

A NOTABLE ANNIVERSARY.

TO the loyal Presbyterian, and surely every Presbyterian is loyal to his Church, the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the Shorter Catechism, held last week in Knox church, Toronto, must have proved satisfactory and inspiring. Not a note of discord was struck throughout the proceedings. The papers read were by men representative of the various phases of thought in the Church, yet all was harmony; all bowed the head in allegiance to the old standards, the old doctrines, the positions of 250 years ago. And yet it was not an old-fashioned gathering by any means, learned professors, popular preachers, ministers with the studious and the literary turn, laymen of culture and business men were among the speakers, while the appreciative audience comprised ladies and gentlemen who give zest and character to the community and mould the public life. It was a genuine tribute to the immortal little book—the manual of the Christian household, the terror of the Scottish school forms.

The addresses were on the whole masterly. That by Rev. Dr. Caven on "The Utility of Creeds and Confessions" opened the Conference on Tuesday evening, when the rev. doctor presided over the meeting. He noted the fact that not a few Christians denied the utility of confessions, holding that they disparaged the great work of the Almighty among men, were hindrances to theological progress, and had created schisms and dissensions in the Church. In combatting these views Dr. Caven said the minor standards of Christian doctrine were never intended to be anything save exponents of the main principles of the Bible. They had, therefore, not been obstacles to the advance of theological science, but barriers to rash speculation. So, too, they had been bonds of union in the Church rather than causes of dissension. At the foundation of all the books of the Bible was the desire to confess the Lord, and this was true of all creeds, including the confessions which were the greatest of all the creeds existing. The confessions were guides to those seeking fellowship with the Church. All conscientious persons seeking admission into a Church desired to know the tenets of that Church, and, as the world had a right to that knowledge, all churches must have a standard, written or unwritten. The articles of confession were also a protection against error in practice or doctrine, and marked the line between what was sound and what was heretical. A man who could accept the articles might ask that they be revised or he might leave the Church. A minister must not teach doctrines in which he did not believe, and a private individual assuming to exercise the right to teach his own views, should those views be wrong, imperiled the liberty of the whole congregation. The ordinary members were not compelled to subscribe to the articles of the confession, a fact which contradicted the epithet of intolerable tyranny which had been applied to the form of government of the Presbyterian Church. The articles were a direction in private and public teaching, and ministers could not do better than fashion their sermons after the type set by them.

Rev. L. H. Jordan, B.D., gave an interesting address on "The historical setting, political and religious, of the Westminster Assembly." He recited the events which led up to various religious revolutions in Europe, England and Scotland immediately preceding the troublous times of the Stuarts, the rise and progress of puritanism and the general dominance of the Presbyterian sentiment throughout the Island of Great Britain.

Rev. W. J. McCaughan's subject was "The personnel of the Assembly." He gave brief but vigorous character sketches of the leading men who sat at that celebrated council. The Assembly was made up of 151 members, of whom 121 were divines and 30 lay members. It had been characterized as standing first, and it undoubtedly did stand first, among Protestant councils. Parliament had been desirous of having every shade of opinion, except the sacerdotal, represented on it, and in this it had been successful. The English clerical members were all men from the Universities of Oxford or Cambridge. Among the members of the Erastian section were Lightfoot, Whitelock, Coleman and Selden. This section felt themselves additionally strong from the fact that the Parliament was at their back. It was the section which held the view that in all matters the State was in the ascendant. The second class was the Episcopalian, about a dozen of whom had been appointed by Parliament, and of whom Archbishop Usher was one of the most prominent. They took no active part in the general discussion. Another class was the Congregationalists or Independents, who had brought their tenets with them from Holland fully developed. Behind this section was Cromwell and the army, and their influence was governed to a considerable extent by the news from the field of battle. Then there were the two branches of the Presbyterian section. Among these the speaker mentioned Dr. Reynolds and John Pym, the great Parliamentary leader, who impeached Strafford. The last party and the most interesting one in the Assembly, the speaker said, was the Scotch commissioners,

Samuel Rutherford, Robert Hallie, George Gillespie and Alex. Henderson, the last of whom gave stability to Presbyterianism and was the greatest statesman of his age.

On Wednesday three sessions were held. Rev. Wm. Burns presided at the morning meeting and delivered a well-timed, well-put address on "The stability of Creeds and the dangers of restless change."

Rev. Dr. Carmichael spoke on "The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession." The confession, for two and a half centuries had been, with the Bible, the very life blood and the bone and sinew of our Presbyterianism. The doctrine which it contains, the system which is called Calvinism, constituted the very foundation stones of the Presbyterian faith. The sole principle which guided the Assembly in their statements of the several doctrines of the confession was: "Are they agreeable to the Word of God?" Every doctrine was tested by being referred to the standard. The confession was not a hard book, nor did it represent the Diet in a stern and severe aspect, as had been contended by some people.

At the afternoon session the chair was occupied by Mr. Mortimer Clark. The first address was by Rev. Dr. McLaren, professor of systematic theology in Knox College, and his subject was "The confession and catechism in relation to the previous history of theology." He denied that Presbyterianism in its doctrine and polity was an entire breaking away from the historical church, an ignoring of the past learning and thought of Christian sages, and was, in fact, the invention of Knox and Calvin. The Westminster Confession and Catechism, owed much to the great divine who drafted them, but they owed more to those learned Christian scholars of preceding ages who had devoted their lives to mastering the contents of the Divine revelation. The articles of the confession were founded on the assumption that the Scriptures were the sole rule of life. No article of faith was admitted which could not vindicate its right to a place in the confession by appeal to the written word. They did not on this account ignore the clarifying knowledge of past ages, nor did they overlook or undervalue that knowledge. They distinguished, however, between tradition as an assistance in studying the word and as an article of faith. It was only by reading many of the articles in the light of the history of theology that they could be fully appreciated. The Westminster Assembly, as one of the latest of the Christian councils, had to deal with all doctrines of the church which had arisen from the earliest times. They represented the achievements of sixteen centuries.

Rev. Dr. Gregg delivered an interesting address on "The History and Influence of the Westminster Standard in Relation to the Various Branches of the Presbyterian Church." He would call attention, he said, to some of the fruits of the Westminster standards. One of his illustrations was found in the fact that they served to bind together in substantial unity the various branches of the Presbyterian Church throughout the world. His second illustration was that the articles formed a most effectual barrier against what he termed the inroads and errors of the Church of Rome.

Mr. J. K. Macdonald, occupied the chair at the evening session. Rev. Dr. Milligan delivered an able address on "Presbyterianism in relation to Civil Liberty." A subject he treated comprehensively and thoroughly. After dealing with the right conception of the church, he said: "By civic liberty, we understand the relations obtaining between the citizen and the State rightly regulated by law. It was the glory of our Presbyterian fathers to perceive and proclaim the truth in all essential respects regarding civil and religious liberty. Because of their spiritual conceptions of God, and of man made in the image of God, they became the champions of civil liberty. They were truly reverend, and therefore truly fearless, and fearless because reverend. They penetrated beneath all shows of things to their heart, and read them as they were, not as they seemed. They were not beguiled by the sight of the eye. John Knox would not worship a piece of painted wood, by whatever name it might be called; he knew it was only wood, that and nothing more. Sacramentarian ideas were rightly conceived of as mythical and superstitious. They taught men who were distracted all their lives with superstitious fears a holy, fearless courage which effected the reformation of the church and the literature of the State. They taught, in short, 'what man was to believe concerning God and what duty God required of man.' In this holy, fearless courage we reckon as a fruit of their labors a vital civil virtue."

Rev. Dr. Parsons addressed the meeting on "The Confession and Catechism in the Home." After giving the history of the two books, known as the longer and shorter Catechism, he spoke of the influence that they had, and especially the shorter one, in moulding character. The address was greatly appreciated, especially by the older people of the audience, who knew by experience the truth of his descriptions.