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The Evangelical Quarterly

OCTOBER 15TH, 1943.

THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH, 1643¹

Leviticus xxvi; Titus ii.

“Sound doctrine . . . faith . . . speech” (Tit. ii. 1, 2, 8).

WHEN our Lord referred us to the Scriptures He meant the O.T. I do not suppose many of you have read Leviticus. Yet we cannot ride roughshod even over Leviticus. Amid all the details of outmoded, superseded sacrificial regulations there are wonderful glimpses of the kind of thing that Jesus Christ proclaims to us with authority. To-day let us recollect that the LORD God always speaks with authority. Every book of Moses tells the tale of Israel's laxness visited with punishment, and yet of the wonderful divine intervention on behalf of an obedient Israel. In Leviticus xxvi God's people are shown how their fidelity in this life shall bring them to the promised land. But He also reveals the reward of insincerity and disobedience towards Himself. To Him the whole story is written plain; defeat, subjection, imprisonment in their own iniquities and in those of their fathers; pining away they shall confess their sins and their walking contrary to Him. And of course God also in His anger walked contrary to them. God is never passive towards His sinning people; He cannot away with iniquity; He will walk contrary to them, His hand guiding their enemies to victory. And note the words: “If then their uncircumcised heart be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity; then will I remember my covenant with Jacob; and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land” (vv. 41f.). God will not reject His people's return to Him in

¹The Confession of Faith, Agreed upon by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster; Examined and approved, *Anno* 1647, by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland; and ratified by Acts of Parliament 1649 and 1690.

their low estate of captivity. For their sakes He will remember the covenant of their ancestors, "whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD" (v. 45). Repent and receive again the light of God's presence even in the land of captivity. But never again forget that the LORD God *will* be obeyed and He is always supreme. He is the LORD.

Living Christian faith is only alive when it has come to understand, with however glad and inspired a submission, that God is supreme, and demands the implicit, meticulous obedience of His servants to all His commandments. The question is not: What would *I* like to do to honour God? but: What doth the LORD require of me? And there is no question about it, what God wants. He wants us into His covenant of grace, into the covenant under which He can be kind to us and do us good—otherwise we must take the consequences of our folly; as the Israelites obeying God escaped from Egypt: as, on the contrary, disobeying God they were barred from Canaan and driven into the wilderness forty years. The repentant God will visit even in captivity. But men must learn to obey, *or* take the consequences.

Jesus Christ came in the fulness of time to tell a rebellious world to repent, to announce that He was come to bear our iniquities, if we did repent, and to make us so strong in His Spirit that we should be able to obey Him in spite of all that antichrist might do. On Christ's conditions implicit obedience to Christ is *demand*ed. "Take my *yoke* upon you." It is easy and light, compared with the burden of unforgiven sin. But it must be carried—we must obey, even in Christ. The alternative is eternal death.

Scripture was bequeathed to us on purpose that from it we might know the truth which liberates us from the bondage of sin. But Scripture in an ultimate sense is written by the finger of God. It can only be understood, in the Christian sense, if Christ sends us the Comforter to reveal the truth. We cannot discover saving truth by our own light. Yet without the truth we are not saved.

Church history is the story of the way the perversion of revealed truth has been fought down the ages to the present day. Our creeds were the conclusions of stormy ecclesiastical conventions, summoned to decide upon the truth as between the

claims of rival factions. The creeds have stood as fundamental positions in doctrine from the time of their formulation until to-day. Every heresy rebutted credally crops up again periodically, when the Church is lackadaisical or wants to make faith easy in a human way. But heresy is also what might be called invincible natural ignorance, which can only be overcome by return to Christ and to knowledge of Him as our Saviour. The creeds will stand, and so will those who stand by them. They represent fundamental truths about God, contradictions of which have no standing.

But of course the creeds contain but a modicum of the truth about what God has done to save sinners. Creeds are based upon Holy Scripture; but there is much more in Scripture than what the creeds contain. The work of the doctors of a confessing Church is to elucidate the substantial doctrines of the faith, all of them that are revealed in Scripture. When even a divine institution like the Church gets into men's hands and the men forget the origin of the institution, defects creep in, will-worship grows dominant, the institution tends to drift into a private concern remote from its original purpose. Then it becomes the duty of Christians to hark back to the mother truths, back to the Bible, back to Christ Himself. Ordinances of men must give way to the revealed ordinances of God, if the Spirit is bountifully shed abroad. Such was the task which confronted the seriously-Christian world at the time of the Reformation, owing to the decay and worldliness of Church administrators in high places, who were being largely imitated down all the steps of the hierarchy. Roman Catholicism had grown corrupt and the struggle was to overthrow the corruption and restore what we may call Bible truth, as opposed to all that was spurious and man-made.

I am not to give any history of the process; what I want to refer to is the drawing up of the Westminster Confession in 1643, and of the two Catechisms based on it a few years later. The main object of my words is to remind you that this Confession is, after Scripture and the Creeds, the chief subordinate standard of the Church of Scotland. When ministers and elders subscribe to the substantial doctrines of the Christian faith, they ought to mean in conscience the Westminster Confession. Opinions differ as to the value of the different Reformed Confessions. One thinks of the Heidelberg, or the Dutch, the Swiss,

the French Reformed Confessions. No Confession is immaculate. All men are fallible. Reference is always back to Scripture, and the indispensable condition of such reference back is the Holy Spirit. But this reference back coupled with the Spirit's aid gives us reliability.

Even the Westminster Confession is not perfect. But it is a noble document to which I am proud to subscribe. The Westminster is not the only Confession the Church of Scotland has had. There were at least two Scots Confessions. But the Westminster is the reigning one. Some outside theologians, like the famous Karl Barth, prefer e.g. the Scots Confession of 1560, at least in bits. But the Westminster is the one which we accept officially. The only awkward thing about it, as far as concerns our own conceit of ourselves, is that *we* did not draw it up. The Reformed divines of England drew it up and it is the noblest jewel in their theological crown, almost the only one. But for the help of these divines Scotland would have lacked a sound basis for its Reform. But Scotland had a few assessors at the Assembly. Some of them made—were allowed to make—significant contributions at the Assembly's request, and when they took the document home to Scotland the General Assembly at once homologated it and adopted it as their own Confession. But in England, alas, vested clericalism and the Court overthrew the combined efforts of the laity and Parliament. The Assembly divines passed over into dissent and the Thirty-nine Articles [of 1571] remained the Confession of the Church of England.

If we took the story of any parallel Reformed Confessions, we would find that they too were the fruit of a dissent from Romanism based upon a new outflow of the Holy Spirit, with its corollary on the human side of a stronger determination to know the truth as God reveals it in Scripture. Behind the Reformation lay the rock-like conviction that God must be obeyed, and that the rules of obedience were to be discovered by God's people in the Holy Book. God *must* be obeyed. Let Christians therefore seek to know His will so far as He makes it known. Let it be their glory to keep the divine commandments *and teach them to their children*, as in the old days of Israel. They must, in the words of St. Paul to Titus in Crete, have "sound doctrine", "sound faith", and so "sound speech".

How does the Church stand in this regard to-day? I see, in regard to SOUND DOCTRINE, a convinced trend in the direction of a greater sense of the oneness of the Body in Christ, less blatancy in the contempt hurled at "Calvinism", of which most who use the name are supremely ignorant. There is a much more fundamental note in the Christian quest, *even since this war*. Men are really asking what they must do to be *saved*. Salvation has fruits in morality; but it transcends it utterly and strips it of priggish self-righteousness.

In regard to SOUND FAITH, I find that men are no longer satisfied with being told to be good. They are suspecting that Christ still works miracles of regeneration, and they are seeking such of the Christ Himself. They want the old assurance of regeneration, some convincing sign that *without their co-operation at all* they have been justified through Christ by the Judge of all the earth, and so can expect to see the Christian life grow upon them, can actually find that the desire to please God can mount up into a consuming fire of love to God. If a man really loves God, then he can love his neighbour: not otherwise. In his new orientation as a sinner reprieved for ever, he sees his neighbour's distress as only the regenerate can see it. He wants to be certain of conveying something of the miracle that has made himself a new creature. He must avoid any suggestion of *tricking* men into the heavenly society. He must speak the *truth* in soberness of revealed fact.

Then he is thirled to SOUND SPEECH in the matter of his service of his neighbour. To be sound in his speech he must know his Bible, he must understand something of his Church's Confession, he must never reject God's will because he happens not to like it. He must be ready to revise any old religious views, to measure them by the canon revealed, i.e. Holy Scripture. In this triple search for soundness, the Holy Spirit helpeth our infirmities. Prayer, Preaching, Scripture, Sacraments and Works of mercy: these are not spasmodic affectations, but the very essence of giving glory to the Most High God, *if*—only *if*!—a man is born again of water and the Spirit.

The dwellers on the fringe of faith, the modernists, the pseudo-scientists, used to tell us that our faith is something that develops, in which progress can be detected as a steady rise in ethical values. Have they ever read their newspapers? Is Hitler a product of progress? Let us remind ourselves that Jesus

Christ, at any rate, is the Same yesterday and to-day and forever. God speaks, and it is done. God commands, and He is not mocked. Our own Church's Confession presents us with sound salvation: the unchangeable Christ, His call, His justification, His abundant grace, His victorious faith given us to overcome the world therewith, the power of it that works in us, body, soul and spirit, really making us new, proof of its own value by the zest it gives to life. It was these zestful, *new* men who drafted Confessions and framed catechisms and drove men to God with knowledge of His will, wherein they learned to rejoice as militants.

God has a very definite will for us. It is revealed in Jesus Christ, it is the only escape from hell and it means heaven. Is it not worth sweat and blood to know, not the man Jesus, but the Lord Christ, not a painful morality, but the power of a God-inspired living? You either have it, or you have it not. It is like the treasure which a man found in a field, and for joy he went and sold all he had and bought that field. That is Christ's Kingdom, the Church both militant and triumphant. Be sound in doctrine and faith and speech before you dare to cut loose from Christ or to criticise His claims upon you. Go back to your Bible; go back to your Catechism as well. Pray for the one thing needful, penitence and a changed, a transformed life. Then you may begin to understand why your ancestors fought and died for their Confession. God make us all willing and ready to suffer if need be, to run our race with patience, looking with knowledge, faith and power unto the Author and Perfecter of our faith, usable to win others.

"In thy doctrine shew uncorruptness, gravity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of us." Believe, know the belief, impart the belief. So strengthen, increase, expand the Church of Jesus Christ.¹

G. T. THOMSON.

New College, Edinburgh.

¹ Preached in St. Stephen's Church, Edinburgh, 4th July, 1943.