission of the fall of Adam, giving grace of faith and repentance unto some and denying it to others, and finally, saving some and damn-

ing others, *whereupon only arise the different opinions* as touching the object of predestination and reprobation, it is merely *apex logicus*, a point of logic. And were it not a mere madness to make a breach of unity or charity in the Church of God merely for a point of logic?"* Some in these last days seem scarcely to share either Twisse's clearness of apprehension or his charity.

How, then, are we to account for the frequent assertion to-day that "the language is supralapsarian"? Partly by a strange confusion which confounds the order in which the decrees are stated with the statement of the order of the decrees; and which thus, because predestination is *treated* of before creation, asserts that predestination is "placed" before creation. As well might it be argued that because Chap. I. treats of the Scriptures, and Chap. II. of God, therefore the Confession teaches that the Scriptures are the "logical *prius*" to God. Partly, again, by an unwillingness to take the trouble to read the Confession as we would any other book, *consecutively*, following its line of thought and analysis. This third chapter, for example, is ordered thus: *First*, the nature and scope of God's decree, in general, is defined in Sections 1 and 2; *secondly*, the application of these general facts is made to the special fact of human destiny in Sections 3-8. In making the application, *first the fact is asserted* that God's sovereign, particular, and unchangeable decree embraces also the destiny of His creatures, in Sections 3 and 4; and *then* the details of how God deals with those whose varying destinies are included in the decree, and on what grounds the varying destinies are dealt to them, are asserted in Sections 5-7; a final section being added on the care with which such mys-

* Twisse, *The Riches of God's Love unto the Vessels of Mercy*, etc., p. 35; quoted by Cunningham: *The Reformers*, etc., p. 363.

terious subjects should be dealt with in preaching (Sec. 8). This whole objection to the Confession reduces thus to the opinion that the Confession ought not to state the *fact* that God's decree embraces the destiny of His creatures until after it has stated the grounds on which He deals diversely with His creatures—predestinating some men to life “out of His mere free grace and love” (Sec. 5); and “ordaining others to dishonor and wrath” for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice (Sec. 7). With this opinion most will disagree—while, in the end, all will conclude that it raises a very petty point.

But why, it may be asked, leave the Confession in a form that needs this explanation? The answer is, that it does not need this explanation; the matter is obvious to every one who will read the chapter consecutively. It needs a commentary to make it *misunderstood*. And let it be observed, in conclusion, that as all objections to this section arise from strange misapprehension, so all proposed remedies for the assumed evil result in materially narrowing the Confession. It is so phrased now as to cover the ground common to supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism, without condemning or asserting either as over against the other: * the alterations would positively exclude supralapsarianism. This is an alteration in the wrong direction.

* Let it be observed that this is not to say that the language is *ambiguous*, as has sometimes been presumed. The language is not ambiguous, but perfectly straightforward and unmistakable. What the Assembly did was, not to seek phraseology which was capable of either a supra- or an infra-lapsarian interpretation, but to confine themselves to stating *the positive common ground on which both alike stand*. The third chapter of the Confession, thus, is simple, essential Calvinism—the common belief of all Calvinistic parties. Supra- and infralapsarianism disagree in some things and they agree in some things. This is what they agree in.

THE CONFESSION DOES NOT CONDEMN INFANTS.

4. This narrowing tendency of most of the presently proposed revisions of the Confession is especially evident in the objections brought against the Section (X., iii.) on "elect infants." This section was added to the Confession during the course of the debate on an order from the Assembly to its Committee "that something be expressed in fit place concerning infants' regeneration in their infancy." The purpose of its addition, therefore, was in the interests of infant salvation--in order to show that though incapable of the outward call of the Word, they might nevertheless be saved by the inward call of the Holy Spirit. The phrase, as originally reported, reads in the *Minutes*, "Elect *of* infants," and the "of" may have been subsequently dropped, Dr. Briggs thinks as a mere matter of style--possibly, however, as a means of making the statement somewhat more inclusive; while it is the most probable of all suggestions that the presence of the *of* in the *Minutes* is due only to the carelessness of the scribe.* However this may be, the form in which the section was adopted is capable of such interpretation as to make it inclusive of several views. Those who believe that some of those who die in infancy are God's elect and are saved by His grace, while others are left in their original sin to perish, can accept this statement; but they have no exclusive right to it, as has been so constantly asserted of late. The statement does not im-

* Certainly the scribe is very careless of exact phraseology elsewhere in his jotting down the subjects of debate. For example, if I have counted correctly, the third chapter is mentioned more or less formally by name ten times in the *Minutes*. In five the plural is used (pp. 114, 126, 127, 322, 323); in five the singular (pp. 126, 129, 130, 245, 246). The *Minutes*, as we have them, are somewhat loosely-kept notes, and it will not do to hang a theory on the exact phraseology they use in a case like the present.

ply that some infants, dying in infancy, are non-elect and exclude the opposite opinion. Those who believe that all those who die in infancy are elect, have also standing-ground here. The statement is colorless,* and only fails clearly to assert that all that die in infancy are elect—leaving that to private opinion, while its purpose is only to assert that whoever of the elect die in infancy are saved nevertheless, even though incapable of the outward call of the Word. It is important to observe (what is often overlooked) that we are reading now the chapter on “Effectual Calling,” and the subject under treatment is God’s elect,—how they are brought to actual participation in salvation. God’s elect, (say Sections 1 and 2,) and they only, are saved, by being effectually called “by His Word and Spirit.” God’s elect, (Section 3 goes on to say,) who die in infancy, or are otherwise incapable of being called by the Word, are nevertheless saved by the inward call of the Spirit. The point, then, is not how many infants are elect, but what becomes of God’s elect if they die in infancy? They are saved, says the Confession in answer to this question, while the former question it does not raise, and, of course, does not answer. If we raise that question, then, it is left for us to answer it; and for all that the Confession says, we may answer it any way we choose. Nothing is implied; the ground is free. When it is proposed to revise the statement so as to make it assert that all that die in infancy are elect, then, (1) it is proposed to break in upon the beautiful, logical ordering of the matter of the

* “Colorless” is the right word, not “ambiguous.” There is no “ambiguity” of statement: what is asserted is clearly and directly said. But the statement has nothing to do with the question of whether there are non-elect infants dying in infancy; and leaves, therefore, without “ambiguous,” room for any variety of opinions on that subject.

Confession, and make it treat a question of election, when it is treating of God's dealing with His elect. And (2) it is proposed to narrow the basis of the Confession, so as that it will exclude all, not only who believe that some that die in infancy are non-elect (happily, a very small number nowadays, even if any exist outside of sacramentarian churches), but also those who are doubtful as to whether we have any decisive Scripture teaching on the subject—of whom there are many. As the Confession stands, however, it asserts, what all Calvinists must admit to be true, viz. : that "elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit." It is because Calvinists believe that this is strictly true and Scriptural that they lay away their little ones in grief mingled with chastened joy and praise God that He has suspended their salvation on no "means of grace." On the other hand, it asserts and implies nothing that any Calvinist doubts. Those who say that it implies that some infants that die in infancy are non-elect, are not only bad exegetes, but have forgotten their English grammar. "Elect infants, dying in infancy" can mean nothing but "such elect infants as die in infancy," and this does not imply that there are some infants dying in infancy that are not elect, but that there are some elect infants who do not die in infancy.

THE CONFESSION NOT INFALLIBLE OR PERFECT.

Let these instances of objections—probably the most serious that are now being urged against the Confession—serve as examples of what may be called the insufficiency of the plea on which we are asked to embark upon a revision of it. It will be impossible to pass in review here the whole body of more or less unimportant objections which have been added to them, such as those that concern the six days of creation (the language of which is Scriptural

and hence open to whatever explanation Scripture may receive), or the declaration that the Pope is Antichrist. Let us conclude, then, by observing that to reject the assertion that the Confession is in need of changes in these particulars or in others like them, is not tantamount to claiming that it is infallible or perfect. We are discussing this year a matter of expediency, not a matter of right. No one doubts that it is in the power and right of the Church to revise or rewrite her Confession. But that is not the point. The point is, does the Confession need revision in order to ease the consciences of our office-bearers in signing it, or to fit it to be our Confession, as a Church, of the system of faith taught in God's Word? This is the question which we answer in the negative. And here it is important for us to distinguish between a public and a private Confession. Presumably, few of us can read the Confession through without finding some form of words which, *had he himself only to consider*, he might conceive it well to improve. For one's own Confession, not moderate, inclusive catholicity, but sharp individual exclusiveness might be desirable. But for a public Confession the virtue of virtues is that it shall be as catholic and inclusive as loyalty to the truth of God, as we conceive it, will permit. The chief virtues of the Westminster Confession may be said to be three: (1) sound Calvinism; (2) moderation and inclusiveness in its statement of Calvinism; and (3) depth of religious atmosphere. By means of these three virtues it is made intrinsically the best Calvinistic Confession for public use ever framed, and any alteration of it runs great risk both of narrowing and worsening it. It may no doubt be amended successfully; it has been amended successfully in America. But as a public Confession it stands now in little need of amendment; and our free and safe relation to it as office-bearers—accepting it only for “system of doctrine”—re-

lieves us from all necessity of seeking to conform it in every point to our own individual, and therefore relatively narrow, views. Under these circumstances, it is submitted that the best answer to the overture of the General Assembly which the Presbyteries can give, is that they do not perceive the need of, and therefore do not desire, any revision of the Confession of Faith; and to this answer the present writer has suggested to his own Presbytery that the following reasons be attached, as *inter alia*, the reasons that determine its action,* to wit:

REASONS FOR NOT REVISING THE CONFESSION.

1. Our free but safe formula of acceptance of the Confession of Faith, by which we "receive and adopt it" as "containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures" (Form of Government, XV., xii.), relieves us of all necessity for seeking, each one to conform the Confession in all its propositions to his individual preferences, and enables us to treat the Confession as a public document, designed, not to bring each of our idiosyncrasies to expression, but to express the general and common faith of the whole body—which it adequately and admirably does.

2. Enjoying this free yet hearty relation to the Confession, we consider that our situation toward our standards is incapable of improvement. However much or little the Confession were altered, we could not, as a body, accept the altered Confession in a closer sense than for system of doctrine; and the alterations could not better it as a public Confession, however much it might be made a closer expression of the faith of some individuals among us. In any case, it could not be made, in all its propositions and

* At their autumn meeting at New Brunswick, the Presbytery of New Brunswick adopted the paper here appended as part of its reply to the Assembly's overture.

forms of statement, the exact expression of the personal faith of each one of our thousands of office-bearers.

3. In these circumstances we are unwilling to mar the integrity of so venerable and admirable a document, in the mere license of change, without prospect of substantially bettering our relation to it, or its fitness to serve as an adequate statement of the system of doctrine which we all heartily believe. The historical character and the hereditary value of the creed should, in such a case, be preserved.

4. We have little hope of substantially bettering the Confession, either in the doctrines it states or in the manner in which they are stated. When we consider the guardedness, moderation, fullness, lucidity, and catholicity of its statement of the Augustinian system of truth, and of the several doctrines which enter into it, we are convinced that the Westminster Confession is the best, safest, and most acceptable statement of the truths and the system which we most surely believe that has ever been formulated; and we despair of making any substantial improvements upon its forms of sound words. On this account we not only do not desire changes on our own account, but should look with doubt and apprehension upon any efforts to improve upon it by the Church.

5. The moderate, catholic, and irenic character of the Westminster Confession has always made it a unifying document. Framed as an irenicon, it bound at once the Scotch and English Churches together; it was adopted and continues to be used by many Congregational and Baptist churches as the confession of their faith; with its accompanying Catechisms it has lately been made the basis of union between the two great Presbyterian bodies which united to constitute our Church; and we are convinced that if Presbyterian union is to go further, it must be on

the basis of the Westminster Standards, pure and simple. In the interests of Church union, therefore, as in the interests of a broad and irenic, moderate and catholic Calvinism, we deprecate any changes in our historical standards, to the system of doctrine contained in which we unabatedly adhere, and with the forms of statement of which we find ourselves in hearty accord.

III.

DOES THE CONFESSION NEED REVISION? *

I HAVE read with great interest the criticisms upon the paper which was presented by me to the Presbytery of New Brunswick, with which Dr. Van Dyke has honored me in the *Herald and Presbyter* of July 31. If I correctly understand the drift of Dr. Van Dyke's remarks, he argues that revision of the Confession is necessary, and he is willing to rest this alleged necessity on three criticisms of the Confession, which he states. It does not seem proper for me to pass these suggestions by without remark, and the less so, that the three points which Dr. Van Dyke has singled out are those which have been most frequently dwelt upon by those who advocate revision. We may hope, then, that if these do not prove adequate reasons for undertaking the task, it may be admitted that there is little serious call for it in the churches.

Probably, however, before entering into a discussion of these test criticisms, I ought to say a word in general about the New Brunswick paper, which has furnished occasion for Dr. Van Dyke's article. Let this be as brief as possible. That paper was intended to bring together what is, in essence, a threefold argument against the necessity of revision—an argument which, if founded on facts, ought

* Printed in the *Herald and Presbyter* for August 21, August 28, and September 4, 1889, in reply to an article by Rev. Dr. Henry J. Van Dyke in criticism of the paper adopted by the Presbytery of New Brunswick, for which see above, pages 39-41.

to prevail. It was intended to urge the following points, viz. : (1) Revision is not necessary in order to ease the consciences of our office-bearers in accepting the Confession ; (2) it is not needed in order to correct any serious infelicities in expressing the doctrines we profess ; and (3) it will throw difficulties in the way of the realization of hopes of church union, already being entertained by the Church. In all this there is certainly no claim to perfection and infallibility for the Confession ; there is no arraignment of the right or power of the Church to undertake a revision of it. The question is a question of expediency. The point is, Does the Confession need revision in order to ease the consciences of our office-bearers in accepting it as a test of soundness, or in order to fit it to be our testimony to the truth of God as taught in His word, and our text-book of doctrine ? And the propositions which are defended are (1) that as we accept it, as office-bearers, only for "system of doctrine," and it confessedly brings the system we profess to adequate expression, it does not need revision for the first of these reasons ; and (2) that as its statements of the truths that enter into this system are exact, full, complete, moderate, catholic, inclusive, and devout, it does not need revision for the second reason. If I properly understand Dr. Van Dyke, he does not take issue with the first of these propositions. He criticises my mode of stating it, indeed, as if it implied that advocates of revision desired change in the system of doctrine. This "for himself and as many as will adhere to him," he repudiates. The object of those for whom he speaks "is not to change the system of doctrine taught in the Confession, nor to repudiate or modify or dilute any one doctrine of that system." Surely, then, we may say that Dr. Van Dyke agrees that no change in the system of doctrine which the Confession teaches, or in "any one doctrine of that system," is needed. And that is just my

first contention. His whole case, then, is apparently directed against my second contention, and is hung, in the present paper, on three selected instances, which he thinks "fully demonstrate the necessity and practicability of revision."

These three points concern the statement of the doctrine of reprobation, the clause about "elect infants," and the alleged absence from the Confession of sufficient recognition of the universal provision and free offer of salvation in Christ. I cannot deny that Dr. Van Dyke has chosen his points well. The issue made by them is distinct; and it is probably on these three points that the decision of the general question will turn. But if this be true, I cannot but think that as the Church (to use an old rabbinical phrase) "sinks herself down in the book" during the coming months, she will, on this issue, feel constrained to vote for no revision. Certainly, speaking for myself, I do not desire revision at these points, and feel bound to affirm that the Confession stands in no need of revision in any one of them—that the opinion that it does rests on a misapprehension of its teaching—and that the alterations that have been proposed would certainly mar it and leave it a less satisfactory document than it now is. I owe to myself some words in justification of my venturing to differ so materially from so ripe a scholar and so thoughtful a theologian as Dr. Van Dyke.

I.

THE DOCTRINE OF REPROBATION.

The third chapter of the Confession, "Of God's Eternal Decree," as it was the occasion of the overture of the Presbytery of Nassau opening the present discussion, so it has borne, thus far, the brunt of objection to the Confession. To me it appears, however, a most admirable chapter—the most admirably clear, orderly, careful, and moder-

ate statement of the great mysteries of God's decree to be found in the whole body of the Reformed Confessions. How, then, shall we account for the offence which has been taken with it of late? I trust I shall be excused for saying it frankly. It seems to me to have arisen from a very strange confusion, involving both the doctrine of reprobation on the one side and the purport of the Westminster Confession on the other.

In order to explain what I mean, let me begin by reminding the reader that the Reformed doctrine has always distinguished (under various names) between what we may call preterition and condemnation, and has always taught that preterition is sovereign (as, indeed, it must be if election is sovereign), while condemnation, a consequent only of preterition, is for men's sins. The sentence which Dr. Van Dyke quotes from Dr. A. A. Hodge is perfectly accurately expressed: "It is no part of the Reformed faith that God's *treatment* of the lost is to be referred to His sovereign will. He *condemns* men only 'for their sins, to the praise of His glorious justice.'" But it *is* a part of the Reformed faith that preterition is sovereign, as Dr. Whitaker, in the age before the Westminster Assembly, clearly tells us: "Of predestination and reprobation it is our part to speak advisedly. But that the only will of God is the cause of reprobation, *being taken as it is contrary to predestination*, not only St. Paul and St. Augustine, but the best and learnedest schoolmen, have largely and invincibly proved." I do not know where this necessary distinction between the sovereignty of preterition and the grounding of the consequent condemnation on sin, is better put, in late writing, than in the late Dr. Boyce's (of the Louisville Baptist Seminary) "Abstract of Systematic Theology," which I mention here chiefly to call attention to the fact that Dr. Boyce's treatment is precisely that, even

in its peculiarities, of the great Westminster divine, Dr. Thomas Goodwin. I prefer, however, to quote here another Westminster divine, who appears to me to be more representative of the thought of the Assembly—Dr. John Arrowsmith—whose statement will serve to illuminate for us not only the subject itself, but the treatment of it in the Westminster Confession, and thus to supply us with a starting-point for its study.

In his "Chain of Principles," Arrowsmith explains: "Preterition, or negative reprobation, is an eternal decree of God, purposing within Himself to deny unto the non-elect that peculiar love of His wherewith election is accompanied, as, also, that special grace which infallibly bringeth to glory. . . . This description carries in the face of it a clear reason why the thing described goeth under the name of negative reprobation, because it standeth mainly on the denial of these free favors which it pleaseth God to bestow on His elect." When speaking later of the "consequents of the forementioned denials," he comes to "3, Condemnation for sin," and says: "This last is that which, by divines, is usually styled *positive reprobation*, and is clearly distinguishable from the *negative* in that the one is an act of punitive justice respecting sin committed and continued in. But the other an absolute decree of God's most free and sovereign will, without respect to any disposition in the creature. I call them consequents, not effects; because, though negative reprobation be *antecedent* to them all, it is not the proper *cause* of them. This difference between the decrees *Aquinas* long since took notice of. 'Election,' saith he, 'is a proper cause both of that glory which the elect look for hereafter, and of that grace which they here enjoy. Whereas reprobation is not the cause of the present sins of the *non-elect*, though it be of God's forsaking them; but their sin proceeds from the parties themselves

so passed by and forsaken.’” A clearer or more exact statement of the common Reformed doctrine on this subject could scarcely be found. Although the matter is capable of very copious illustration from the Westminster divines, we may content ourself with this typical statement. Enough has been already quoted to point out that the Westminster divines had in mind, as, indeed, they could not fail to have, the very obvious and necessary distinction between God’s sovereign decree of preterition—“negative reprobation,” as Arrowsmith calls it—which must be as free and sovereign as election itself, of which it is, indeed, but the negative statement; and his dealing with those thus passed by, which depends on their deserts. The fact that men are sinners does not affect the sovereignty of preterition; it only affects the treatment they are left to by preterition. If, for instance, out of the holy angels God chose sovereignly a certain number for some high service, involving special gifts of grace to them to fit them for it, the “leaving” of the rest would be just as truly “preterition” as in the case of fallen men; but the consequent treatment being but the “consequent,” and not the “effect,” of preterition, would be infinitely different in the two cases, seeing that it is the effect of the deserts, whatever they may be, in which those who are “passed by” are found to be left. Consequently, *sin* is not the cause of preterition; *election* is the cause of preterition; *i. e.*, the choosing of some is the cause that “the rest” are left. Sin is the cause, however, of how the preterited ones are treated. And to guard this, the Westminster men were accustomed to use a phrase they borrowed from Wollevius, which affirmed that sin is not the *causa reprobationis*, but the *causa reprobabilitatis*; that is, sin is not the cause of *reprobation* (otherwise the elect, who also are sinners, would be reprobates), but it is the cause of men being in a *reprobabile state*.

These are not theological subtleties; they are broad, outstanding facts of God's dealing with men; and it is failure to note them that is causing much (not always wholly intelligent) criticism of the Confession in these last days.

Let us come back to the third chapter of the Confession now, and note its structure. It opens with what is the finest and most guarded and most beautiful statement of the doctrine of God's decrees in general that has ever been compressed into so small a space (Sections 1 and 2). Then, proceeding to the special decree dealing with His creatures' destiny, it *first* asserts the fact that this sovereign, particular, and unchangeable decree extends also over this sphere of the destiny of the creature (Sections 3 and 4), and *then* proceeds to outline God's consequent dealing with the diverse classes (Sections 5-7), closing with a caution against careless handling of such great mysteries (Section 8). Were this the proper occasion for it, it would be a pleasure to expound this marvellously concise, full, and careful statement of an essential doctrine, in detail. Now, however, we are concerned only to emphasize the obvious fact that the famous Section 3 is nothing more than the clear statement of one fact falling under Section 1, here particularly restated in order to supply a starting-point for the full discussion of God's special decree given in Sections 4-8. To accept the general doctrine of Section 1, and then be stumbled by the specific fact asserted under it by Section 3, is simply to deny *in specie* what has just been asserted *in genere*. If "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass" (III., i.), how can we be offended by the assertion that "by the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life and others foreordained

to everlasting death" (III., iii.), unless we are prepared to deny that "it comes to pass" that some go to eternal life and some to eternal death?* Are we to be Calvinists only "in the vague," and on the moment that we descend into details, be ready not only to stumble at our Calvinistic faith, but also to desert elementary logic? What need there is for amending this section we certainly fail to see.

It is a matter of interest, indeed, but of less importance, to ask what would be the effect of adopting the amendment to it proposed by Dr. Van Dyke, who desires that the words "*for their sins*" should be inserted into Section 3. "Will any opponent of revision," he asks, "maintain that the addition of these words would mar the integrity of our Confession?" I answer, unhesitatingly, yes; the insertion of these words into Section 3 would be an intolerable confusing of the logical order and exactitude of statement of this now beautifully ordered and carefully phrased chapter. It would prematurely introduce the statement of the *ground* of God's actual dealings with *one* class into the statement of the *fact* that *two* classes are discriminated. It would confound the treatment of *preterition* (which is sovereign) with that of *condemnation* (which is based on sin). It would throw the whole chapter into such confusion

* Compare the admirable discussion of the late Principal Cunningham (*Historical Theology*, II., pp. 422-430). "It is manifest," he says, "that if the Calvinistic doctrine upon this great *general* question be established" (*i. e.*, of the Decrees, as in III., 1, 2), "this settles all the questions bearing upon the subjects of election and reprobation, or the purposings and actings of God with respect to the character and fate of men individually. If God has unchangeably foreordained whatsoever comes to pass, and if, in point of fact, some men are saved and the rest perish, then it must be true that He has predestinated some men to everlasting life and has foreordained others to everlasting death" (pp. 424-7).

as to render Section 7 superfluous, while affording us but a sorry substitute for that richer section. In the effort to prevent careless readers from misapprehending a plain and admirably ordered document, it would compel all careful readers to be offended by a bad arrangement and an insufficient theological discrimination. Speaking for myself, then, I do not hesitate to say that the present form of the third chapter suits me precisely, and that the proposed change would be unacceptable and confusing, and appears to me to rest only on an unwillingness to take the trouble to follow the Confession in the logical ordering of its matter.

II.

INFANT SALVATION.

If the current misapprehensions of Chapter III. are remarkable, I think we may characterize the interpretation of Chapter X., Section 3, which finds a body of non-elect infants, dying in infancy, implied in its statement, as one of the most astonishing pieces of misinterpretation in literary history. It is so perfectly gratuitous as almost to reach the level of the sublime. And when Dr. Van Dyke adduces "the ambiguous phrase '*elect* infants dying in infancy,'" as sanctioning "the popular impression that we hold the abhorrent doctrine of the damnation of infants," and as, therefore, one of the three cases in which the necessity for revision is obvious, he renders it easy for us to reply that the phrase is not, properly speaking, "ambiguous," and that the Confession is certainly in no need of revision to guard it from a wholly unreasonable interpretation.

The assertion that the clause in question necessarily implies, as its opposite, a body of non-elect infants dying in infancy, has been so often and so dogmatically reiterated

of late years, however, that I shall need to ask the reader to go with me to the text of the Confession, before I can hope that he will credit my counter-assertion that such an implication is a total misunderstanding of it. Let us observe, then, that we are now dealing with effectual calling, not with election. All questions of election have been settled seven chapters back; and this logically arranged Confession—the careful strictness of the logical arrangement of which has been made a reproach to it—is not a document to rebroach that question at this late and inappropriate point. Let us observe, next, that in the apprehension of the framers of the Confession effectual calling is the first step in the application of redemption to God's elect. To them, and them only, is given this grace. But how? "*By His word and Spirit*"—and then a rich statement is made as to how this call works in and on them, so as that, though effectually drawn to Jesus, they come most freely and willingly. God's elect, then, are saved through the external call of the word and the internal call of the Spirit conjoined. But what if God's elect die before they are capable of receiving this external call of the word? Are they then lost? No, says Section 3; God's elect that die in infancy are regenerated and saved through the internal work of the Spirit, without the intermediation of the word; and so are all others of the elect who are incapable of receiving such an outward call. Now, observe: There is no such distinction in the minds of the framers of the Confession, at this point, as "elect infants dying in infancy," and "non-elect infants dying in infancy." The distinction in their minds is that between "elect infants that reach the adult state," who are saved by the "word and Spirit," and "elect infants dying in infancy" who are saved by the Spirit apart from the word. This is the antithesis that was in their minds when they wrote this phrase;

and they expected the reader to understand, as he read the words "elect infants dying in infancy," that these were the opposites of those who, having reached adulthood, were saved by the intermediation of the word. In short, "elect infants dying in infancy" is equivalent to "such elect infants as die in infancy," *and not at all* to "such infants dying in infancy as are elect." This is absolutely necessary to the progress of the thought. And this being so, the phrase does not start the question as to whether there are non-elect infants dying in infancy at all. To raise that question here is perfectly gratuitous; and as it was not in the minds of the writers as they wrote this phrase, no proof that the majority of the Westminster divines believed that there were, or might be, non-elect infants dying in infancy, has any bearing on the interpretation of this passage. We deal with the Confession that they framed, and with what they teach in it—not with what outside of it they are known to have believed. What they would have said had they felt called upon to speak of the question whether there be non-elect infants dying in infancy, we may indeed learn from their private writings. But we are not concerned with what they teach elsewhere on subjects not here under discussion; but only with what they teach here. And what they teach here is that all of God's elect that reach adult age are called by the "word and Spirit," but such elect infants as die in infancy, and all others of the elect who are incapable of the outward call, are saved, apart from the outward call, by the Spirit's regeneration. How many there are—whether all or some of such as die in infancy—is a question wholly out of mind. The antithesis is that unless these infants die in infancy, or these others are really incapable of receiving the outward call, they cannot be saved without a knowledge of the gospel—and *that* the fourth section goes on to assert. To raise any other antith-

esis here is to raise a false antithesis, which was not in the minds of the writers; and to make any inferences from this false antithesis is to read something of our own into the text. If we choose to raise such questions of our own, let us answer them; the Confession has not raised them, and does not answer them by statement or implication.

This interpretation of the bare text is powerfully supported by the history of the framing of this phrase in the Assembly. The chapter on effectual calling in the first form lacked Section 3, and therefore it was ordered ("Minutes," p. 134) "that something be expressed in fit place *concerning infants' regeneration in their infancy.*" Observe, this is the point in the minds of the Assembly—*the regeneration of infants in their infancy.* What they wished to do was to show that Sections 1 and 2 did not exclude those who die in infancy from salvation, by the assertion that the effectual call came through the word. It was the possibility and actuality of regeneration in infancy that they wished to assert, and this, and this only, they do assert,—without implying anything at all as to how many of infants dying in infancy are so regenerated, which they would have adjudged a wholly inappropriate subject to broach at this place. We read in the "Minutes" of debates about this section, but absolutely nothing of the debate turning on anything else than the memorandum quoted above suggests. The phrase that occurs once, "Proceed in debate about elect of infants" (p. 162), furnishes no ground whatever for an opposite inference. In the complete uncertainty as to what is meant by the phrase, "elect of infants," or indeed whether it represents anything more than one of the numerous verbal blunders of the not over-careful scribe, it only tells us that Section 3 was carefully considered before it was finally accepted. All we know is that it cannot mean anything inconsistent

with both the memorandum which opened the debate and the formulated section which closed it. Dr. Van Dyke has somewhere in his papers in the *Evangelist* said (if my memory serves me), that he is aware that this Section 3 was arrived at by a compromise. If he will be so good as to point out the evidence for this, he will confer a favor on scholars. I have searched the "Minutes" in vain for any signs of such a compromise. To show that Westminster divines differed as to whether all or only some of those who die in infancy are saved, is nothing to the purpose. There is no evidence that they had this matter in mind when this section was being debated. The only apposite thing would be to show that they differed as to whether infants that die in infancy are capable of regenerating grace. We know that their intention was to assert that death in infancy did not snatch the soul from the Saviour; we know this is what they did assert. We have no right to infer that this assertion was arrived at by any compromise, or that any debates were held on any other subject in this connection.

What has been said surely vindicates the Confession from the charge that revision is necessary at this point in order to prevent its seeming to teach that there are non-elect infants dying in infancy. Are the amendments offered in themselves acceptable? A thousand times no, I should say. First, to insert a statement that all those that die in infancy are elect, *here*, would be out of place and order. This is not the place to treat of who are elect and who not, but of *how God saves the elect*. Secondly, to insert such a statement anywhere would be an unnecessary burdening of the Confession with an explicit statement of what most Presbyterians believe, indeed, but not all feel justified in asserting to be revealed truth. For myself, I believe with all my heart that all dying in infancy are saved, and I be-

lieve that I can prove it from Scripture. But I think it far better to leave the Confession, asserting, as it does assert, that God saves all the elect, whether reaching adult age or dying in infancy, rather than to force into it a dogmatic definition of a doctrine which many among us still believe rests on a pious hope rather than on clear Scripture. To do this, as Dr. De Witt has unanswerably shown, is to move in the direction of narrowing our confessional basis, without necessity and without gain. The Confession already provides firm ground for all who believe that all those that die in infancy are elect, and it does this without dogmatism and without sacrificing its moderation and calm guardedness of statement. Why sacrifice this? No one can doubt that what the Confession asserts is exactly true: that "elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when and where and how He pleaseth." Who denies that? And why should it be altered to a more doubtful form to save men from the possibility of misinterpreting it inconsistently with both the context and its own grammatical form?

III.

GOD'S LOVE TO MAN.

In the preceding paper (pp. 25 *sq.* above) I have already said a few words regarding the general subject which lies at the base of the third test case which Dr. Van Dyke adduces to prove a necessity for revising the Confession—the Confession's treatment of the love of God to man. Here the following few remarks, additional to what I have there said, may suffice. Dr. Van Dyke complains that "there is not, in all our Confession, one declaration which clearly comprehends or alludes to the teaching of the Scripture" on the sufficient provision and free proclamation of

salvation for all men, and their accountability for rejecting it. I do not understand Dr. Van Dyke to complain that all this is nowhere gathered up in a single statement, nor can he intend to complain that the Confession does teach (as it certainly does) the doctrine of "the limited" (or better, "the definite") atonement. I understand him to mean that the Confession taken at large nowhere recognizes adequately the freedom of the great Gospel offer, and man's consequent responsibility for rejecting it. But certainly this is somewhat rashly charged. It can hardly be said that the Confession nowhere teaches that "the eternal decree of God hinders no one from accepting the Gospel," when the Confession explicitly teaches that God is not the author of sin (would it not be a sin to refuse the Gospel?), and that by the decree no "violence is offered to the will of the creature" (III., i.), nor is his liberty taken away (III., i.), and when it teaches that God freely offers the Gospel to all, as we shall immediately see. For to affirm that the Confession does not teach that the offer to all men is free, and that their acceptance of it would be saving, is to forget some of its most emphatic passages. The Confession vindicates the duty of translating the Bible "into the vulgar language of every nation," on the ground that thereby, "the word of God dwelling in all plentifully, they may worship him in an acceptable manner, and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope" (I., viii.). Here is clearly asserted the duty of the free proclamation, and the value of the truth as proclaimed to all—that all may through it be brought to "hope." Again (VII., vi.) it is declared that the ordinances of the New Covenant differ from those of the Old, in that the Gospel is held forth in them "in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy to all nations"—certainly a broad enough basis for any preaching. But the Confession goes

further than this, declaring with the greatest explicitness (VII., iii.) that the Lord has "*freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him that they may be saved.*" It may be asserted, without fear of successful contradiction, that this Section 3 of the seventh chapter actually contains all that Dr. Van Dyke asks, *i. e.*, a full recognition of the universal, sufficient provision and the free offer of salvation to all, *along-side of* the statement of its special designation for the elect, and I do not see what need there is for a repetition of it elsewhere. Nay, it may even be maintained that we already have in the third chapter itself all the recognition of this freedom of proclamation which is appropriate in that place, it being not only declared in the opening of it that God's decree does not supersede man's liberty or responsibility, but also commended at the end that the doctrine of predestination be not so preached as to deter man from seeking salvation, but only so as to encourage the seekers with the assurance that though it be they who are working out their own salvation with fear and trembling, yet it is God who is working in them both the willing and the doing according to His own good pleasure. The Confession requires that predestination be so preached "that men attending the will of God revealed in his word [there is the free offer], and yielding obedience thereunto [there is the recognition of personal responsibility], may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation [there is the recognition of God's hand in what is experienced only as their own work], be assured of their eternal election [there is the encouragement to further effort]." No wonder the splendid sentence follows: "So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God, and of humility, *diligence*, and *abundant consolation* to all that sincerely obey the Gospel." The order here is, (1)

hear the Gospel, (2) obey it, (3) be encouraged and comforted because God's hand is certainly in it; and that is (1) free proclamation of the word; (2) responsibility in accepting it; (3) praise to and confidence in God for His blessed work in us.

I cannot, then, think the Confession in need of the third improvement which Dr. Van Dyke proposes. It has it already spread over its pages, and, especially in VI. iii., explicitly stated. If the attempt is made to set aside the Confession's clear declaration of God's love for men and His provision of a salvation adequate to all their needs, as insufficiently explicit, I cannot consider this a very reasonable procedure. No one doubts that the New Testament is written all over with the love of God to man; and yet it is the fact that there is but a single unique passage in it which brings the terms "God loved" and "the world" into immediate conjunction. This great doctrine can be not only "implied" but "declared" apart from this exact phraseology, and it is adequately "declared" both in the Scriptures and the Confession, apart from it. It is scarcely fair to apply different modes of estimation to the two documents. If the New Testament declares that "God is love," the Confession equally asserts, at its appropriate place, that He is "most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin" (II., i.). If the New Testament declares that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life," the Confession traces the working of this mighty love from plan to act and from act to act, until it brings its own into the fruition of glory: and speaks continually of God's goodness which is over all, of His nature which is such that He can be described only as He who "is good and doeth good unto

all" (XXI., i.), of His condescension to covenant with man as man for his salvation (VII., i.), and of his unwearied determination that His gracious offers, freely made to all, should not wholly fail (VII., iii.). As a matter of mere fact the whole essence and drift of the entire Confession is praise of the unspeakable and inexplicable love of God to man. As such it opens with God's compassion in giving man a saving revelation of Himself (I., i.); places the God of Love, so grandly described, at the root of all its doctrinal statements (II., i.); bases His whole saving purpose on His "mere grace and love" (III., v.), and creation itself on His goodness (IV., i.)—a goodness which fails not in any dealing with His creatures (VII., i.), even in His dealings with sin (V., iv.). The Confession, in a word, accurately fulfills the demand which Dr. Schaff makes, for a Confession "that is inspired and controlled, not by the idea of divine justice, which is a consuming fire, but by the idea of divine love, which is life and peace"—"a Confession which is as broad and deep as God's love, and as strict and severe as God's justice." This, this Confession is. And no Confession could be this which did not make, as this Confession does, its formative idea, not God's general and indiscriminate love for His creatures, but His ineffable and peculiar love for His people—His *saving* love, as distinguished from His mere benevolence. God's electing love is the highest manifestation of His love for man, not (as some seem to think) a limitation of it: it does not make His general love without effect—it gives it effect. That the Confession lays most stress on it, is to preserve the right proportion of faith and to glorify God's general love, not to derogate from it. Doing so it makes everything of love, bases its whole fabric on it, and all the more glorifies it that it does not forget God's justice. After the Bible, it is the most perfect charter of the divine love cur-

rent among men. Nor would it be bettered in this regard by making it speak twice as often about love and half as often of the black facts of human nature and destiny which furnish the occasion of the exhibition of God's love to men, and apart from a full realization of which, we can have no appreciation of the depths of His love.

In closing, then, I reiterate that I cannot but feel that the Confession, if it is to be judged by these three well-chosen examples, must be adjudged to be in no need of revision. And I cannot help noting that all the objections seem to grow out of misapprehension of what the Confession does teach and how it teaches it. Why not so revise it as to make such misapprehension impossible, then? I can only reply, that no document can be framed which is incapable of being misapprehended by the careless reader, and I am bound to say that, in my judgment, the Confession cannot be misapprehended in these points when carefully read. Most of the presently urged objections have arisen primarily in the minds of enemies of Calvinism, whose misapprehension (or misrepresentation) was a foregone conclusion, and have, by dint of much proclamation, been conveyed from them to us—for the best of us are not proof against outside influences. We have tested assertions of this kind, not as we should, by grounded and consecutive study of the whole document, but by momentary adversion to the passages specially attacked, with our minds full of the attack. And so we have seen the sense in them which we were sent to look for. The remedy is not to revise the Confession in the hope of rendering misapprehension of it impossible, but to revise our study of the Confession, in the hope of correctly apprehending it. What the Confession needs is not revision, but study. And the present agitation will have been a boon to the Church, however it eventuates, if it brings the Confession more into

the minds of our membership; if it applies its forms of sound words to our conceptions of doctrine, and lays its devout spirit alongside of our aspirations heavenward. For the Confession is not only the soundest, sweetest, most exact and moderate statement of doctrine ever framed. It is a revival document. It was framed by revivalists, in a revival age. And it bears a revival spirit in its bosom. He who feeds on it will find, not only his thought quickened and his intellectual apprehension clarified, but his heart warmed and his spirit turned toward God.

IV.

THE PRESBYTERIAN WORLD AND THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION.*

THE last few years have been marked, throughout the Presbyterian world, by a widespread agitation regarding the relation of the churches to the Westminster Standards, which has seemed to culminate during the ecclesiastical year that has just closed. Its formal beginnings † may be assigned to the movement which issued in the adoption by the Scottish United Presbyterian Church, in 1879, of a Declaratory Act, giving forth an authorized explanation in regard to certain subjects in the Standards, respecting which it was found desirable to set forth more fully and clearly the view which the Synod took of the teaching of Holy Scripture. The subjects treated in this document are especially the love of God for all mankind, and His provision, by the gift of His Son, of a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all, and offered freely to all; man's responsibility; infant salvation and the salvability of the heathen; Church and State; and such minor matters as creation in six days, and the like. This was followed in 1882 by the passage of a somewhat similar act by the Presbyterian Church of Victoria. Since 1883 the Presbyterian Church of England, while "unabatedly adhering to the doctrine contained in the Westminster Confession," has been busily

* Printed in *The Presbyterian Review*, October, 1889, vol. x., p. 646.

† Compare an interesting account of the movement in Scotland, from the competent hand of A. Taylor Innis, Esq., in *The Andover Review* for July, 1889, pp. 1-15.

engaged in considering its relations to that document ; in the course of which consideration it has framed for itself a brief compendium of fundamental doctrines, designed, “not of necessity to supersede the Westminster Confession as the standard of orthodox teaching from the pulpit, yet for sundry other practical uses,” “as, for example, the clear presentation to the public of the Church’s exact doctrinal teaching, or for the indoctrination of catechumens, or even for an intelligent profession of their faith by ruling elders and deacons.”* Accordingly, it was proposed to the Synod at its last meeting to adopt these new “Articles of Faith,” “as a sufficiently full statement of this Church’s belief on fundamental doctrines to serve for a testimony to those beyond her communion, and for a summary of her creed to be recited upon special occasions of public worship”—in a word, to take some such place as its *Summary of Principles* does in the United Presbyterian Church. At the other end of the world, again, the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Otago and Southland in Southern New Zealand appointed a committee at their meeting in the autumn of 1888, to consider the whole subject of the relation of the Church to its subordinate Standards, and report to the Synod of 1889.† In Scotland, the Established Church has

* Dr. J. Oswald Dykes, in *The Catholic Presbyterian*, ix. 469, June, 1883.

† A somewhat similar overture to that sent up to the Synod of Otago and Southland by the Presbytery of Dunedin, on the basis of which the action mentioned above was taken, was sent up by the Presbytery of Auckland to the last General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, but was set aside on the ground that the modified formula of subscription in use in that church secures all that is necessary. That formula reserves liberty of opinion “on the teaching of the said Confession in regard to the duty of the civil magistrate, marriage with a deceased wife’s sister, and the forms of expression in which the several doctrines are stated.”

during the last year voted to revert for ministerial subscription, from the formula framed in 1711, which required acceptance of the whole doctrine of the Confession as truths of God, to the simpler one which has hitherto been used by the elders, and which rests on the act of the Assembly of 1694; while the elders hereafter are only to express their approbation of the Confession. The Free Church, after a year's debate, has appointed a large committee to report to the next Assembly what relief is needed. In America, two overtures looking toward revision were presented to the Canadian Presbytery of Toronto, but voted down; while the General Assembly of our own Church has overtured its Presbyteries with a view to discovering whether there is any widespread or important call for revision among us.

Such a chronicle as this is apt to leave upon the mind an impression of a deep and almost universal disaffection under the pressure of the Westminster Standards. It certainly does prove that there are men everywhere who are dissatisfied either with the Standards themselves or with the relation they find themselves occupying to them. But we must not imagine that the causes which produce this restlessness are everywhere the same, or that all are agreed as to what is needed for relief or that anything is needed. Even among those who really object to the Standards themselves, different men object to widely different things, so that if the attempt were made to exclude everything concerning which any individual cherished doubt, "it would be a poor church," in the paradoxical language of Dr. Macgregor,* "which has not in its adult membership a sufficient amount

* *Freedom in the Truth* (Dunedin: 12mo, pp. 72), being Dr. Macgregor's speech in the Synod of Otago and Southland in opposition to the overture of the Presbytery of Dunedin, on which the Synod's action was based.

of immaturity to cast out by this process the whole round of Christian doctrine." And it is more important still to remember that the circumstances of the several churches are widely different, and the relations they bear to the Standards very diverse, so that the causes of restlessness that are operative in one are wholly absent in another. There is obviously, for example, a very great difference between objecting to be bound to an extended doctrinal treatise in all its propositions and rejecting the whole Calvinistic theology. If we, however, range the world over and gather together indiscriminately all the objections that have been made to the Westminster Confession during these last years, we are in danger of confusing even such opposite points of view as these. In the midst of such an agitation for change as has arisen in the American Church during the last months, therefore, it seems necessary for us to take a general glance over the Presbyterian world with a view to tracing the causes which are working in one place or another, to the production of this restlessness. In so doing we can scarcely fail to learn more accurately to estimate at its true value much that might otherwise be misunderstood, and perhaps also we may learn to value more highly our own inheritance in our creed and in our relation to it as fixed in the formula by which we accept it in ordination.

I.

OVERSTRICTNESS OF FORMULA OF ACCEPTANCE.

Among the causes of the present restlessness with reference to the Westminster Standards, the first place is undoubtedly due to the overstrictness prevailing in some churches, in the formula of subscription which is required of office-bearers. And it is worthy of notice that where the formula seems most overstrict, dissatisfaction seems to be most widespread, most pronounced, and most difficult to

satisfy. The Established and Free Churches of Scotland, for example, have hitherto required of their ministry "sincerely to own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith . . . to be the truths of God." Dr. Candlish has, indeed, argued that in its historical sense, even this formula asks only acceptance of the Confession as a whole;* but, as it seems to us, unsuccessfully, and certainly without effect on the convictions of the churches. We do not wonder, therefore, that the ministry of these churches are earnest in seeking relief. It may savor of exaggeration to say with Mr. Taylor Innis (presuming that he means single propositions), that "there is no honest or sane man who will pretend that any proposition in religious truth constructed by others, exactly expresses his own view of that religious truth";† but this is surely apt to be true of an extended confession, and we must certainly agree with the words which he adds in a note: "Properly speaking, the Confession is not the confession of faith of any one who signs it, but of all. None of them exactly agree with it, but none of them contradict it." In a word, a public confession, by virtue of the very fact that it is public, cannot be, and ought not to be pretended to be, just the expression of his faith which each one who accepts it as representing his faith would have framed had he only himself to consider. The most we can expect, and the most we have right to ask, is that each one may be able to recognize it as an expression of the system of truth which he believes. To go beyond this and seek to make each of a large body of signers accept the Confession in all its propositions as the profession of his personal belief, cannot fail to result in serious evils—not least among which are the twin evils

* *The Relation of the Presbyterian Churches to the Confession of Faith.* Glasgow, 1886, p. 6.

† *The Law of Creeds in Scotland*, p. 479.

that, on the one hand, too strict subscription overreaches itself and becomes little better than no subscription ; and, on the other, that it begets a spirit of petty, carping criticism which raises objection to forms of statement that in other circumstances would not appear objectionable.

Where the formula of acceptance is such that no one signs without some mental reservation, some soon learn to sign without reference to mental reservation ; and gross heterodoxy becomes gradually safe, because there is no one so wholly without sin that his conscience permits him to cast the first stone. That such a state of things has not been unknown, the history of Scottish Moderatism may teach us. That in the estimation of some, some of its features are not wholly unknown now, there are not lacking phenomena which may indicate. It is even occasionally openly asserted. Thus Dr. Watt is reported as declaring on the floor of the Established Presbytery of Glasgow that "he took it, that no man signed the formula without mental reservation more or less";* and Professor Storey is reported † as pleading in one of his opening addresses, that "some such terms of official subscription of the Confession should be adopted as shall openly sanction the liberty which is tacitly exercised in qualifying or modifying some of its propositions." Now, such a state of affairs is a great evil ; and the dangers attending it have never been better pointed out than by Dr. Charles Hodge, who writes : "To adopt every proposition contained in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms is more than the vast majority of our ministers either do or can do. To make them profess to do it is a great sin. It hurts their consciences. It fosters a spirit of evasion and subterfuge. It forces them

* *The Glasgow Herald*, March 28, 1889.

† *Ibid.*, November 13, 1888.

to take creeds in a 'non-natural sense.' It at once vitiates and degrades. There are few greater evils connected with establishments than the overwhelming temptations which they offer to make men profess what they do not believe. Under such strict requirements, men make light of professions, and are ready to adopt any creed which opens the door to wealth or office. The overstrict the world over are the least faithful."*

Not less surely, however, does overstrictness of formula wound tender consciences and produce a restlessness as over against the creed itself to all the propositions of which they are obliged to assent as the profession of their faith, even when they would not find these propositions objectionable when considered only as one statement of the faith they profess. Tender consciences must revolt from a confession to which they are too closely bound, if they do not find themselves in absolute agreement with its every word; and revolt once begun battens on what it feeds on, until a great war breaks out against the Confession with which, nevertheless, most of the combatants are in substantial agreement. Thus overstrictness in the formula is the real account often to be given of what emerges as objection against the creed, rather than against the formula. Relief is to be sought in such a relaxation of the formula as will give all the liberty to individuals which is consistent with the Church's witness to the truth. What is needed seems to us admirably expressed by Dr. Marshall Lang in a speech in the Established Presbytery of Glasgow, advocating the change of formula which has since been accomplished in that Church: "The point they desired to emphasize was this," he is reported as saying,† "that they did not bind men to the mere letter. They did not insist that a man should accept all the propo-

* *Church Polity*, p. 332. † *The Glasgow Herald*, March 28, 1889.

sitions and all the phraseology of the Confession. What they asked was, that a man should honestly and truly subscribe to the system of truth that was presented in the Confession of Faith, and not merely to the words of the letter in which it was presented. He thought a substantial relief was given to persons of scrupulous conscience." So far as the present agitation in the Scotch churches arises from this cause and tends to this result, it is an effort to attain a situation as over against the Standards which the American churches have always enjoyed, and it must have the hearty sympathy of every American Presbyterian.

In this advocacy of a liberal formula, however, we are not to be understood as if we could at all accord with those who would so relax the formula as to make the Confession of Faith little more than a venerable relic of a past age, still honored as such by the Church. Such a change as that made in 1816 by the Church of Holland by which ministers were no longer pledged to the Standards, *because (quia)*, but only *in so far as (quatenus)* they accord with the Word, is justly pointed to by Mr. McEwan* as fatal. That there are, nevertheless, some in the Scotch churches who might desire it, seems to be hinted by some words of Mr. Taylor Innis.† Unfortunately there are some even who act as if this were all that the present very strict formula bound them to, as was evinced, for example, by the amazing plea put in by Mr. James Stuart, author of that very remarkable book, *The Principles of Christianity*, when arraigned before the Presbytery of Edinburgh.‡

* *The New Movement in the Free Church* (Edinburgh, 1889), pp. 10 and 11.

† *The Theological Review*, November, 1888.

‡ As reported in *The Scotsman* for January 31, 1889. Mr. Stuart is reported as saying: "He could not see how the subordinate standard and the ultimate standard were on an equality. He regarded the sub-

Nevertheless, it is surely not nearly so difficult as Principal David Brown expresses himself as thinking, to frame a formula which will "let in all right men and keep out all wrong." The American churches have such a formula. Of course it lies in the courts of the Church to decide what is and what is not "of the system," and Church courts are not infallible, nor always faithful. But Church courts can afford, and do venture, to hold men strictly to the terms of a liberal formula, when they could not to an illiberal one. Overstrictness demands and begets laxity in performance; while a truly liberal but conservative formula binds all essentially sound men together against laxity. In pleading for a liberal formula, therefore, we wish it distinctly understood that we do not plead either for a lax formula, or much less for a lax administration of any formula—within which an essential dishonesty seems to lurk. The American formula appears to us the ideal one, and as nothing more lax than it would be acceptable or safe, certainly a lax administration of it would be unendurable, and, as we have said, essentially dishonest.

ordinate one as valid only in so far as it was based on the ultimate one." Thus, he confused his duty to himself and his God, with his duty to the Church as a society; and so refused to withdraw from a Church whose formularies he no longer accepted. For reply, we should only need point Mr. Stuart to the brochure of his brother "liberal," Mr. Macintosh's *The Obsolescence of the Confession of Faith*, p. 63, one of the few bright spots of truth in this remarkable pamphlet. We hardly know what to think of such words as are ascribed to Rev. T. P. Kilpatrick, of Aberdeen, on the floor of the Free Church Assembly (*The Scotsman* for May 31, 1889), who is reported as saying that he spoke for himself and for many of the younger ministers of the Church, and that "they were adherents of no system of theology that was at present in existence." Yet they had signed the Confession of Faith by the strictest of formulas,

II.

SCHOLASTIC FORM OF THE CONFESSION.

Overstrictness of formula is not, however, the cause of all the restlessness, as over against the Westminster Standards, which is, at present, exhibiting itself in the churches, nor even of all that arises apart from doctrinal disharmony with the Westminster Confession. It has grown quite common to hear objections directed wholly against its form; it is alleged that it is too long, too full, too detailed, too analytical, too scholastic, too logical, or too polemic to serve properly as a creed for the profession of a Church's faith. In one form or another, and on one ground or another (by no means always on the same ground), this objection has found much expression during the past year. Thus the Presbytery of Brechin even overtured the Free Church Assembly to revert to the Reformation Confession of the Scotch Church; and it has not been uncommon to hear contrasts drawn between it as a document which is vital, religious, and biblical, and the Westminster Confession as scholastic, theological, logical—between the one as the natural product of a period of living faith and earnest preaching, and the other as the equally natural product of a period of controversy. Perhaps this phase of opinion has never been better expressed than by Mr. J. Murray Garden in seconding Dr. Brown's overture in the Free Church Presbytery of Aberdeen. "If the Westminster Confession is a perfect building," he is reported as saying,* "perfect in all its parts, and true in all its proportions, I should rather prefer to liken the Confession of John Knox to a tree, living and springing and adapted to the life of the Church. If the Westminster Confession is clear, it is cold;

* The (Aberdeen) *Daily Free Press* for February 6, 1889.

if it is purifying to the intellect, it is very often chilling to the faith; whereas such a document as I have referred to is bright and warming like a living fire, and you cannot wonder, for it was born at a time when men were instinct with life." There is not apparent here any objection to the doctrines of the Confession, but only to its forms of statement. It is no doubt a very pleasing picture that Mr. Garden paints for us of the model Confession; but wherein does the Westminster Confession not fully satisfy it? We very much fear that in most cases when this general position finds expression, it is founded on an erroneous idea of what a Confession like ours is and the purposes which it is intended to serve, if not also upon an insufficient appreciation of the true character of the Westminster Confession itself. "Fancy attempting to recite the Westminster Confession as part of the worship of God," cries Mr. Robert Macintosh,* and many more appear to share his idea that a creed must be in its essence "an immediate utterance of faith," couched in "religious form," and intended as a vehicle through which the people at large periodically bring their belief to verbal expression. It could be wished that so good a treatise as Dunlop's *A Full Account of the Several Ends and Uses of Confessions of Faith*, should not be permitted to grow obsolescent until in some way men attained a somewhat rounded view of the functions of Confessions. It ought to require very little consideration, however, to discover that they are not intended to take the place either of the sermon, applying the truth of God to the heart, or of the professional element of prayer, in which we acknowledge God's truth to Him. Their three chief ends are rather to serve as testimonies, tests, and text-books. As

* *The Obsolescence of the Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, 1888), p. 28.

testimonies, they (we revert to old Dunlop's words) "give a fair and authentic account of the doctrine maintained," and clear misapprehensions and calumnies; they enable Christian societies "in the most solemn manner to make profession of the true religion and glory in it before the world"—a duty especially binding when the truth is ridiculed and despised in the world, or is being deserted by the churches; and they bring together and bind into one communion those who stand for the truth, contributing to their mutual comfort and edification. As tests, they are established as Standards of sound teaching and bulwarks against error; and especially as protections to the people against ecclesiastical tyranny and the vagaries of individual teachers, enabling them to demand and secure that they be fed with the sincere milk of the Word. As text-books, they provide the people with short and useful summaries of the true doctrines of religion, and so maintain purity of faith among them. For all and for each of these purposes, they ought to be full, detailed, theological, clear, logical, discriminating—not without the breath of vital piety blowing through them; but not merely a summary of those truths necessary for salvation, but rather of the whole circle of the fundamental truths of God. It is because, strong in moderation and true catholicity, the Westminster Standards are creeds of this sort, that they were "cried up," as Baillie tells us, at the time, as the best yet extant, even by the "opposites" of the divines who framed them, and have continued to win the praise of their candid-minded "opposites" ever since. The late Dr. Curry, for example, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, bore testimony that the Westminster Confession is "the ablest, clearest, and most comprehensive system of Christian doctrine ever framed," "a comprehensive embodiment of nearly all the precious truths of the gospel." It is "its intrinsic worth alone,"

as Dr. Schaff reminds us,* that “can explain the fact that it has supplanted the older Standards of John Knox and John Craig in the land of their birth, and has been adopted by three distinct denominations.” Even its very completeness and length is one of its excellences; how otherwise shall we bear testimony to the whole truth of God? Mr. Taylor Innis, certainly no prejudiced witness in such a matter, truly says: † “In the history of Scotland, and in the Reformed Churches generally, it does not appear that the men who sought for the minimum of truth to confess, were the men who had the most of the Divine spirit of truth. The greatest men and the best men (with some exceptions, like Baxter) seem hitherto to have been in favor of full creeds. Churchmen of capacity and earnestness—the men in whose heart the question, *How is THE KING’S Government to be carried on?* continuously burned—have felt their practical need of creeds for keeping the Church together, and have argued that they are essential, if not to the being (*esse*), at least to the well-being of the Church. And, on the other hand, the men of tenderness of conscience and pure heart toward God and men, have leaned not only to the Confession of the permanently central truths, but to the eager and solemn Confession of whatever truth the time and its trial called for—to its Confession not only individually, but by the unanimous and accordant voice of the witnessing Church of Christ.”

As for those who find the Westminster Confession a harsh or extreme document, or a cold and undevout one—who speak of it as the product of controversialists rather

* *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. i., p. 788. “For its sake,” says Mr. Taylor Innis, “Scotland, long before the revolution of 1688, was willing to forget its own national Confession—that laid by John Knox on the table of the Parliament, 1560.” (*The Andover Review*, July, 1889, p. 1.)

† *The Law of Creeds in Scotland*, p. 480.

than of godly preachers of the Word—we simply cannot understand them. It marks the extreme of Calvinistic development only in the sense that it embodies the cream of Calvinistic thinking. Framed, as Dr. Alexander F. Mitchell so eloquently tells us,* “when the Church was still under the happy influence of a marvellous revival, when the Word of God was felt as a living, quickening, transforming power, and preached not as a tradition, but as the very power and wisdom of God”; and “by men of ripe scholarship and devoted piety, who have remained our models of earnest preaching and our guides in practical godliness, even unto this day”; and primarily for the purpose of vindicating the doctrine of the Church of England as in harmony with the consensus of Reformed Christendom, and therefore with a constant effort to make its decisions unanimous † and to secure moderation and catholicity; ‡ it not only stands to-day as the representative (in Dr. Schaff’s words) of “the most vigorous and yet moderate form of Calvinism,” as (in Dr. Macgregor’s words) “a model of guarded strength in moderation,” but also as a document so filled with vital godliness that its every section seems to have been framed in the consciousness of God’s presence, and no one can feed on it without feeling that he is in the very temple of the Most High. § If men would only study

* *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, etc. Introduction: p. lxxv.

† *Ibid.*, p. xlv.

‡ *Ibid.*, pp. liv., lv., lxxiv.

§ Cf. Dr. Candlish (the elder): “I think it worthy of special notice how our Westminster Standards, sometimes held to consist of hard and dry abstractions, place so much stress on personal union to Christ as the explanation of our being made partakers of the benefits of redemption.” (*The Fatherhood of God*, edition 5, p. 196.) The whole passage, pp. 192–197, will repay perusal in this connection.

the Confession! Take a single example of how recklessly it is not infrequently quoted. In speaking of the interpretation of the Scriptures (I., ix.) it sets aside the patristic and mediæval method of torturing a "multiple sense"—literal and spiritual, allegorical and anagogical—out of each text of Scripture, by the decided assertion that the sense "of *any* Scripture" "is not manifold, but one." On this perfectly obvious and thoroughly scientific statement Mr. Robert Macintosh founds page after page of assault on the Confession, incredibly misinterpreting it to mean that all parts of the Bible teach the same thing! This is just one-quarter of his whole argument to prove the Confession to be obsolete.* The assertions which have become so common of late that the Confession is supralapsarian in the third chapter, teaches by implication the damnation of some that die in infancy in the third section of the tenth chapter, and gives insufficient recognition to the love of God as over against His sovereignty, scarcely differ in kind from this proceeding of Mr. Macintosh's.

III.

EXCLUSIVENESS OF THE CREED.

There is still another attitude which has led to objection in some quarters, during the last year, to the Westminster Standards, without necessarily implying lack of harmony with their doctrine. This is a feeling that the creed is too exclusive, and a desire for Church union and greater catholicity of Church life, based on the undoubted facts that on the one hand the Westminster Standards, while moderately and catholically Calvinistic, are yet exclusively Calvinistic, and on the other, that Christendom is broader than Calvin-

* *The Obsolescence of the Confession of Faith*, pp. 44-55.

ism. This position is fairly represented by the overture presented by Mr. Macdonnell to the Presbytery of Toronto,* which was based primarily on the proposition that "the Church of Christ should be careful not to exclude from the ministry any man whom the Lord of the Church would receive." Mr. Macdonnell illustrated his meaning by pointing to godly men in the Methodist and other churches, admired by us all, and gladly acknowledged to be true ministers of the Gospel, whom, nevertheless, we would not admit as teachers into our hedged and walled portion of the Church. We cannot but think, however, that we should be as loyal to God's truth as charitable to our fellow-men. This position, moreover, appears to us to be founded on a mistaken view of the nature of the Church and of Church unity, as well as on an insufficient realization of the difficulties of minimum Confessions. Its apparent liberality may, after all, prove not to be wholly out of affinity with the illiberal conception which identifies "our" Church with the Church of God, and seeks the fusion of all denominations into one external body on account of difficulty in conceiving of the Church as one amid a multiplicity of forms of organization, creed, and life. The last few years have given birth to many schemes to secure Church unity by some external means, or in some external sense—by inclusion in a common organization, as if unity were attainable "by building a great house around a divided family," or by enforced uniformity in forms of worship, or the like—none of them the product of a truly liberal spirit. We have but to open our eyes to see that the living Church of God is already one in the unity of the Spirit, or awaits, for its full realization, only the spirit of oneness in our hearts. If it were, indeed, true that "our Church" constitutes the

* Reported by *The Toronto Mail* for April 3, 1889.

whole true Church of God, then we should beware of excluding from our pulpits any whom God has called to preach His Word. But if we all who, under many names, hold fast to the one head, are, by common communion with Him, united into one spiritual body, it by no means follows that each member is not required to do its own work in its own appointed way. Every colonel in an army has not an inherent right to command every regiment; and yet the army is one. In a word, the matter so put raises the whole question of the right of denominational existence. If we have a defensible right to be Presbyterians, we have as just a right to our separate creed as to our separate organization.

And who is to determine for us the minimum of truth which Christian men are bound to confess? Is it so easy a matter to distinguish between such essential doctrines as we dare not mar our witness to, and the unessential ones which we may suppress public confession of for the sake of outward unity of organization? Does not the line of division fluctuate from age to age? May not even a secondary question—say such as circumcision—on occasion become vital (Gal. v. 2)? Can we innocently consent permanently to testify in a public manner to no truth except the most fundamental, nay, the most commonly recognized, and therefore the least in need of our testimony? And, finally, if all these difficulties were surmounted, and we had attained a minimum creed, would it not be embarrassing to possess a creed from which we could allow no deviation—deviation from which *ipso facto* (just because it is the *minimum*) excludes from heaven—of the whole of which we must say, “Which faith, unless every one do keep whole and entire, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly”? We should consider well whether this liberal pathway leads not, in the end, to tyranny.

It would not require very extended investigation into the

nature of doctrinal standards to learn that they must needs contain much more than the minimum of faith. The attempt to pare down our testimony to truth to the narrowest limits is similar to the attempt to enter heaven on the minimum of morality. And how could a minimum creed serve as a text-book of doctrine, or protect the people in the exercise of their rights as against the misbelief of a pastor? The necessary contents of a doctrinal standard are determined by a threefold test: (1). It must contain our confession of essential Christianity—all the holy truths that lie at the basis of our Christian religion must find their places in it. (2). It must mark our highest attainments in divine truth: whatever we have come clearly to see to be the truth of God must be unwaveringly testified to in it; after Nice no creed is tolerable which does not bear witness to the Trinity; after Chalcedon, none which does not testify to the holy truth of Christ's person; after Augustine, which does not confess to the sovereignty of God; after the Reformation, which does not clearly proclaim justification by faith. To falter in our witness to God's truth after we have once attained to a clear conception of it, is not a venial fault. (3). It must contain, also, much of very subordinate importance *per se*, which the administrative function of the doctrinal standard renders a necessary part of its contents. For one great use of a doctrinal standard is to determine the fitness of men to exercise, not the office of pastor, but the office of pastor in this or that church. For instance, the Presbyterian people believe that God has commanded the observation of the Lord's Supper "till He come." A Quaker is ineligible to a pastorate in this church, therefore, and our doctrinal standard must be so framed as to protect the people from having their rights invaded in this particular. Again, the Presbyterian people believe that it is not only their privilege, but their duty, to

consecrate their children to Christ in holy baptism. No one, accordingly, who denies the ordinance of infant baptism to them can possibly be permitted to occupy the position of pastor among them; and our doctrinal standard must be so framed as to protect the people from invasion of their rights in this particular. In a word, a creed, in the sense of a doctrinal standard, as distinguished from a liturgical form, must be extensive enough not only to witness to the essential Christianity of a people, but to enable them, on the one hand, to testify through it to the truth of God as they have attained knowledge of it—for testimony to truth against heresy and error from within is only second in importance to testimony to truth against heathenism and error from without—and to protect them, on the other hand, in their Christian rights in the administration of the Gospel. Two propositions may, in fact, be laid down here which are worthy of our most careful meditation before we yield to present clamors for brief and primary creeds. *The people's right to no Christian ordinance is safe which is not guaranteed to them in the standards of the Church.* Without this guarantee, the eligible pastors may hold any views and attain to any tyranny in the matter of the administration of ordinances. *And the Christian knowledge of no people can be permanently maintained at a higher level than the contents of their doctrinal standards.* Continuity and harmony of teaching is only attainable within the limits of the doctrinal standards. With respect to all that is beyond or outside them, successive teachers may and do differ; the people are confused, and grow first doubtful, then agnostic, and then oppositive. If we would have the people pass beyond the first principles of the faith, we must pass just in that proportion beyond them in our Creed—which is not only our official testimony to the truth, and our official text-book of doctrine, but our stand-

ard of teaching to all our pastors. The cry for brief, primary creeds is, therefore, a movement which must be characterized not only as undoctinal, but anti-doctrinal. It is a direct blow at the right of the people to the whole truth of God.

IV.

DOCTRINAL OBJECTIONS.

We must not fail, however, to recognize frankly that, after all these causes of dissatisfaction with the Westminster Standards are eliminated, there remains a residuum—a small residuum—of objections which arise out of doctrinal grounds. There are, no doubt, several kinds of objections to be recognized even here. Some arise merely from the opinion that the truths of the Gospel do not receive the same relative emphasis in the Confession as in the Bible; and these are probably the most frequently urged of all forms of doctrinal objection. Dr. Candlish, in supporting his overture in the Free Church Presbytery of Glasgow, supplies a good example of how they are presented. “The Confession,” he is reported as saying, “did not express, in their scriptural proportions, some aspects of the Gospel, and these were such vital and precious truths as the love of God to the world, His free offer of salvation to all men, and the responsibility of every one who heard this gracious call for accepting or refusing it. It was not meant that these truths were not contained in the Confession. He strongly contended that they were in it, but they were not so prominent in it proportionally to the statement of other truths—those of the sovereignty and almighty power of God’s grace—as they were in the Bible.”* It will be remembered that it is with these points that the Declaratory Acts of the United Presbyterians and the Presby-

* *The Glasgow Herald* for February 12, 1889.

terian Church of Victoria deal. Other objections arise out of real recalcitration from some of the doctrinal statements, or even from some of the doctrines stated in the Confession. A fair example of these is supplied by the overture of the Presbytery of Nassau, praying the American Assembly to revise Chapter III., *Of God's Eternal Decree*; and others would seek a far more thorough, if not more radical, revision. Lastly, some objectors are objectors because they have consciously drifted into a wholly un-Calvinistic, or even anti-Calvinistic, position. A fair example of this attitude is supplied by Mr. Robert Macintosh, who, in his pamphlet on *The Obsolescence of the Westminster Confession of Faith*, constantly speaks of "Calvinism" from the outside, and thinks that the Bible, "but for its occasional language as to election, coincides not with Calvinism, but with evangelical Arminianism."* And other examples could be adduced.

That objectors of all these sorts, even of the most radical, have made their voice heard in the course of the last few months, is surely in no wise strange. When the Confession was framed there were those who did not accept its system of doctrine; and it is no wonder that there are such to-day. If those who are wholly out of sympathy with it are to hold office under it, of course it must be "revised," as to have obtained a like result two hundred years ago, it would need to have been very differently framed. The only peculiarity of the present situation is, that the churches seem now troubled by the objections of this small minority whom we have always with us, and who so confidently demand a revolution of our whole scheme of doctrine for their personal comfort and ease of conscience, that they appear at times almost in danger of getting it. Such a situa-

* *Op. cit.*, p. 50.

tion appears, however, not so much to put the Confession of Faith, as the churches, on trial; and its issue is apt to determine less whether the Westminster doctrines be true than whether the churches which profess them remain faithful. After all, the Church exists for the truth: it is "the pillar and ground of the truth." And although it is the duty of every church, as of every individual, to see to it that she does not profess a faith she does not believe, yet her convictions are not the measure of the truth. Its norm and standard are elsewhere; and a church's convictions are rather the measure of herself than of the truth. It is the duty of every church to believe and profess faith in all that the Bible teaches. And when we speak of revising a creed, the real question is not (as has been often supposed) whether the church still believes the creed, but whether the Bible still teaches it; and the true remedy may therefore be found not in revising the creed, but in recalling the church to the perception and embracing of the whole truth of God as revealed in His word. Woe to every church which formally and deliberately excinds from her public profession, any truth of God that He has revealed for the instruction of His people.

These obvious principles, important enough in themselves, have an especial importance to the American Presbyterian Churches, in which acceptance of the doctrinal standards is not made a condition of church membership. Perhaps, at bottom, we are face to face here, in more or less developed form, with one application of the modern doctrine of the "Christian consciousness." But at all events it has little fitness among us. Presbyterians do not look upon their creed as the expression of what their people believe: but rather as the expression of what they ought to believe. Like the perfect moral standard of life—the divine perfection; this creed strives to represent

the perfect intellectual standard of faith—the divine truth. We do not ask our people to profess faith in all its articles at the outset of their Christian course: we ask them to set their faces toward it—as they set their faces toward sanctification—as the goal of their understanding of divine truth. It is the standard of the teaching they are to receive, not of the knowledge they have already assimilated: it represents not the minimum of knowledge that the Church demands ere she receives a soul into her communion, but the maximum that she expects to train her people to in the prosecution of her work as a teacher sent from God. Some other churches have creeds which they use as the test of fitness for membership in the society of Christ: and it is, perhaps, not altogether strange that some who have come from them to us should have some slight initial difficulty in apprehending our different practice. But it is strange that those born and bred among us should occasionally fall into the same error. It would be a revolution of our whole point of view were the American Presbyterian Church to undertake a revision of the Confession, or to attempt to frame a new and more primary Confession to substitute for it, on the ground that the present Confession is not throughout believed by our people, or that it is too abstruse or difficult to be easily understood by the less instructed and less advanced among them. The Confession is not a popular document. It does not represent the stage of Christian faith attained by our babes in Christ. It is our standard of *teaching*, not of *membership*; and it is addressed to those who, trained in the word of God, present themselves as men learned in the Scriptures to become teachers of others. To them it offers itself as a succinct statement of the teaching of the Word, and as such demands their suffrages. The only legitimate criticism of it will therefore turn on the simple question, whether the doctrine taught in it is the doctrine of the Bible.

It is, of course, easy to say that in all these remarks we have assumed that the Confession does embody the truth of God. This is perfectly true. We are addressing now a body of men all of whom have set their seal to it as "containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures": and it is no violent assumption that they hold fast their profession, until they give us notice to the contrary. In such circumstances it is surely within the mark to say that revision of the doctrine of the Confession is for us a question of our own faithfulness as much as it is of its truth. If its doctrines are not true, in God's name let it be shown out of the Scriptures, that we may all be saved from the confession of a lie. But until that is done (and as yet it has not been done, though generations of opponents from without have essayed it with quite as much learning and force as are now embarked in the effort from within), let not those who believe them to be the truth of God, as revealed in His Word, be misled into revising them on any such plea as that the Creed ought to be conformed to the living faith of the Church. If the Creed be conformed to the truth of God, that is a better thing. In such case (and we believe this to be such a case) the living faith of the Church needs rather to be conformed to the Creed.

V.

CONFESSIONAL SUBSCRIPTION AND
REVISION.*

THE chief reason why I am personally opposed to revision of the Confession of Faith is because I believe its doctrine to be the truth of God, and because I believe its forms of statement of that doctrine to be at once exact and catholic—broad enough to include all soundly Calvinistic thinking, and precise enough to exclude all tampering with the Calvinistic truth. I am confirmed in my conviction that the Confession clothes the true doctrine in admirably chosen language by the straits and inconsistencies to which those are driven who are trying to point out passages in it which need revision. I am sure it is not the Confession that is at fault, for example, when men praise the first section of the third chapter, and then cry out against the third section. This is but denying in detail what is affirmed in the mass. If it be indeed true that God has “freely and unchangeably” ordained “whatsoever comes to pass,” then we can be offended by the assertion that He has predestinated some men and angels unto everlasting life, and foreordained others to everlasting death, only if we are prepared to deny that “it comes to pass” that some go to everlasting life and some to everlasting death. The Confession brings to admirable expression the system of doctrine which I find delivered in the Word of God. And my own personal

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argument against revision, satisfactory to myself—and I trust I do not stand anything like alone among the thousands of Israel in this—is that the Confession does not need revision.

Nevertheless, when it fell to my lot to set forth a statement of reasons why revision is not called for,* I did not confine myself to this one reason. There are other reasons equally valid; and I stated some of them, too. One of these is, that as office-bearers in the Presbyterian Church, we do not accept the Confession for its *ipsissima verba*, but only for its “system of doctrine”; and, therefore, so long as we cordially hold to its system of doctrine, we really have no stringent reason for revising it, even though we may fancy ourselves able to improve upon its forms of statement. This is a perfectly valid argument; and it has been proved to be worth stating by the circumstance that the majority of those who have advocated revision have been careful to say that they are not dissatisfied with the system of doctrine, or, indeed, with any one doctrine of the Confession, but are only desirous of changing some of its forms of statement. Now certainly it is worth while saying to these brethren that they have no grievance, that they have not accepted the Confession for more than the system of doctrine, and that seeing that they are not asked to assert that its forms of statement are absolutely perfect and incapable of improvement, they ought to think twice, or even thrice, before they enter into the unsettling path of revision, without prospect, or indeed possibility, of at all bettering their relation to it. I believe this to be, indeed, an absolutely unanswerable argument; one which takes away all color of real necessity for any of the revisions proposed by men who are sound in the faith.

* For the text of these reasons, see above, p. 39.

I find, however, that this argument of mine has been the occasion of some misunderstanding which seems to need correcting. On the one hand, it has been said that I am favoring a lax administration of our formula of acceptance. On the other, that I have represented our formula as itself a lax form of subscription. A word or two on both these points need be said.

1. In the first place, I am certainly not in favor of a lax administration of any formula. I feel bound to say frankly that I cannot help believing that a lax administration of our formula would be a demoralizing step. I cannot think it consistent with essential honesty to accept a creed, or to continue to live under a creed which we have accepted, for system of doctrine—the system of doctrine of which we do not believe. For a Church to impose a formula which she does not intend to be taken in its strictest sense and to require to be lived up to, it seems to me, would be dishonest in her, and would be a betrayal of her trust as the pillar and ground of the truth. And for an individual to accept it when it did not express his hearty conviction, would be dishonest in him. No plea of the *animus imponendi* can relieve the individual conscience of its responsibility in making its own professions. Whatever else we do, let us not sap the very springs of our honor and credit. Let all creeds perish ere we consent to profess what we do not believe.

2. In the second place, I am certainly not in favor of relaxing our present formula. There would not, of course, attach any dishonesty to the use of a laxer formula. But the adoption of such an one would certainly imperil the continued empire of sound doctrine among us. We all know what has happened in the Church of Holland since the formula, by which its hereditary Reformed Creed was accepted, was changed from asserting that they received it

because it is Scriptural, to asserting that they receive it *in so far* as it is Scriptural. A relaxing of the formula beyond such limits as secure strict acceptance of the Creed in its essential meaning as Scriptural and true, is simply breaking down all barriers and demitting the whole function of the Church as guardian of the truth.

3. It may easily be inferred from what I have just said that I do not think our present formula a lax one. It is a liberal one; as liberal as it ought to be; as liberal as it is safe to be; as liberal as is consistent with the Church's witness to and guardianship over the truth of God. But it is in no sense a lax formula. It is, on the contrary, a binding formula—a strict formula—in the use of which no man can honestly accept our Confession of Faith and not be a sound Calvinist. And I need not say that this is just what I think it ought to be.

4. But I think it very important that we should not allow our minds to be confused as to what it is to which this strict formula so strictly binds us. What this is, is to be settled not by our preferences, but by its own terms. What the ordainee is required "sincerely to receive and adopt" is "the Confession of Faith of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures" (Form of Government, xv.). This is not the same as requiring him to receive the Confession of Faith in its *ipsissima verba*, or in all its forms of statement. That would scarcely be a liberal formula. Nor is it the same as merely requiring the reception of the Confession for *substance* of doctrine. That would not be a safe formula. What is "nominated in the bond" is "*system of doctrine*"; and that is historically what has always been understood by it. As such, it is both a liberal and a safe formula. Liberal, because it does not bind to the mere letter; safe, because it strictly holds the ordainee to the system of doc-

trine and to every doctrine that enters as a constituent part into that system. No one can sign this formula who is not a strict Calvinist; no one who denies any one of the doctrines which enter into the structure of the Calvinistic system as taught in the Confession of Faith. And if he thinks he can, the Church courts must teach him better, as indeed so may the civil courts. But, on the other hand, no Calvinist who has accepted the Creed in the use of this formula, can possibly be disturbed by what he deems infelicities of the language or of the forms of statement in which the system of doctrine is stated. He has not signed it for "forms of statement," nor for "mode of arrangement," nor for "organizing principle," but specifically for "system of doctrine." It is a safe formula, because it binds strictly to the whole doctrinal system of the Confession, and to all and every one of the doctrines entering as essential constituent parts into that system. It is liberal, because it allows for all sorts of variation in preferred ways of stating the system, consistent with preserving the system intact. It, therefore, allows all the liberty consistent with the preservation of the whole truth, and thus evinces itself as the ideal formula.

5. I am aware that some express themselves sometimes as if they thought "system of doctrine" a rather evanescent thing, not to be identified apart from the words and forms of statement and modes of arrangement by which it is brought to expression. But surely this is not thoughtfully said. We all know what Calvinism is—what Arminianism is—what Pelagianism is—apart from any one statement of any of them. If any one asked me to give him a work teaching "the Calvinistic system," my only embarrassment would be to determine *which* work to give him. I might take Dr. Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology* in one hand, Dr. Shedd's *Dogmatic Theology* in the other, Dr. Dabney's *Syllabus* under one arm, and Dr. Henry B. Smith's *System*

under the other, and truly say, Take your choice! What! the same system amid so much diversity? Undoubtedly. Perhaps no single sentence would be found expressed identically the same words in any two of these works; certainly there are great variations to be found in them in forms of statement, even in conception, even (within limits) in doctrine itself. But the system abides in all. And it so abides in all as to be just as easily identifiable and just as strict a conception, as the special mode of statement of any one of the works separately. Why, one might as well say that he has no clear conception of a horse apart from one special horse, as that he has no strict conception of "the system of doctrine" apart from any one expression of it. No, the conception of the "system" is as clear as that of the *ipsissima verba*; and therefore subscription for system of doctrine is *strict* subscription. But it is also liberal subscription, which subscription to the *ipsissima verba* would not be.

All this being so, is it not a fair argument against revision that, if we still remain Calvinists, there is no call for revision of our Confession in order to relieve the consciences of our office-bearers? There may be other reasons why we *desire* revision—though good and sufficient reasons have not been published to the world as yet; but since we sign only for system of doctrine, there cannot be any stringent necessity for revision arising out of wounded consciences, *provided* those consciences be Calvinistic, and heartily believe the system of doctrine which lies expressed in our Confession.