

The Westminster Confession of Faith Revised by the Baptists.

A correspondent furnishes the following paper to the London (Eng.) Weekly Review. As we think it may prove interesting reading to many of our subscribers, we reproduce it here:—

The revision of the Prayer Book is an unwelcome subject to the majority of the clergy and laity of the Church of England. All Protestants in England, outside the Established Church, however, see clearly that the Prayer Book would be greatly improved by the revision. In fact, it was the hope of accomplishing this end which led to the convening of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster in 1643. The "Ordinance of the Lords and Commons assembled in Parliament, for the calling of an Assembly of learned and godly Divines, and others, to be consulted with by the Parliament, for the settling of the government and liturgy of the Church of England; and for vindicating and clearing of the doctrine of the said Church from false aspersions and interpretations," states, "Whereas, as yet, many things remain in the liturgy, discipline, and government of the Church which do necessarily require a further and more perfect reformation than as yet hath been attained; . . . and for the better effecting hereof, and for the vindicating and clearing of the doctrine of the Church of England from all false calumnies and aspersions, it is thought fit and necessary to call an Assembly of learned, godly, and judicious Divines, to consult and advise of such matters and things, touching the premises."

Their effort at revision proved ineffectual. It was therefore resolved to begin the work de novo. The Westminster Standards were consequently compiled as a substitute for the liturgy.

In like manner there is no reason why a proposal to revise the Westminster Confession should throw Presbyterians into a panic. When Dr. Fraser was Moderator of the English Presbyterian Synod in 1874, in his opening address, he said, "Speaking for myself only, I will add that in my opinion we are not likely to make any very great advance in England till we abbreviate and simplify our Confession. Some may prefer to relax the terms of adherence to the Confession, and retain that venerable document as it is; but this, though the easiest, is not, as it appears to me, so advantageous, or even so safe, as to condense the Confession, and then insist on an honest acceptance of it by all rulers and teachers in the Church. This subject, however, is scarcely one fit to be discussed from the Moderator's chair, nor should it be considered even on the floor of the Presbytery or Synod without careful regard to the effect which any alteration might produce on our relations with other Presbyterian Churches, near and remote, holding the Westminster Standards."

The Baptists prepared and published a revised edition both of the Westminster Confession of Faith and of the Shorter Catechism. The statement prefixed to their edition states, "We, the ministers and messengers of, and concerned for upwards of, one hundred baptised Churches in England and Wales (denying Arminianism), being met together in London, from the third of the seventh month to the eleventh of the same, 1689, to consider of some things that might be for the glory of God, and the good of these congregations, have thought meet (for the satisfaction of all other Christians that differ from us in the point of baptism) to recommend to their several the Confession of our Faith, which Confession we own, as containing the doctrine of our faith and practice, and to desire that the members of our Churches respectively do furnish themselves therewith."

The book to which the foregoing statement is prefixed is entitled "Thirty-two Articles of Christian Faith and Practice; A Baptist Confession of Faith, 1689, with Scripture Proofs."

The compilers of the Baptist Confession of Faith addressed a preface—"To the Judicious and Impartial Reader," wherein they give their reasons for compiling the Confession, and tell the manner in which they accomplished it. "Courteous Reader," they say, "it is now many years since divers of us, with other sober Christians (then living and walking in the way of the Lord, that we profess), did conceive ourselves to be under a necessity of publishing a Confession of Faith, for the information and satisfaction of those that did not thoroughly understand what our principles were, or had entertained prejudices against our profession, by reason of the strange representation of them by some men of note, who had taken very wrong measures, and accordingly led others into misapprehensions of us and them; and this was first put forth about the year 1648, in the name of seven congregations then gathered in London."

They proceed, then, to state that the purpose for which the Confession of 1643 was issued had been in a good measure answered, both by satisfying Christians who differed from them about the subject of baptism, and also in benefiting those who entertained their religious principles, but as that Confession had become difficult to obtain they resolved to issue another of a more complete and comprehensive kind; "and finding no defect," they say, "in this regard, in that fixed on by the (Westminster) Assembly, and after them, by those of the Congregational way, we did readily conclude it best to retain the same order in our present Confession; and also, when we observed that those last mentioned (Congregationalists) did in their Confessions (for reasons which seemed of weight both to themselves and others) choose not only to express their mind in words concurrent with the former in sense, concerning all those articles wherein they were agreed, but also, for the most part, without any variation of the terms; we (Baptists) did in like manner conclude it best to follow their (Congregationalists) example in making use of the very same words with them both, in these articles, which are very many, wherein our faith and doctrine is the same with theirs; and this we did, the more abundantly to manifest our consent with both, in all the fundamental articles of the Christian religion, as also with many others, whose orthodox Confessions have been published to the world, on behalf of the Protestants, in divers nations and cities; and also to convince all we have no itch to clog religion with new

words, but do readily acquiesce in that form of sound words which hath been in consent with the Holy Scriptures, used by others before us; hereby declaring before God, angels and men, our hearty agreement with them in that wholesome Protestant doctrine, which with so clear evidence of Scriptures they have asserted; some things, indeed, are in some places added, some terms omitted, and some few changed; but these alterations are of such a nature, as that we need not doubt any charge or suspicion of unsoundness in the faith, from any of our brethren upon the account of them.

"In those things wherein we differ from others, we have expressed ourselves with all candour and plainness, that none might entertain jealousy of aught secretly lodged in our breasts, that we would not the world should be acquainted with; yet we hope we have also observed those rules of modesty and humility as will render our freedom in this respect inoffensive, even to those whose sentiments are different from ours."

It is much to be regretted that certain agitators in Scotland for revision of the Confession of Faith neglected to observe those rules of modesty and humility, and whose utterances on a recent occasion thereby became offensive to those whose sentiments were different from theirs respecting the Westminster Standards. The obscure Baptists of 1689 can give a lesson to certain illuminati among the Presbyterians of 1877 in the rules referred to.

The first chapter of the Baptist Confession, like the Westminster, treats of the Holy Scriptures, and consists of ten sections. It is, word for word, the same as the Westminster, with the exception of the first sentence, which reads thus:—"The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule, of all-saving knowledge, faith, and obedience; although" &c., &c., same as in Westminster Confession.

There is a chapter in the Baptist Confession which is not in the Westminster, treating "Of the Gospel, and of the extent of the Grace thereof." It comes between the chapters treating "Of the Law of God," and that treating "Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience." In several chapters, such as "Of the Civil Magistrate," the section alleged to countenance persecution is omitted, and in that "Of Marriage and Divorce," the section relating to Divorce is also omitted in the Baptist Confession. Omissions of sections occur in other chapters. The only chapter wherein the sentiments of the compilers of the Westminster Confession differ from those of the Baptist Confession, I need scarcely say, is that treating "Of Baptism." (1.) "Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances of positive and sovereign institution, appointed by the Lord Jesus, the only lawgiver, to be continued in His Church to the end of the world. (2.) These Holy appointments are to be administered by those only who are qualified and thereunto called, according to the commission of Christ."

In the Baptist Confession the term "Sacrament" is never used, the term "Ordinance" being always applied both to Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In Chapter XXIX.—treating "Of Baptism"—the Baptists express themselves "with all candour and plainness," yet they "observe those rules of modesty and humility as will render their freedom in this respect inoffensive, even to those whose sentiments are different from theirs." This chapter is divided into four sections, instead of seven, as in the Westminster Confession.

(1.) "Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, to be unto the party baptised a sign of his fellowship with Him, in His death and resurrection; of his being ingrafted into Him; of remission of sins; and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life.

(2.) "Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance.

(3.) "The outward element to be used in this ordinance is water, wherein the party is to be baptised, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

(4.) "Immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary to the due administration of this ordinance."

Two chapters contained in the Westminster Confession are wholly omitted in that of the Baptists. These are the 30th and 31st chapters, treating "of Church Censures," and "of Synods and Councils" respectively. As Baptists have followed the independent form of Church government, and not the Presbyterian, the reason of the omission of these chapters is obvious.

When such an outcry is raised in these days against Creeds and Confessions of Faith—definite religious ideas, and teaching of dogmatic theology—it may be of some service to call attention to the reasons why the Christians of preceding generations adopted these modes of proclaiming the religion of Jesus; also to consider if these reasons have no longer any weight, and also to inform some of the friends of what has been termed "modern thought," that Presbyterians of a by-gone age were not singular among Protestants in their adoption of, and attachment to, Creeds and Confessions of Faith. These are not faultless, as their compilers were not infallible. Revision may improve them, it may also mar them. The writer of the leading article in the Christian World of May 4th says, "We should not like to be asked to sign the Confession of the Westminster Divines, but we should find it still more difficult to sign the confession of Mr. Fergus Ferguson."

Let us pray God that he would root out of our hearts everything of our own planting, and set out there, with his own hands, the tree of life, bearing all manner of fruits.

He who reads with discernment and choice, will acquire less learning, but more knowledge; and as this knowledge is collected with design, and cultivated with art and method, it will be at all times of immediate and ready use to himself and others. He who reads without this discernment and choice, and, like Bodin's pupil, resolves to read all, will not have time, nor capacity neither, to do anything else. He will not be able to think, without which it is impertinent to read, nor to act, without which it is impertinent to think.—Boilingbroke.

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