

Correspondence.

The Westminster Confession.

Editor BRITISH AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN.

Sir,—As you have recently given insertion to letters from correspondents who appear to me to give an altogether undue place and importance to the Westminster Confession of Faith, I trust you will kindly allow a few words of calm and moderate protest, on behalf of the very many who regard as a serious evil the rigidity with which this confession has been imposed upon our Church. I do not ask this privilege with any desire of provoking controversy, yet it is a privilege which I should not have asked at all, had not the very strong expressions on one side, which have appeared in your columns, made it a matter of necessity that others should express their equally strong and equally conscientious convictions on the other.

And first I must say that some of your correspondents, in their enthusiastic zeal for the "confession," appear to me to forget that they are giving it a place due only to that inspired standard of truth, which, as our Shorter Catechism teaches us, is "the only rule" direct us how we may glorify and enjoy "God—the only authoritative teacher as to "what we are to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man." When I see the terms in which some of your correspondents refer to the "Confession" as the foundation and only safeguard of our Church from lukewarmness and laxity, I am inclined to ask—What has become of the Word of God? Have we indeed made it of non effect through our traditions? Has that "rock" failed us on which Christ promised to found His Church? Is the living fountain of "the law and the testimony" in any way shut up to us that we should deem it of so much importance to draw it—to some extent tinged and altered through human channels? Practically it is not so, for happily, it is the Bible and not the Confession to which our ministers appeal when proving what they teach. It was "razo me the Bible," not the "Confession," that good old Dr. Erskine cried when he wished to teach the Church her duty in regard to missions. And, indeed, the "Confession," while giving very distinct statements on a number of matters which do not practically concern us at all, says not one word about this duty, so solemnly bound upon the Church by her Divine Founder.

It may be willingly granted that some "Confession" is needed of the "Faith" of those who are to be invested with the responsible office of preaching the Gospel of Christ. But the only confession which our Lord Himself demanded of the preachers whom He sent forth was that of their faith in Him, nor did the Apostolic Church demand any other. But, considering the difference of circumstances, and the constant human tendency to corrupt the simplicity of the Gospel, it may be needful to provide some security that the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, or in the language of the Confession, "those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation" shall be taught in their purity. But it is surely neither necessary nor well that every candidate for the ministry should have to pledge his adherence to the whole of a series of theological-metaphysical propositions, some of which, indeed, no one would dispute, while others are, to say the very least, exceedingly doubtful—the work of human minds exercised with matters "too high" for any human intellect. The age when the "Confession" was framed was an age far too much addicted to numerous and bulky "systems of doctrine, which, as every human expression of mysteries too deep for man to sound must tend to error, are so much the more liable to it in proportion to their extent. The divines of those days had not got quite free from the excessive dogmatism of the Romish Church,—from her tendency to enforce too much,—and to found authoritative dogmas on isolated and ill-understood texts,—the very tendencies which led to her persecution of those who, like Galilee, departed in any respect from her interpretation of Truth. Now the Westminster Confession undoubtedly dogmatizes and draws conclusions in regard to points on which it would be far better reverently to accept the similar words of Scripture than to attempt to build dogmatic conclusions on promises so little understood. Some of the conclusions it thus draws, I cannot but regard, in common with the great majority of Christians, and even of Presbyterians, as unwarranted by Scripture, and conveying dishonouring conceptions of God—founded, only upon a few isolated words, which no modern commentator would similarly interpret. But I know that I speak not only for those who object to some points of the Confession, but also for many who do not—in maintaining that it is not desirable that our ministers should be obliged to pledge their unqualified adherents to a long and complicated series of speculative propositions in regard to which there must always exist much legitimate difference of opinion. I see no reason why there should not, in regard to these, be the same latitude allowed between ministers of the same Church that there is between ministers of sister Churches, recognized as true branches of the Church of Christ. To do otherwise is either to narrow ourselves down to men whose minds shall all run in the one groove, or to tempt them to suppress their conscientious convictions, both of which alternatives are most undesirable for the edification of the Church. No one, surely, would venture to assert that the Westminster Confession is either perfect or infallible. Yet to say that ministers are to be bound by it in every particular—that they have no right to explain Scripture otherwise than in strict conformity with its teachings, is practically to assert this, and

to give it an authority never intended by its excellent compilers, who meant it as an aid to the understanding of truth,—not as a finality.

We of the laity are not told that we must homologate in all points the Confession of Faith or cease to be Presbyterians. If so, it would very much reduce the numbers of the Church. But those who, like myself, are sincerely attached to the Presbyterian Church, believing it to be a Scriptural and living branch of the Christian Church, while not feeling bound to a long and complicated dogmatic system,—would have felt it hard, had they desired to enter her ministry, and been excluded from it simply because they could not in all points conscientiously endorse the Westminster Confession. Made an ultimate authority in this way, the Confession does become a "fetter," or rather an unscriptural barrier, which has excluded many good men from the Church of Scotland, and recently lost to us an excellent young minister in our own. It is true that, as the *Globe* says, in a recent article,—the great mass of Presbyterian ministers simply accept the Confession "in its main scope,"—not necessarily binding themselves to every minute detail as they understand them." But this is at best a very unsatisfactory position, and it is surely most inconsistent to maintain in authority a Confession containing admittedly "doubtful" and "non-essential" propositions, which may be enforced though we are told they need not be believed. "Lay the unity of the Church only on what is essential to the Church" was the excellent maxim of the great Richard Baxter, in the very age when the Confession was compiled. A striking instance of the evil of doing otherwise, and of the rigidity of adherence of the "Confession"—making it an ultimate instead of a "subordinate" standard—was the disposition, some fifty years ago, of the well-known John McLeod Campbell of Row. This excellent and earnest minister, now universally acknowledged to have been one of the best and holiest men ever adorned the Church of Scotland, and the author of several valuable theological works which have moulded much of the best Christian thought of the day, was formally deposed by the General Assembly in 1831, for preaching the doctrine that Christ had "taken away the sin of the world," a doctrine unquestionably Scriptural, and embodied in the standards of all the other Reformed Churches. Yet Mr. Campbell was not permitted to appeal from the Confession to the Bible. The circumstance that Mr. Campbell was, before his death, presented with the degree of Doctor of Divinity by one of the Scottish Universities,—and also the fact that Mr. Moody has recently preached this very doctrine from one end of Scotland to the other, with the concurrence and approval of numerous ministers of both the Scottish Churches,—shows the change of feeling in this respect, though as yet the standard remains unaltered. But it is well-known that some of the best and ablest Scottish ministers are anxious to change the relations of the Church to the Confession as soon as it can be conveniently done. With Mr. Campbell was deposed another excellent minister, the Rev. Thomas Scott, while at the same time, and for the same reason, the Rev. J. Stevenson, author of the well-known and delightful works—"The Lord my Shepherd," and "Christ on the Cross"—withdrew to the Church of England—other earnest Christian men, both licentiates and students being in the same way lost to the Church. Can we consider as anything a "fetter," the rigidity which would exclude Mr. Moody himself from our ministry, (though we might let him preach in our pulpits), and many another honoured servant of Christ besides,—simply because he could not in all subscribe to all points a long commendium of human teachings, drawn up by men as fallible as ourselves? What wonder that very many earnest and spiritually minded Christians of all denominations have grown very weary of those long detailed creeds and formula—feeling that God's truth is too great to be narrowed down to any little human system, and long to go back to some simple Confession like the Apostles Creed, which should not interpose artificial barriers,—surely most displeasing to our Divine Master,—between those who are indeed "one in Christ Jesus!"

It should not have been considered an "attack" on the Confession to say that ministers should "search the Scriptures" for themselves under the guidance of the Spirit of Truth—and not be content to look solely through the spectacles of the Confession. I need hardly say that the Rev. man tell his people that they were to read the Bible in order to prove the Prayer Book! Presbyterians can see the evil in this, though some of them cannot see the same evil when the "Confession" is in question. But it is as absurd to question the loyalty of Presbyterians who think the "Confession" needs reforming, as it would be for one branch of the Episcopal Church to question that of those who wish to purify the Prayer Book from some things which they consider error. Indeed, it is notorious that the Evangelical Episcopalians find fault with the new "Reformed Episcopal Church," for going out from among them instead of remaining to help them to carry reform within the Church; and this is, I think, the very duty which devolves upon all liberal minded Presbyterians.

We are far from underrating the excellence and wisdom of the men who drew up the "Confession," or undervaluing the results of their labours. In many respects it is a most admirable "body of divinity," and was drawn up sincerely, though by no means unanimously in all points, by its compilers, according to their light. But there are many reasons why our faith should not be stereotyped, and our progress stopped at the point which they had reached, more than two centuries ago. It is often said that a scholar in our Sabbath schools now has more facilities for understanding the Bible than the philosophers of those days. The progress of both Biblical criticism and of historic and scientific research has cast much new light on many portions of Scripture, and led to the very different interpretation of not a few. It is strongly indicated by God's providence

that there is to be progress in the development of theology as of all other departments of thought.

This principle is the very *raison d'être* of every new commentary, critical work, and theological article that is published, which would be useless and superfluous, were it not supposed capable of shedding some new light on Divine Truth.

No scientific school would commit the error of crystallizing its system at any given point in the past, and why should we commit the same error in regard to what is far more important? The teaching of its Divine Founder was that the Church was to depend on the guidance of the Spirit of Truth. Is it not lack of faith in this teaching which lays so much stress on human standards? Believing that the Church, as well as the individual Christian is to make progress in Divine truth, and that every Christian is under obligation to "search the Scriptures" with open heart and mind, we of the laity desire the same liberty for our clergy that we claim for ourselves,—so that they may not be obliged, in defence to any human authority to close their minds against the entrance of any light which the "Spirit of truth" may bring to their minds in the course of their researches—considering that any earnest or prayerful student of Scripture has as much right to search into the "deep things of God," as had the compilers of the Confession.

Every one who knows the history of the Church of Scotland knows well that the evil from which she has suffered most, has been that of making a dead and rigid orthodoxy of belief stand instead of the warm and living faith and trust which comes from drawing our spiritual life direct from Christ who is our life, and seeking the constant teaching of the Holy Spirit. And the Church was never more idly "moderate" than when she deposed one of our holiest ministers for a supposed deviation from dogmatic "orthodoxy." It is living faith and personal holiness, and not elaborate theological confessions that can keep our doctrine pure. Permit me to close this somewhat long letter (in which, while expressing as I cannot but express, my own strong convictions, I have tried to avoid anything that might wound the feelings of those who think differently) by an opposite quotation from Mr. Spurgeon, "The only way to conserve orthodoxy is to nourish spiritual power. Living faith in, and earnest zeal for Christ, will always ensure sound theology. Love for a person rather than faith in a creed, is the vital idea of the Gospel. When we accept Christ as Saviour to pardon sin, renew the soul, impart life, comfort in sorrow, keep from falling, save with a great salvation, we cannot go very far wrong in doctrinal belief. To keep the church doctrinally pure, we need only keep up strong faith and ardent love to the person of our Lord and Saviour. Yours, etc., A LAY PRESBYTERIAN.

Probationers and Vacancies.

Editor BRITISH AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN.

Sir,—Will you allow me space in your columns to make a few statements to the public concerning the way affairs are managed in some of our congregations?

I wish to draw attention to the very inadequate support that probationers receive from vacant congregations.

The sum of eight dollars is far too little to pay even ordinary expenses, and especially in the case when the distance to be travelled is very great. Sometimes we are transported from Dan to Beersheba, and then we only receive the miserable pittance of eight dollars. Very often unless we are extraordinary vigilant and careful, we will be minus fifty cents or a dollar of that sum.

All most ordinary mechanics earn more than this. He will earn his ten, twelve, or fifteen dollars per week, but the licentiate and probationer of one of the largest and wealthiest churches are frowned down to the trifling sum of eight dollars.

Why, sir, there are some country congregations who have been giving their settled ministers at the rate of fifteen, twenty, and twenty-five dollars per week, and when they become vacant, the poor probationer, who travels two hundred miles in order to preach the Gospel to them, receives the paltry sum of eight dollars. Surely this is scarcely fair or just.

And, sir, one can scarcely credit it; there are leading men in some of our congregations mean enough to lift up their voice and to use their influence against the settlement of a pastor, because "the preaching only costs them eight dollars" now, and if they had a minister this sum would have to be largely increased. Here, find, Mr. Editor, the secret of long vacancies. O, tempora! O mores! where is the Christianity here? We once heard of an old man who thanked God that he had been a member of a Christian Church the last three years, and it only cost him three cents.

These small-souled, niggardly individuals are surely of the same stamp. We would at once say, Let the church be purified of all such. This, Mr. Editor, is the reason why some congregations remain long vacant—"cheap preaching."

But we hate to dwell on such a disagreeable topic, and hasten on to remark that it is no wonder that there are at the present time in our church ninety vacancies, and only thirty probationers to supply them. Our young men receive such tremendous and startling encouragement to enter the profession of the Christian ministry from such a state of things.

"The harvest, truly, is plenteous; but tell it not in Gath." It is no wonder that the laborers are few.

Young men who have been brought up in good circumstances, refuse to enter the ministry to pine and languish upon eight dollars per week.

The time it takes to qualify oneself for the ministry is a powerful argument against such small remuneration. Altogether it takes about ten years. Three years preparatory training for the university, and four years of an arts course after entering the university, then three years of a theological training, and then we are ready to receive the enormous salary of

eight dollars per week and pay all our expenses. Why, Sir, the thing is so absurd as almost to arouse the slumbering shades of John Knox. What's the remedy? It lies with the Presbyteries. Let them see to it, that each congregation pays according to its means, and then there will be no more "cheap preaching."

Hoping you will insert this, so that the rights of probationers and licentiates may be preserved, I remain, yours truly, JOSEPH.

Pastor and People.

Easy Religion.

It is not to be denied or overlooked that there is a prevailing tendency in many of our popular and fashionable city and country churches, to favor and advocate a loose and easy-going religion among Christians, as well as among ministers, especially among young Christians.

Three months ago, one of the most intelligent, clear-headed professional men in the country, not himself a professor of religion, said to me, in a conversation on the importance and reality of religion: "If there is any thing in this world that tempts me to disbelieve the whole thing, it is when I see men profess to be converted—covenant to labor for Christ, and His cause forever—come to the communion and take the body and blood of the crucified Saviour in their hands and lips—and then in three months after I see those same persons playing cards at whist parties, dancing at public balls, frequenting operas and theatres, and all manner of vain worldly amusements! It looks to me like consummate hypocrisy, and I am tempted to think the whole thing a delusion!"

I cannot wonder at it. What a slur upon Christianity, that there is nothing in it to interest, delight, and satisfy the soul! Must the young Christian be without joy, pleasure, and happiness, only as he seeks them over in the green fields of vain worldly amusements?

Said Dr. Cuyler, "You cannot grow healthy, young Christians, in the foul air of social dissipation! Midnight parties, operas, Germanias, and whist clubs, do not suit Christ's plants of grace, any better than Labrador ice fields suit orange trees. A Christian cannot keep all the habits of a worldly without killing his piety. Come out and be separate, means something more than to take the communion seat half a dozen times a year."

If there is prevailing in upon our churches a strong prevalent current towards an easy-going religion—a tendency to favour and practice vain, dissipating amusements, which lead away from Christ; the true demand of the pews upon the pulpit is, that it shall be awake to that fact—shall speak, and preach, if need be, against these things, though they seem to be little matters, and though some may be offended by it—for the watchman must warn the flock against present dangers, and present forms of worldly conformity, and departures from God—though he may find, in faithfully doing so, that the offence of the cross has not yet ceased.

Infinite Loveliness.

Every object that can be presented to us has a claim on our affections corresponding to its character. If any object be admirable, it possesses a natural and inherent claim to our admiration; if it be venerable, it has a claim to our reverence; if it be terrible, it demands our fear; if it be beautiful and amiable, it claims and deserves our love. But God is perfectly and infinitely lovely; nay, he is excellence and loveliness itself. If you doubt this, ask those who can tell you. Ask Christ, who is in the bosom of the Father, and He will tell you that God is infinitely lovely. Ask the holy angels who dwell in His immediate presence, and they will tell you that He is lovely beyond all that even angelic minds can conceive. Ask good men in all ages, and they will lament that they cannot tell you how admirable and excellent Jehovah is. Ask everything beautiful and amiable in the universe, and it will tell you that all its beauty is but a faint reflection of His. If all this does not satisfy you, ask the spirits of disobedience, and they, though filled with malice and rage against him, will tell you, if you can constrain them to speak, that the Being whom they hate is lovely, and that it constitutes the essence of their misery that they can find no blemish in His character. But if God be thus infinitely lovely, we are under infinite obligations to love Him; obligations from which He Himself cannot release us, but by altering his character and ceasing to be lovely.

God's WORD GIVEN LIGHT.—The following shows how the Word of God reaches the human heart, even in heathen lands:—"A native minister of Madagascar, now an assistant in the revision of the book of Genesis, attributes his conversion entirely to his having accidentally met with a small scrap torn from a Malagasy Bible. While walking past the spot where the Memorial Church of Ambatan-kanga now stands, he saw on the ground a small scrap of printed paper. Taking it up, he found it was a mere fragment of the book of Psalms. He began to read, and was especially struck with one verse, which speaks of the power and majesty of God. He could not get rid of the impression it made on his mind, that the God revealed in the Bible was the true and living God. He accordingly sought out some Christian, and inquired about the faith they possessed. The result was that he accepted Christ as his Saviour, joined himself to the persecuted company of believers, and endured with them privation and loss for Christ's sake. He has now been for some years a native pastor, and is a most zealous and godly man."

The right and noble things which enter into character are, next to the Word of God, the noblest book to be seen and read by all men. The man who lives right, and is right, has more power in his silence than another has by his words. Character is like balls which ring out sweet music, and which, when touched accidentally even, resound with sweet music.

The Word of God.

How truly refreshing to the soul, when too weak to read or think much, to take a little sentence from God's Word and think over it. Take the following: "Justified from all things," or, "Made high by His blood." "As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you." "I have chosen you." Just fast on these four words. "I." Who? Jesus; the altogether lovely one, the delight of God's heart. "Have," yes, long ago, before the world began, His love fastened on us guilty sinners. "Chosen you." To think that I should be His choice, His chosen one—me, a poor wretched thing. And He need not have chosen me. He's of glorious beings were before Him; but he passed them all by, and came down to love a little worm of the dust, and He became like us. "I am a worm and no man." (Ps. xxi.) O, may our souls be flattened on the love of Christ; thus shall we be filled with joy and peace.

Random Readings.

A SIMPLE faith is the best answer to all cunning questions.

HE is a wise man who knows his own folly—who distrusts himself and looks to Jesus.

Your temptations may not lie that way to-day, but they may be your strongest temptations to-morrow.

A MAN, says Spurgeon, ought to hope within the bounds of reason and the promises of the good old Book.

SLEEP is death's younger brother, and so like him, that I never dare trust him without my prayers.—Sir T. Brown.

A MAN ought to carry himself in the world as an orange tree would, if it could walk up and down in the garden, swinging perfume from every little censer it holds up to the air.

JOHN BUNYAN was once asked a question about heaven which he could not answer, because the matter was not revealed in the Scriptures; and he therefore advised the inquirer to live a holy life, and go and see.

THAT very law which moulds a tear,
And bids it trickle from its source;
That law preserves the earth a sphere,
And guides the planets in their course.
Rogers.

I CONFESS I have no hope but that which inspired the dying malefactor at the side of my Lord, and I must be saved in the same way—as freely, as fully, or not at all. Let me be found accepted in the Beloved, and complete in Him.—Countess of Huntingdon.

We scatter seeds with careless hands,
And dream we ne'er shall see them more
But for a thousand years
Their fruit appears,
In weeds that mar the land
Or fruitful store.

PERSONS may greatly injure others in their thoughts by unjustly entertaining mean thoughts or a low esteem of them. Some are deeply and continuously injurious to others by the contempt they habitually have of them in their hearts, and by their willingness to think the worst of them.

A LIFE which is part a truth,
Is ever the blindest of lies.
For a lie which is all a lie,
May be met and fought with outright;
But a lie which is part a truth,
Is a harder matter to fight.
Tennyson.

It is related of Dr. Griffin, that he once became so anxious in regard to the spiritual death long prevalent in his congregation, that he spent a night in prayer, and the next day preached with such power and earnestness that forty followed him in tears to his study, to ask what they must do to be saved.

"How large a membership has your church?" asked a minister of the deacon with whom he stopped over Sunday. "Well, I tell 'em they have got about ten that can be depended on to do anything; but there are more'n a hundred names on the church books, if that's what you want to know."

O WEARY hands, that through the day,
Life's heavy burden scarcely bear;
Another hand shall take away
This load of toil, and sin, and care:
Not here, but there!

O weary aching, throbbing brain!
O heart with doubt and sorrow riven!
There is no toll, no love in vain,
In that best home that Christ has given:
Not earth, but heaven.

A SILVER egg was prepared as a present to a Saxon queen. Open the silver by a secret spring, and there was found a yolk of gold. Find the spring of the gold, and it flew open and disclosed a beautiful bird. Press the wings of the bird, and in its breast was found a crown, jewelled and radiant. And even within the crown, upheld by a spring like the rest, was a ring of diamonds, which fitted the finger of the princess herself. O! how many a promise there is within a promise in the Scripture, the silver around the gold, the gold around the jewels; yet how few of God's children ever find their way far enough among the springs to discover the crown of His rejoicing, or the ring of His covenant of peace!

SPURGEON says very forcibly:—"There is not a Christian beneath the scope of God's heaven from whom I am separated. At the Lord's table I always invite all Christians to come and sit down and commune with us. If any man were to tell me that I am separate from the Episcopalian, the Presbyterian, or the Methodist, I would tell him he did not know me, for I love them with a pure heart, fervently, and I am not separate from them. This bears rather hard on our strict-communication Baptists. I should not like to say any thing against them, for they are about the best people in the world; but they really do separate themselves from the great body of Christ's people. They separate from the great universal church. They say they will not commune with it; and if any one comes to their table and has not been baptized, they turn him away. The pulse of Christ is communion; and was to the Church that seeks to cure the ill of Christ's Church by stopping its pulse!"