

ARTICLE VIII.

SCRIPTURE OR LOGIC—WHICH?

BY A PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER.

THE whole church of Christ has an interest in the subject which is under discussion in the Presbyterian Church—that of making some changes in the Confession of Faith; for the Westminster Confession is not the exclusive property of the Presbyterian Church, and the system of doctrine taught therein exerts a mighty influence far beyond the limits of that church. Without a doubt, evangelical Christians generally were gratified, when the answer “yes” was returned by nearly two-thirds of two hundred and eleven presbyteries to the question, “Do you desire a revision of the Confession of Faith?” And everybody was well pleased with the unanimity of the General Assembly in responding favorably to that vote by the appointment of a committee of twenty-five ministers and elders, to formulate such alterations and amendments to the Confession of Faith as in their judgment might be desirable. But perhaps not all thoughtful persons were so well pleased with the injunction added by the Assembly, “This Committee on Revision are hereby instructed that they shall not propose any alterations or amendments that will in any way impair the integrity of the Calvinistic system of doctrine taught in the Confession of Faith.”

sense of an *orderly arrangement*. But if no truths are to be admitted into the Confession but those which are logically connected, that is, reconcilable with each other by human reason, the Confession must necessarily be unscriptural. For all Christians, including the strictest Calvinists, admit that the Scriptures contain statements which are not logically connected, and which cannot be fully harmonized, by any light we have at present.

A perfectly logical system of theology is, therefore, an impossibility. Calvinistic writers, when treating of the decrees of God, as related to the freedom of man, labor to show the utter futility of human logic, when applied to divine things, and the necessity we are under of believing statements which are by us irreconcilable with each other, if each is reasonable in itself, and sustained by Scripture. But if a logical system is, in the nature of things, impossible; and if the system taught in the old Confession is not logical throughout, why should the Presbyterian General Assembly enjoin it upon the Committee on Revision not to impair in any way the integrity of the system taught in the Confession?

Coming from God, and containing a revelation of truth about infinite and eternal realities, intended for the apprehension of finite creatures, the Scriptures do not reveal all truth. That would not be possible. We have partial revelations, glimpses of glorious realities, hints, and suggestions, which are exceedingly helpful and comforting to thoughtful believers. Of course, this statement does not apply to historical facts or moral precepts, but to truths pertaining to the infinite Creator and his thoughts and relations. We

must do as the Westminster divines so wisely did, in framing the first section of the now famous third chapter. "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established." There is no logical connection between the two statements there made; no rational reconciliation of them. For once logic was sacrificed to truth. And as they did in that one instance, they might have done in many others, with great advantage to the cause of truth. There ought to have been a good many "yet so's" in a theological document as long as the Confession of Faith. But our Westminster fathers, having made that one concession to scriptural truth, appear to have deemed it necessary to follow logic from that point to the end of the system. Hence we find no reference to the all-important truths, that God has a compassionate interest in all men as guilty sinners; that it was love to a guilty world that led him to send his Son to save all who would receive him, and give up their sins; or that he desires that the glad tidings of salvation should be made known to every intelligent creature in the world. Nor is there any intimation that Christ was a propitiation for the sins of the whole world, or that God has no pleasure in the death of any, but desires that all should come to repentance. Evidently the Westminster divines could not reconcile any such statements as these logically with the doctrines of election and the atonement as they understood these. And so those practically important and glorious truths were all ignored. And to this hour many who receive the system taught in the Confession as a logical one, and therefore the only true, the only possible one, are opposed to the insertion of any such statements. How often have men, in their zeal for logic, explained God's loving

the world, as meaning *the world of the elect*, and Christ's being a propitiation for the sins of the whole world, as meaning *the whole world of the elect!* Indeed, during the late discussions, some good men were candid enough to say, that in their opinion the Confession is exactly right in its position, that God's compassion and love must be confined to the elect alone, and that for all the rest of mankind he has nothing but wrath.

Truth is like God. It is not possible for us to take it all in. All our views of it are necessarily finite and partial. Take almost any great and influential truth, and if you follow it logically, in all its possible applications, it becomes impracticable, dangerous, absurd. One truth must limit and modify another. The life of humanity is developed and improved in the effort to realize in outward action ideas or principles which are intellectually conceived. "All the great movements of mankind are movements of thought in course of evolution and application to the affairs of life." In making this application of great truths occurs the danger of carrying principles too far. The necessity and importance of "checks and balances" is well understood. We are all acquainted with the meaning of "a reaction from extremes."

The Holy Scriptures are the one inexhaustible fountain of suggestive and stirring thought, of ideas and principles which have led to the movements and revolutions and advances of mankind.

The idea of liberty, of the right of every individual in human society to enjoy life, liberty, and happiness (unless it has been forfeited by crime), is a most important and glorious one. The period when Luther discovered it in the Bible became one of the most interesting and eventful in the world's history. The development and application of it

tre, until it becomes incompatible with the existence of civil government and law, and destructive to all true liberty. It runs to anarchy. It must necessarily be checked and limited by the truth, that God has ordained society or the nation with civil government and law to protect society, and to guard the rights of each individual in the State.

So the truth that God has ordained civil government is a vastly important and influential one. But when it is adopted, and applied logically, without being modified by the correlative truth that every individual citizen has God-given rights which must be respected, it begets tyranny and oppression.

In the *Princeton Review*, for October, 1859, may be found an admirable article, entitled, "A Nation's Right to Worship God," which is devoted to an exposition of this principle, and an application of it to the then existing circumstances of our country. The history of the last thirty years and the present ominous trend of things show the absolute correctness of the principle, and the keenness of the gifted writer's philosophic insight.

The truth that God created all things needs, perhaps, to be modified by what many are quite sure is the truth, that things have very gradually, in the lapse of ages, assumed their present forms. But evolution, if it be true, needs to be limited by the truth concerning the all-wise God's creative power, or it will land its votaries in Egyptian darkness.

The non-recognition of this important principle accounts for the bitter controversies which have in the past agitated and divided the Christian world. In the mind of one who recognizes it, many perplexing questions are soon settled. The Holy Scriptures, which have so long been charged with containing many contradictions, become to him luminous, harmonious, glorious. The settlement of religious controversies and the coming together of the disciples of Christ become only a question of time. He becomes aware, at

the same time, of the fatal defect in the time-honored and influential Westminster documents.

The truth that God is a sovereign, doing according to his will in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth, is a great first principle, a necessary truth. Much is made of it in the Bible, as also of the fact that he knows the end from the beginning, that nothing occurs by chance, that nothing can take him by surprise, that the past and the future are alike present to his omniscient mind, and that men are dependent on him, and not he on them. But it is easy to run this mighty truth concerning the divine supremacy, logically, to a dangerous extreme, until it becomes demoralizing and absurd. It needs to be limited by the correlative truth, that man is a free-agent, and responsible to God for all his doings.

In like manner, that man is free in his volitions and choices, and therefore responsible to God, is a foundation truth in religion and morals. Yet, if it is followed out logically as far as it is capable of being applied, it becomes entirely incompatible with the truth that God is a sovereign, inconsistent with many statements in Scripture, and a most dangerous principle, morally and religiously. It must be checked by the truth concerning God's sovereignty.

The Bible contains many illustrations of what has been said. That is what makes it the most paradoxical of books. It utters a truth without stopping to give the correlative truth which limits it and forbids its extreme application. It does not hesitate to say, in one place, that there is not a

place, the Scripture says, that the Lord hath made all things for himself; yea, even the wicked for the day of evil. In another, we have the Lord God of Israel himself lamenting the suicidal folly of sinners, and declaring, "As I live, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn ye, turn ye, from your evil ways, for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" It is often at their peril, then, that men take one statement in Scripture, and view all other statements from the standpoint of that one, and apply it logically as far as it is capable of being carried.

It would be easy to view all things from the standpoint of man's freedom, and become a Pelagian, or at least an Arminian. It would be just as easy to view all things from the standpoint of the divine sovereignty, and become a fatalist, or at least a Calvinist.

Hence the immense mischief which will follow, if you form your logical system of theology first, and then search the Bible for isolated texts to support it, must be evident. Need we be surprised that the committee appointed by the Presbyterian Assembly, two or three years ago, to search the Bible for texts to prove all the propositions in the Confession and Catechisms, came back, after a year's work, and asked for an extension of time and an increase of their number?

To insert in the Confession of Faith those important portions of revealed truth which the Westminster divines ignored will not make the system taught in it any more illogical than it is; for the one broken link in the third chapter destroys the system as a truly logical one.

But the Confession, having been framed after a particular fashion, and for a specific purpose—the conservation of an alleged logical system of theology, we do not see how it can readily be altered, so as to be a symmetrical exhibition of Bible truth. A new Confession, ignoring a logical sys-

tem, would be far better, in every way, and for many reasons.

1. The narrow, rationalistic system which the Westminster divines bequeathed to us has perplexed and bewildered innumerable honest souls, and has kept the Protestant world in a state of controversy and division ever since it was framed; to say nothing of the disputes and divisions caused by the same attempt to reduce divinely revealed truths to a logical system, from the time of Augustine.

2. The old system is not scriptural, and cannot possibly be reconciled with Scripture, from the nature of the truths revealed and the way in which they are revealed.

3. Even if the committee on proof-texts were able to find, somewhere in the Bible, some passage to support each proposition in the system—that would amount to nothing. For does not every one know that you can prove almost anything, "out of the Bible," by dealing with it in that way?

4. Large portions of Scripture become uninteresting and unedifying to those who come fully under the influence of *the system*. Their favorite passages are those which are believed to sustain the system. Other Scriptures are apt to be lightly esteemed. There are revealed truths waiting to burst upon the Christian world with mighty awakening power; such as, the truth about the Holy Spirit as promised to the disciples of Christ; the sanctification of believers; Christian brotherhood and mutual helpfulness, as taught in Acts ii. and iv., and in 1 John iii. 17; and all the prophecies and intimations of the coming of the kingdom of God. But the parts of Scripture which teach these things have very little force with many good men, presumably because they do not constitute any part of that system of doctrine which has been received and adopted as the essential truth revealed in Scripture.

5. When the Scriptures are read with a mind unbiassed by any preconceived theory or ready-made system, there is to a believer a perpetual freshness, life, and power in their

truths and precepts, promises and prophecies; and he comes to the word with an ever-renewed interest and delight. How different this from looking through the Bible for chapters or verses to support the system!

6. A Christian who uses his Bible for that purpose makes but little progress. When he has mastered the system and the proof-texts, he is considered an accomplished theologian. All else in Scripture is of comparatively little interest to him: much of it is inexplicable; some of it, irrelevant and out of place, because it does not agree with the system.

7. The old system ought to give place to a scriptural Confession, for the sake of the older ministers. Having had more experience, and gained the practical wisdom acquired only by experience, they ought to be the most valuable ministers in the church. But elderly ministers are slighted and rejected, and young men eagerly sought after. This is an anomaly, of course. It is not so in any other sphere of life. In other professions, experience and wisdom count for much, and are highly prized. It is not so in the case of ministers. And this strange and sad state of things cannot be accounted for, unless it be owing to the fact that so many of the Christian people of to-day are not hampered by the old system in their Bible-study, and on that account they find themselves often in advance of their ministers, in an understanding of the nature and design of Christianity. They somehow expect that the young men, enjoying the light of the scholarship of this day, and having caught its earnest practical evangelism, will be less narrow and impractical than the fathers, who, in so many cases, are walking in the old ruts, and are hampered by the old shackles. But their hopes in regard to the young men, *moulded and trained* in some of the seminaries, are not always realized.

8. It is a terrible evil, that when a Christian man, after a great struggle, brings himself to assent to the hard and incredible system, as the very sum and substance of revealed

truth, he is then apt to substitute faith in the system, and devotion to it and to its defence, in the place of personal devotion to Christ and earnest work for the salvation of souls and for the betterment of human society.

9. If we would know why many good men give the cold shoulder to moral reforms, and persistently take a despondent view of the world's future, we may find a principal reason in the strong hold which the system has upon them. If there are doctors of divinity who are opposed to the suppression of the liquor-traffic and houses of prostitution, on the ground that the removing of temptations would be contrary to the will of God, we may find a solution of this tremendous anomaly in the fact, that some understand *the system* as teaching that God is not under any moral obligations to do right. His will is law, and that is the end of it. To worship a God of immoral or even of questionable character, must have a bad effect on the worshipper. We naturally and inevitably conform to our ideals.

10. Precise definitions in matters of religion are in many cases merely limitations of the illimitable, and are therefore apt to be erroneous and misleading; and philosophical explanations mixed up with statements of scriptural doctrine may be questionable, and will almost to a certainty lead to disputes and divisions.

11. A narrow and harsh system being derogatory to the moral character of God, and a denial of the worth and dignity of human nature, under its influence the human mind is apt to lose its vital power, and to tend towards imbecility. If some who hold the system very firmly are not thus affected in the least, it may be for the reason that it is possible for men to give assent to a system of doctrine, and to be wonderfully expert in defending it, without yielding

other churches of Christendom who have been caught in the same snare will be liberated also. And as it was in the days of the sixteenth-century Reformation, when the human intellect was set free from the bondage of the papal system, many minds exhibited extraordinary vigor in the search for truth and in the conflict with error and tyranny, so the liberation of multitudes of honest souls from this bondage to a supposed logical system will bring into exercise an amount of intellectual vigor and moral strength such as has not been seen among men since the days of Luther and Calvin. Let so vast a number of noble Christian souls be freed from the false conservatism engendered by a false system, and every moral reform for which suffering humanity is now crying out so bitterly, will be wonderfully quickened and rapidly consummated.

For such reasons we very much prefer a *new* Confession of the Christian Faith—one based upon Holy Scripture, and not on human logic; and we cannot but regard the unexpected and spontaneous effort of the Presbyterian Church, to “alter” the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Confession, as by far the most important movement of the nineteenth century.

What, then, will be the practical gain of discarding the old system, by which Christendom has been largely ruled and moulded since Augustine? Much every way.

1. The church will be planted on a truly scriptural foundation. As things now are, it is on the system—a man-made work—rather than on the word of God, that the church is relying. An iron-bound system like that of the Westminster divines—while it may intend to honor the Scriptures—dishonors them, for it supplants them.

2. Men will have a better opinion of God. This will be an incalculable gain. For one thing, they will have more self-respect. If the people are taught that God is an arbitrary and incomprehensible tyrant, and that they themselves are fools or fiends, the result cannot be good.

3. When Christians are once free from the shackles and oppressive influence of the system, and when they begin to look at things in the light of Holy Scripture and of facts, they will not only breathe much more freely, and have brighter hopes for the world's future; but they will give themselves to the work to which they are called in the world. According to the system, sin is the most natural, the most common, and the most unavoidable thing in the world; whereas, according to the word of God, it is the most hateful, horrible, and deadly. And, so far from being necessary, full provision for its utter destruction has been made in the sufferings and intercessions of the Lord Jesus, the mighty work of the Holy Spirit, and the exertions of penitent and believing souls. The unbiassed believer, as soon as he is brought into the light and freedom of God's truth, joyfully recognizes all this. And he at once enters heartily and hopefully into God's merciful purpose and plan. Seeing himself described as a "co-worker with God," he directs all his energies to the subduing of sin, whether in himself or in others. Undoubtedly the indifference and inaction of Christians, in view of the ravages of sin and the perishing condition of multitudes around them, is not the result of wickedness in their hearts, so much as of their waiting for God to do something; either to remove these evils himself, or else move *them* to do it. But when they come to see that God does not propose to do what he has wisely and graciously left for men to do, and commanded them to do; and that, if the sins and crimes which pollute our civilization and disgrace our Christianity are to be removed, Christians must unite their efforts, trusting in God, and re-

not influenced by a restless spirit or a mere love of change; least of all, by a desire to see Christians adapt their doctrines to what is called "the spirit of the age." He is old-fashioned in his views and ways; is favorable to the use of creeds, if scriptural, and not too long and minute; to catechisms, if evangelical and practical; and he hopes that nothing in the world will induce the Presbyterians to give up their belief in the Abrahamic or family covenant, as still in force. He would rejoice exceedingly, if the period of transition, which under the circumstances is an absolute necessity, were past and gone, and all Christians were settled down to earnest and abundant work for the glory of the Lord Jesus, and the salvation of the perishing. He has written as he has done, because he so thoroughly believes that the system which attributes to God a questionable character, has necessarily a bad moral effect on many of those who adopt it, and because he has learned from history that the prevalence of this system in its strictness has ever been followed, sooner or later, by a fearful reaction to Unitarianism or infidelity. It is his fervent prayer, therefore, that God may give his Holy Spirit to the Presbyterian people at this critical time, and that, under the influence of divine light and love, they may discard the old and baneful system, and adopt a new and briefer Confession of Faith—one which will be truly scriptural, thoroughly evangelical, and a fair reflection throughout of the sublime truth concerning the world's redemption, and the coming kingdom of the world's Redeemer.