

Should the Confession of Faith be Revised?

BY REV WM CLELAND, TORONTO.

For the Review.

We are not aware and do not believe that there exists in the Presbyterian Church of Canada anything like a general desire for the revision and alteration, much less for the entire abandonment of the Confession of Faith. This venerable document has stood, I may say, as the public and authorized record of the faith of the Presbyterian Church since the days of Knox and the Reformation; for, though in its present shape it came into existence well nigh a century afterwards, it is simply a repetition in a more systematized form of the original confession of the Reformed Church of Scotland, which was adopted at the time of her organization as the National Church in 1580, and which may be found at length in Knox's History, in Calderwood, and in Dunlop's Collection of Confession. And, as it has stood for centuries as the firm and enduring memorial of the Church's creed, in the assured persuasion that it is founded on and agreeable to the Word of God, we trust that in the future it will retain its long-existing position, and continue for all time to come to testify to the world what it is that the Church holds itself warranted to believe, and commissioned to teach.

Like the Bible itself, from which it is drawn, and of the teaching of which it is a full and faithful declaration, our Confession has been subjected throughout its entire history to severe and unfriendly criticism; but until a comparatively recent period its assailants have been confined almost altogether to infidels, and sceptics, and the partisans of churches that have not been able to accept in its entirety its evangelical creed. Within our own times however, there has sprung up in the ranks of the Church that had hitherto accorded it a unanimous and loyal allegiance a disposition to carp at it, which sometimes breaks out in very unexpected quarters, finding expression rather in a covert sneer than in an open manly attack. In a somewhat far-off fashion it is insinuated now and again, that it has outlived its day, for, however faithfully it may set forth the views of the Church in her less mature years, it is altogether inadequate to give expression to her views in these times of light and leading, during which she has emerged into clearer light, and attained to a better understanding of divine truth. For this, and other reasons to which it is not necessary to advert, it is hinted occasionally that the time for its revision has arrived, so as to bring it into full accordance with the general sentiment of the Church, and more especially with a view to the presentation of its contents in a briefer and simpler form, in a tone less harsh and severe, and in tones more brimful of the mild and loving spirit of the gospel.

We do not claim on behalf of our Confession that it is altogether perfect, and utterly incapable of improvement, but we confidently assert that no defect can be found in it of so grave a nature as to warrant a demand for its revision and alteration. It gives forth a full statement of divine truth, arranged in the best possible order, and expressed in language always clear and intelligible. It aims neither by omission nor commission, neither in the use of language unwarrantably strong, nor in the employment of terms culpably weak and inadequate. As a complete transcript of the Divine Word as revealed in Holy Scripture it stands without a rival. The men who framed it were qualified in the highest degree for the task. It is hardly too much to say that there has never been since the days of the apostles an assembly better fitted to give form and body to the faith of the Church than the Assembly they comprised which met at Westminster in 1643. For sanctified genius and surpassing attainments can any age of the Church furnish two higher names than those of Selden and Lightfoot, not to mention several others hardly inferior. Speaking of the clerical members of the Assembly only, Baxter, whose judgment is entitled for many reasons to the highest respect, has left it on record that "they were men of eminent learning, godliness, mental ability and fidelity." So perfect is the form of sound words they gave to the Church that not long since one whose name is pronounced with respect and veneration wherever the English language is spoken, addressing the Synod of the English Presbyterian Church, gave expression to the strong hope that "the Presbyterians would never abandon the Confession of Faith, they would not easily come by any better." And what shall we say of the noble array of the great and good men of past generations who heartily gave to it the full homage of minds not only highly gifted in themselves, but illumined not merely by the torch of science, but yet more by the better light that proceeds from the Son of righteousness. Is it possible for us to have any good reason to discard in the smallest particular a document that commanded the hearty acceptance of such men as Chalmers and Cooke, and Cunningham and Crawford, who but lately passed away—men, to use the language of a distinguished divine already referred to, "who could swallow up the astonishing geniuses who seem capable of evolving a new system of divinity every month as easily as a lot of whitebait"—men to speak with bated breath, who may certainly be held to stand on a level with the best and brightest that are enrolled on our Canadian register. It is true, we Presbyterians are people of a decidedly sturdy mould, possessed in a high degree of the spirit of manly independence, and little disposed to yield a slavish submission to the authority of great names; yet it can hardly be a slight gratification even for us to know not merely that sanctified genius and scholarship of the highest order lent their resources to the framing of our creed, but that throughout the centuries that have elapsed since it was sent forth on the errand of making known to the world the faith of the Reformed Church of Scotland, it has met with the

admiring approval not only of a very large and important section of the Christian world, but also of very many of the first and foremost minds of by-gone times. As a church we have grown and prospered greatly under its shelter; but if, in an unhappy hour we are tempted to withdraw from it the allegiance that from the first hour of our history we have unitedly and heartily accorded to it, the son of our prosperity will, I fear, from that moment begin to go down. There can hardly be a doubt that if we once undertake to cut and carve the precious document, the work of mutilation will be sure to go on till the venerated symbol shall either largely lose its identity or wholly disappear. The history of the Presbyterian Church in England furnishes too much warrant for entertaining such a painful apprehension. Before the century closed that saw our Confession of Faith moulded into the present form, this Church began to cut loose from this noble instrument, and to substitute for much of its salutary teaching the wild vagaries of human speculation. In the desire to get rid of a document that pledged them to views they no longer held, many in her communion, under the plea of religious liberty, made a clamant demand for the repeal of the law that required its subscription. The demand has ultimately conceded; the obnoxious instrument was deposed from its high position. And with what result? Spiritual atrophy set in. Like Samson deprived of his locks, the Church lost her strength, sinking deeper and deeper into the despatch of decay till when the present century dawned, there was hardly anything left of her but the name. The history of the Irish Presbyterian Church furnishes another beacon-light to warn us. In the early part of the last century this Church began to follow in the footsteps of her English sister. Many of the younger ministers on her roll became bold to make light of mere sectional preaching; they insisted upon sincerity as the chief test of Christian discipleship; they taught that erroneous opinions were only hurtful when wilful; and, above all, they inveighed vehemently against the law which required subscription to a creed or confession, as submissive of the right of private judgment, and inconsistent with Christian liberty and true Protestantism. The views they advocated unhappily became prevalent, and subscription to the confession of faith was practically set aside. The consequence was that Arianism, which is little better than infidelity crept in and the Church was brought to the very verge of destruction. The threatened doom, however, was happily averted. This grand old church that has borne so honorable a share in the great battle for civil and religious liberty, and in the diffusion and maintenance of a pure Gospel, in by-gone times, was not to be left to perish. At no stage in her downward career had there been wanting in her communion, men who had striven with marked ability to arrest its progress, but it was not till the present century had entered upon its course that a decided arrest was laid upon its footsteps. Men, whose revered names will live in her memory for all time to come, by exertions in which distinguished ability, unflinching purpose and unflagging zeal shone conspicuous, were honored of her great King and Head to reclaim her from her wanderings, and to bring her back to the old paths. The vessel drifting on the rocks was saved from destruction. Saved, she flung anew from her masthead the old flag, the symbol of her loyalty to her Lord and Master. The Confession of Faith was restored to its ancient place of authority, and from that time till now the Church has made marked progress. Peace has been within her walls, and prosperity within her palaces; and at this moment she takes rank among the very foremost of the evangelical churches of Christendom. Let us be warned by the facts which the history of these churches discloses, to stand with unyielding steadfastness by our venerable Confession "Obsta principia"—let this be our watchword. The spirit and the tendency of the times affords ground for grave anxiety. Everywhere men's minds seem to be unsettled; everywhere there is a manifest craving for something new, fascinating and exciting, and an unhallowed disposition to throw aside all reverence for the past. For the Church at such a season, to abandon any of her deeply cherished principles, or to alter in any measure her long existing position, would be to encourage, if not to sanction the dangerous tendency. Sciolists, who know little of our confession beyond the name, and who in their inexcusable ignorance associate with it teaching that it utterly repudiates, may pronounce it an obsolete and effete production, utterly unsuited to this age of progressive advancement; but we are fully persuaded that the Presbyterian people of this and other lands who know its worth, and can appreciate its excellence, still regard it with undiminished reverence. Some of their number, it is true, pretend to be able to find flaws in the body of its contents; but, as for ourselves, we can truly say that the more we examine it the more immovable we find to be the foundations on which it rests, and the more scriptural the principles it embodies. It is true science and theology have made great progress since it was framed. Discoveries of great value have been made, manuscripts of the New Testament of a very ancient date have been found, and certain archaeological facts connected with the history of Assyria and of Egypt have been unveiled. These have all thrown more or less light upon the Holy Scriptures, bearing strong testimony to their source and leading, in some instances to a better understanding of their contents. But within the whole volume of the accumulated evidence that has been gathered from these fields of investigation nothing is found that tends in the slightest degree to unsettle or disturb our faith in the divinity of their origin, or to demand an alteration in their interpretation. The same old Bible from which the Westminster divines drew all their material for the construction of the noble fabric of our Confession, stands to-day in its unimpaired entirety, bearing the same testimony, and strengthened rather than weakened on its foundations by the discoveries of science and the facts of history. No good reason,