



THE
REFORMED
FAITH
Exposition
of
The Westminster
Confession
of Faith





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Robert Shaw

CHRISTIAN
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FOREWORD

The Westminster Confession of Faith is one of the noblest and most influential documents of the Christian Church. It remains the fullest and most carefully constructed brief exposition of the Christian faith ever written. Almost three hundred and fifty years later it continues to be used and loved as a grand summary of biblical teaching.

In past days the Confession was read, pondered and studied by Christians of all levels of education. The crofter and the craftsman might be as familiar with it as the teacher and the theologian. Understanding Christian doctrine and healthy Christian living were then seen as intimate friends. It is hardly surprising that rugged, vigorous, intelligent and self-sacrificing Christianity was the result, for the Confession put calcium into the Christian's spiritual bones.

Of course, the Confession's heyday was in an age in which Christians had little 'leisure-time', no television and few books. We, by contrast, have so many other things to absorb our attention. Yet, it is to our spiritual loss that we – by comparison so well-educated – are so poorly educated in the things which matter most of all, the truths of the gospel. Indeed, opening the Confession may bring us moderns into a world and a vocabulary to which many of us are strangers.

In this setting, we must not make the mistake of either passively accepting the influences of our age, or of wishing we had been born in another era. Instead we must learn to live wholesomely non-conformist Christian lives, increasingly transformed by the renewing of our minds (as Paul puts it in Rom. 12:1-2).

Here, Robert Shaw can help us. Taking the chapter of the Confession as a starting point, he warmly and enthusiastically explains its teaching. His work provides a miniature course in theology. More than that, it explains, expounds and applies the whole gospel in a way that will explain the message of Scripture, illumine understanding, stimulate worship and strengthen Christian living. A course of private study with Shaw as teacher and companion will equip us to be intelligent and capable witnesses to Jesus Christ in the modern world – able to give a reason for the hope that the gospel gives us (1 Pet. 3:15). This is a considerable return for the modest investment of the price of one book and the expenditure of a little time and study.

If personal testimony is any encouragement, perhaps I may be allowed to place my own on record. I recall, with great gratitude, a period in my later teens when I first became acquainted with the Westminster Confession, and began to study it with the aid of a commentary. Looking back, I think of that as one of the most valuable investments of time and thought I ever made. It took me a stage further in understanding the greatness of God, the glory of Christ, the ministry of the Spirit, the nature of the Christian life, the church and the world to come. I sometimes compare that time of study to the activity of a squirrel gathering nuts which will see him through the winter! So it has proved to be. Let Robert Shaw be your guide, reading him with careful and prayerful thought, discernment and appreciation, and you will know what I mean.

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PREFACE



In preparing the following Exposition of the Confession of Faith, framed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines, it has been the object of the author to state the truths embraced in each section, to explain the terms employed wherever it seemed necessary, and to illustrate and confirm the doctrines. To avoid swelling the volume to an undue size, the arguments have been stated with the utmost possible brevity; in the illustrations, conciseness combined with perspicuity has been studied, and numerous passages of Scripture, which elucidate the subjects treated of, have been merely referred to, without being quoted at large. It is hoped that the attentive reader will here find the substance of larger works compressed within a small space; that materials for reflection will be suggested; and that an examination of the texts of Scripture marked, will throw much light upon the points to which they refer.

The Westminster Confession of Faith contains a simple exhibition of the truth, based upon the Word of God; but its several propositions are laid in opposition to the heresies and errors which have been disseminated in various ages. It has, therefore, been a prominent object of the author of the Exposition to point out the numerous errors against which the statements in the Confession are directed. The reader will thus find the deliverance of the Westminster Assembly of Divines upon the various errors by which the truth has been corrupted in former times, and will be guarded against modern errors, which are generally only a revival of those that had previously disturbed the Church, and that had been long ago refuted.

To render the work more accessible for reference, a Table of Contents has been prefixed, and a copious Index added, which will

show, at a glance, the various subjects discussed, and the manifold errors that have been noticed, in the course of the work.

To have transcribed the proofs from Scripture annexed to each proposition by the Westminster Assembly of Divines would have extended this volume to an inconvenient size. But the texts have been inserted after each section; and the additional labour of those who will take the trouble of turning to these proofs in their Bibles will be amply compensated. Their scriptural knowledge will be enlarged, and they will be satisfied that every truth set down in the Confession is 'most agreeable to the Word of God'. Of this the author of the Exposition is so completely convinced, that he has not found it necessary to differ from the compilers of the Confession in any one point of doctrine. The language, in some cases, might admit of improvement; but 'as to the truth of the matter' he cordially concurs in the judgment of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1647, that it is 'most orthodox, and grounded upon the Word of God'. And if the Confession, two hundred years ago, contained a faithful exhibition of the truth, it must do so still; for scriptural truth is, like its divine Author, 'the same yesterday, today, and for ever'.

Whitburn,
May 12, 1845



INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

There have been many objections urged against the use of Creeds and Confessions of Faith, at different periods and with various degrees of skill or plausibility. It is not necessary either to enumerate all these objections or to answer them all, since many of them have sunk into oblivion, and others have already met sufficient refutation. Almost the only objection which is now urged with any degree of confidence is that which accuses Confessions of usurping a position and authority due to divine truth alone. This objection itself has its origin in an erroneous view of what a Confession of Faith really is, and of what it is in which the necessity of a Confession being framed consists. The necessity for the formation of Confessions of Faith does not lie in the nature of the sacred truth revealed to man; but in the nature of the human itself. A Confession of Faith is not a revelation of divine truth – it is ‘not even a rule of faith and practice, but a help in both,’ to use the words of our own Confession; but it is a declaration of the manner in which any man, or number of men – any Christian or any Church – understands the truth which has been revealed. Its object is, therefore, not to teach divine truth; but to exhibit a clear, systematic and intelligible declaration of our own sentiments, and to furnish the means of ascertaining the opinions of others, especially in religious controversies.

The truth of this view, and the explanation which it gives of the necessity for the existence of Creeds and Confessions, may be easily shown. The human mind is so prone to error, and of such widely diversified capacity in every respect, that when even a simple truth is presented for its reception, that truth may be reproduced in almost as many different aspects as there were different minds to which it was presented. Suppose it a single

sentence, uttered in a voice, or written in a language understood by all – each man might understand it in his own way, putting upon it the construction which, to him, seemed the clearest; but it would be impossible to ascertain, whether they all understood it in the same sense or not, by their merely repeating the very words which they had heard or read, unless they were all to state, each in his own words, what they understood it to mean. Each man might then say, ‘I believe its meaning was to this effect.’ This would be really his Creed, or Confession of Faith, respecting that truth; and when all had thus stated their belief, if anything like a harmonious consent of mind among them could be obtained, it would be their united Confession of Faith with regard to that particular truth so revealed and understood.

But it would be more than this – it would be both a bond of union among themselves on that point, and also a conjoint testimony to all other men; not as absolutely and certainly teaching that truth, but as absolutely and certainly conveying the sense in which these men understood it, so far as their statement was itself distinct and intelligible; and it might prove the term of admission to the body of those who had thus emitted a joint declaration of what they believed to be the meaning of that truth.

To this extent, we think, all intelligent and candid persons will readily concur; and so far, it must be evident that there is no infringement of the natural liberty of any man, nor any attempt to control or overbear his conscientious convictions respecting what he believes to be truth in any given or supposable case. If any man cannot agree with the joint testimony borne by those who are agreed, this may be a cause of mutual regret; but it could neither confer on them any right to compel him to join them, contrary to his convictions, nor entitle him to complain on account of being excluded from a body of men with those opinions he did not concur. No man of strict integrity, indeed, could even wish to become one of a body of men with whom he did not agree on that peculiar point which formed the basis of their association.

Now, let this view be applied to the subject of religious truth – taking care, at the same time, to mark the special points which the idea of religious truth necessarily introduces. Religious truth is the revelation of God’s will to man – whether that revelation

be conveyed orally, or in a written record. As it comes now to us, it is in a written record. This we believe to be the very Word of the very God of truth. In this respect, it is to every soul the only and the all-sufficient rule of faith, with regard to 'what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.' But the question immediately arises, as above suggested, whether all to whom this revelation of God's will has been made understand it in the same sense? If any man say, that his only rule of faith is the Bible, every man who believes the Bible to be the Word of God will agree in this sentiment; but still the question returns, 'What do you understand the Bible to teach?' It would be no answer to this question merely to repeat a series of texts; for this would give no information in what sense these texts were understood. This must be manifest to every one who reflects for a moment. All who even profess the Christian name, however discordant their opinions may be, at least assume to believe the Bible; but each jarring sectarian gives his own construction to the language of that sacred book; and it is only in consequence of the statement in his own words of what that construction is, that it can be known whether his sentiments accord with, or differ from, those of the majority of professing Christians. This, as before remarked, arises not out of the nature of the truth revealed, but out of the nature of the minds to whom that truth is presented. The question is not, therefore, one respecting God's truth, but respecting man's truth – not respecting the truth of the Bible, but respecting man's apprehension of that truth.

Another element now comes into view. The Bible not only contains a revelation of eternal truth, which it is man's duty to receive and to hold, but it also appoints a body of men to be the depositaries and teachers of that truth – a Church, which is not a voluntary association of men who have ascertained that there is a harmony of sentiment sufficient for a basis of union, but a divine institution, subject directly to God, and having no authority over conscience. And, to complete this idea, let it further be observed, that God, in instituting the Church, has promised to bestow upon it the Holy Spirit, to lead it into the knowledge of the truth. This promise, further, is not to the Church in an aggregate capacity alone, but also to every individual member thereof, so as both to preserve inviolate his own responsibility, and to secure his personal

union with God. The realization of this great promise provides what in no other case exists, or can exist – an infallible umpire for the decision of all questions that can arise respecting Christian faith. For it may be confidently maintained that whenever jarring Churches or individual Christians have been enabled to seek the light and guidance of the Holy Spirit in a sincere, humble and earnest spirit, they have obtained such a decision of the point in dispute as to put an end to contention, and to secure the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace: and further, notwithstanding all the various aspects in which Christianity has, during the course of many centuries, been externally disguised, there has been still an amount of real harmony of belief, such as none but an infallible teacher and arbiter could have secured.

The Christian Church, as a divine institution, takes the Word of God alone, and the whole Word of God, as her only rule of faith; but she must also frame and promulgate a statement of what she understands the Word of God to teach. This she does, not as arrogating any authority to suppress, change or amend anything that God's Word teaches, but in discharge of the various duties which she owes to God, to the world, and to those of her own communion. Since she has been constituted the depository of God's truth, it is her duty to him to state, in the most distinct and explicit terms, what she understands that truth to mean. In this manner she not only proclaims what God has said, but also appends her seal that God is true. Thus a Confession of Faith is not the very voice of divine truth, but the echo of that voice from souls that have heard its utterance, felt its power, and are answering to its call.

And, since she has been instituted for the purpose of teaching God's truth to an erring world, her duty to the world requires that she should leave it in no doubt respecting the manner in which she understands the message which she has to deliver. Without doing so the Church would be no teacher, and the world might remain untaught, so far as she was concerned. For when the message had been stated in God's own words, every hearer must attempt, according to the constitution of his own mind, to form some conception of what these words mean; and his conception may be very vague and obscure, or even very erroneous, unless some attempt be made to define, elucidate, and correct them.

Nor, indeed, could either the hearers or the teachers know that they understood the truth alike, without mutual statements and explanations with regard to the meaning which they respectively believe it to convey.

Still further, the Church has a duty to discharge to those of its own communion. To them she must produce a form of sound words, in order both to promote and confirm their knowledge, and also to guard them against the hazard of being led into errors; and, as they must be regarded as all agreed, with respect to the main outline of the truths which they believe, they are deeply interested in obtaining some security that those who are to become their teachers in future generations shall continue to teach the same divine and saving truths. The members of any Church must know each other's sentiments – must combine to hold them forth steadily and consistently to the notice of all around them, as witnesses for the same truths; and must do their utmost to secure that the same truths shall be taught by all its ministers, and to all candidates for admission. For all these purposes the formation of a Creed, or Confession of Faith, is imperatively necessary; and thus it appears that a Church cannot adequately discharge its duty to God, to the world, and to its own members, without a Confession of Faith.

There never has been a period in which the Christian Church has been without a Confession of Faith, though these Confessions have varied both in character and in extent. The first and simplest Confession is that of Peter: 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.' That of the Ethiopian treasurer is similar, and almost identical: 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' This Confession secured admission into the Church; but, without this, admission could not have been obtained.

It was not long till this simple and brief primitive Confession was enlarged; at first, in order to meet the perverse notions of the Judaizing teachers, and next, to exclude those who were beginning to be tainted with the Gnostic heresies. It then became necessary, not only to confess that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, but also that Jesus Christ was come in the flesh, in order to prevent the admission, and to check the teaching, of those who held that Christ's human nature was a mere phantasm or appearance.

In like manner the rise of any heresy rendered it necessary, first, to test the novel tenet by the Word of God and by the decision of the Holy Spirit, and then to add to the existing Confession of Faith a new article, containing the deliverance of the Church respecting each successive heresy. Thus, in the discharge of her duty to God, to the world, and to herself, the Church was constrained to enlarge the Confession of her Faith.

But this unavoidable enlargement ought not to be censured as unnecessarily lengthened and minute; for, let it be observed, that it led to a continually increasing clearness and precision in the testimony of what the Church believes, and tended to the progressive development of sacred truth.

Further, as the need of a Confession arises from the nature of the human mind, and the enlargement of the Confession was caused by the successive appearance and refutation of error, and as the human mind is still the same, and prone to the same erroneous notions, the Confession of Faith, which contains a refutation of past heresies, furnishes, at the same time, to all who understand it, a ready weapon wherewith to encounter any resuscitated heresy. The truth of this view will be most apparent to those who have most carefully studied the various Confessions of Faith framed by the Christian Church. And it must ever be regarded as a matter of no small importance by those who seek admission into any Church, that in its Confession they can obtain a full exhibition of the terms of communion to which they are required to consent. The existence of a Confession of Faith is ever a standing defence against the danger of any Church lapsing unawares into heresy. For although no Church ought to regard her Confession as a standard of faith, in any other than a subordinate sense, still it is a standard of admitted faith, which the Church may not lightly abandon, and a term of communion to its own members, till its articles are accused of being erroneous, and again brought to the final and supreme standard, the Word of God and the teaching of the Holy Spirit, sincerely, humbly, and earnestly sought in faith and prayer.

b. Quitting the subject of Confessions of Faith in general, we direct our attention to the Confession of Faith framed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines.

The first thing which must strike any thoughtful reader, after having carefully and studiously perused the Westminster Assembly's Confession of Faith, *is the remarkable comprehensiveness and accuracy of its character, viewed as a systematic exhibition of divine truth, or what is termed a system of theology.* In this respect it may be regarded as almost perfect, both in its arrangement and in its completeness. Even a single glance over its table of contents will show with what exquisite skill its arrangement proceeds from the statement of first principles to the regular development and final consummation of the whole scheme of revealed truth. Nothing essential is omitted; and nothing is extended to a length disproportioned to its due importance. Nor do we think that a systematic study of theology could be prosecuted on a better plan than that of the Confession of Faith. Too little attention, perhaps, has been shown to the Confession in this respect; and we are strongly persuaded that it might be most advantageously used in our theological halls as a text-book.

This, at least, may be affirmed, that no private Christian could fail to benefit largely from a deliberate and studious perusal and re-perusal of the Confession of Faith, for the express purpose of obtaining a clear and systematic conception of sacred truth, both as a whole, and with all its parts so arranged as to display their relative importance, and their mutual bearing upon, and illustration of, each other. Such a deliberate perusal would also tend very greatly to fortify the mind against the danger of being led astray by crude notions, or induced to attribute undue importance to some favourite doctrine, to the disparagement of others not less essential, and with serious injury to the harmonious analogy of faith.

There is another characteristic of the Westminster Confession to which still less attention had been generally directed, but which is not less remarkable. Framed, as it was, by men of distinguished learning and ability, who were thoroughly conversant with the history of the Church from the earliest times till the period in which they lived, *it contains the calm and settled judgment of these profound divines on all previous heresies and subjects of controversy which had in any age or country agitated the Church.* This it does without expressly naming even one of these heresies, or entering into mere

controversy. Each error is condemned, not by a direct statement and refutation of it, but by a clear, definite and strong statement of the converse truth. There was, in this mode of exhibiting the truth, singular wisdom combined with equally singular modesty. Everything of an irritating nature is suppressed, and the pure and simple truth alone displayed; while there is not only no ostentatious parade of superior learning, but even a concealment of learning the most accurate and profound.

A hasty or superficial reader of the Confession of Faith will scarcely perceive that, in some of its apparently simple propositions, he is perusing an acute and conclusive refutation of the various heresies and controversies that have corrupted and disturbed the Church. Yet, if he will turn to Church history, make himself acquainted with its details, and resume his study of the Confession, he will be often surprised to find in one place the wild theories of the Gnostics dispelled; in another, the Arian and Socinian heresies set aside; in another, the very essence of the Papal system annihilated; and in another, the basis of all Pelagian and Arminian errors removed.

Thus viewed, the Confession of Faith might be so connected with one aspect of Church history as to furnish, if not a textbook according to chronological arrangement in studying the rise and refutation of heresies, yet a valuable arrangement of their relative importance, doctrinally considered. And when we advert to the fact that, owing to the sameness of the human mind, there is a perpetually recurring tendency to reproduce an old and exploded error, as if it were a new discovery of some hitherto unknown or neglected truth, it must be obvious that were the peculiar excellence of our Confession, as a deliverance of all previously existing heresies, better known and more attended to, there would be great reason to hope that their re-appearance would be rendered almost impossible, or, at least, that their growth would be very speedily and effectually checked.

Closely connected with this excellence of the Confession of Faith is *its astonishing precision of thought and language*. The whole mental training of the eminent divines of that period led to this result. They were accustomed to cast every argument into the syllogistic form, and to adjust all its terms with the utmost

care and accuracy. Every one who has studied the propositions of the Confession must have remarked their extreme precision; but, without peculiar attention, he may not perceive the astonishing care which these divines must have bestowed on this part of their great work. This may be best shown by an instance. Let us select one from chapter 3, 'On God's Eternal Decree,' sections 3 and 4: 'By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death. These angels and men thus *predestinated* and *foreordained*,' etc.

The expressions to which we wish to draw the reader's attention are the words 'predestinated' and 'foreordained'. A hasty or superficial reader might perceive no difference between these words. But, if so, why are they both used? For there is no instance of mere tautological repetition in the concise language of the Confession. But, further, let it be well remarked that the word 'predestinated' is used only in connection with 'everlasting life,' and the word 'foreordained' with 'everlasting death'. And when the compound form of the proposition is assumed, both terms are used to represent each its respective member in the general affirmation. Why is this the case? Because the Westminster Divines did not understand the meaning of the terms *predestination* and *foreordination* to be identical, and therefore never used these words as synonymous. By *predestination* they meant *a positive decree determining to confer everlasting life*; and this they regarded as the basis of the whole *doctrines of free grace*, arising from nothing in man, but having for its divine origin the character and sovereignty of God. By *foreordination*, on the other hand, they meant *a decree of order, or arrangement, determining that the guilty should be condemned to everlasting death*; and this they regarded as the basis of *judicial procedure*, according to which God 'ordains men to dishonour and wrath for their sin,' and having respect to man's own character and conduct.

Let it be further remarked, that while, according to this view, the term *predestination* could never with propriety be applied to the *lost*, the term *foreordination* might be applied to the *saved*, since they also are the subjects, in one sense, of judicial procedure. Accordingly there is no instance in the Confession of Faith where

the term *predestination* is applied to the *lost*, though there are several instances where the term *foreordination*, or a kindred term, is applied to the *saved*. And let this also be marked, that the term *reprobation*, which is so liable to be misunderstood and applied in an offensive sense to the doctrine of predestination, is not even once used in the Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. Later writers on that doctrine have indeed employed that word, as older writers had done, and had thereby furnished occasion to the opponents of the doctrine to misrepresent it; but the Westminster Divines cautiously avoided the use of an offensive term, carefully selected such words as were best fitted to convey their meaning, and in every instance used them with the most strict and definite precision.¹

Many other examples might be given of the remarkable accuracy of thought and language which forms a distinguished characteristic of the Confession of Faith; but we must content ourselves with suggesting the line of investigation, leaving it to every reader to prosecute it for himself.

Another decided and great merit of the Confession consists in the clear and well-defined statement which it makes *of the principles on which alone can securely rest the great idea of the co-ordination, yet mutual support, of the civil and the ecclesiastical jurisdictions*. It is but too usual for people to misunderstand those parts of the Confession which treat of these jurisdictions – some accusing those passages of containing Erastian concessions, and others charging them with being either lawless or intolerant. The truth is, they favour no extreme. Proceeding upon the sacred rule – to render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's – they willingly ascribe to the civil magistrate a supreme power in the State: all that belongs to his province, not merely with regard to his due authority over the persons and property of men, but also with regard to what pertains to his own official mode of rendering homage to the King of kings. It is in this latter department of magisterial duty that what

1. In the Exposition it has been found necessary to use the term *reprobation*, in consequence of its frequent occurrence in the writings of the most eminent modern authors; who have, however, been careful to explain it, so as to guard against the harsh misconstruction of its meaning by prejudiced opponents. When so explained it is harmless; but it might have been as well, had a term so liable to be perverted never been employed.

is called the power of the civil magistrate – *circa sacra* – *about* religious matters, consists. But there his province ends, and he has no power *in sacris* – *in* religious matters. This is most carefully guarded in the leading proposition of Chapter 30: ‘The Lord Jesus Christ, as King and Head of his Church, hath therein appointed a government in the hands of Church Officers, distinct from the Civil Magistrate.’

The leading Erastians of that period, learned and subtle as they were, felt it impossible to evade the force of that proposition, and could but refuse to give to it the sanction of the Legislature. They could not, however, prevail upon the Assembly either to modify or suppress it; and there it remains, and must remain, as the unanswered and unanswerable refutation of the Erastian heresy by the Westminster Assembly of Divines.

In modern times it has been too much the custom of the opponents of Erastianism tacitly to grant the Erastian argument – or, at least, the principle on which it rests – by admitting, or even asserting, that if a Church be established, it must cease to have a separate and independent jurisdiction, and must obey the laws of the State, even in spiritual matters; but then declaring that, as this is evidently wrong, there ought to be no Established Church. There is more peril to both civil and religious liberty in this mode of evading Erastianism than is commonly perceived; for, if it were generally admitted that an Established Church ought to be subject, even in spiritual matters, to the civil jurisdiction of the State, then would civil rulers have a direct and admitted interest in establishing a Church, not for the sake of promoting Christianity, nor with the view of rendering homage to the Prince of the kings of the earth, but for the purpose of employing the Church as a powerful engine of State policy. That they would avail themselves of such an admission is certain; and this would necessarily tend to produce a perilous contest between the defenders of religious liberty and the supporters of arbitrary power; and if the issue should be the triumph of Erastianism, that issue would inevitably involve the loss of both civil and religious liberty in the blending of the two jurisdictions – which is the very essence of absolute despotism.

Of this the framers of our Confession were well aware; and, therefore, they strove to procure the well-adjusted and mutual

counterpoise and co-operation of the two jurisdictions, as the best safeguards of both civil and religious liberty, and as founded on the express authority of the Word of God. It never yet has been proved, from either Scripture or reason, that they were wrong, although their views have been much misunderstood and grievously misrepresented. But, instead of prosecuting this topic, we refer to the comment on those chapters which treat of the civil magistrate, of synods, and of Church censures, as giving a very accurate and intelligible explanation of the doctrine of the Confession on these subjects.

The Confession of Faith has often been accused of *advocating intolerant and persecuting principles*. It is, however, in truth, equally free from latitudinarian laxity on the one hand, and intolerance on the other. An intelligent and candid perusal of chapter 20, 'On Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience,' ought of itself to refute all such calumnies. The mind of man never produced a truer or nobler proposition than the following:

'God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.'

The man who can comprehend, entertain, and act upon that principle can never arrogate an overbearing and intolerant authority over the conscience of his fellow-man, much less wield against him the weapons of remorseless persecution.

But there is a very prevalent and yet very false method of thinking, or pretending to think, respecting toleration and liberty of conscience. Many seem to be of the opinion that toleration consists in making no distinction between truth and error, but regarding them with equal favour. This opinion, if carefully analysed, would be found to be essentially of an infidel character. Many seem to think that by liberty of conscience is meant that every man should be at liberty to act in everything according to his own inclination, without regard to the feelings, convictions and rights of other men. This would, indeed, be to convert liberty into lawlessness, and to make conscience of licentiousness.

But the Confession proceeds upon the principle that truth can be distinguished from error, right from wrong; that though

conscience cannot be compelled, it may be enlightened; and that when sinful, corrupt and prone to licentiousness, men may be lawfully restrained from the commission of such excesses as are offensive to public feeling, and injurious to the moral welfare of the community. If this be intolerance, it is a kind of intolerance of which none will complain but those who wish to be free from all restraint of law, human or divine. Nothing, in our opinion, but a wilful determination to misrepresent the sentiments expressed in the Confession of Faith, or a culpable degree of wilful ignorance respecting the true meaning of these sentiments, could induce any man to accuse it of favouring intolerant and persecuting principles. Certainly the conduct of those who framed it gave no countenance to such an accusation, though that calumny has been often and most pertinaciously asserted. On this point, also it would be well if people would take the trouble to ascertain what precise meaning the framers of the Confession gave to the words which they employed; for it is not doing justice to them and their work to adopt some modern acceptance of a term used by them in a different sense, and then to charge them with holding the sentiment conveyed by the modern use or misuse of that term. Yet this is the method almost invariably employed by the assailants of the Confession of Faith.

c. In order to form a right conception of the Confession of Faith, it is absolutely necessary to have some acquaintance with the history of the period in which it was composed. A brief outline, however, is all that our present space can afford.

There was, from the beginning, a very strong and essential difference between the Reformed Churches of England and of Scotland; arising, in a great measure, out of the peculiar elements prevailing at the time in the respective kingdoms. In England, the Reformation was begun, conducted and stopped almost entirely according to the pleasure of the reigning sovereign. In Scotland, it was begun, carried forward and completed in spite of the determined opposition of the sovereign. In England, therefore, the will of the monarch was an essential element from the first, and continued to be so throughout the course of the Reformation; and the Church of England was accordingly based upon, and pervaded

by, the evil influence of the Erastian principle, the sovereign being recognised as the supreme judge in causes ecclesiastical as well as in causes civil. The Church of Scotland assumed a very different basis, and gave her undivided allegiance to a far other King: she assumed as the sole rule the Word of God alone, and the whole Word of God, in all matters of doctrine, worship, government and discipline; and paid her allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ, and to him alone, as the only Head and King of the Church. There was, therefore, in the Church of Scotland, from the first, a degree of spiritual independence, of true religious liberty, to which the Church of England never could attain.

This spiritual independence enjoyed by the Church of Scotland was by no means agreeable to James VI, who set himself to subvert it by every means which fraud (by him called 'king-craft') could devise, or force accomplish. He did not wholly succeed; though, by banishing the faithful and the fearless, and overawing the timid, he did manage to mould it somewhat into conformity with his arbitrary will, and imposed upon it a set of sycophantic and tyrannical prelates. His sterner but less deceitful son, Charles I, urged on by the narrow-minded and cruel Laud, seeking to complete what his father had begun, drove Scotland to the necessity of rising in defence of her liberties, civil and sacred. This gave rise to the great National Covenant of 1638, by which the people of almost the entire kingdom were knit to God and to each other, in a solemn bond for the maintenance and defence of sacred truth and freedom. The contest proceeding, a General Assembly was held at Glasgow towards the close of the same year, in which the system of Prelacy was abolished, and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland restored. In vain did the king attempt to overthrow this second Reformation, even by the extreme measure of an attempted invasion. The tide of war rolled back from the Scottish borders, and the Church and kingdom continued covenanted and free.

But a storm had been long gathering in England, and was ready to burst forth with uncontrollable might. Although the progress of the Reformation in England had been paralysed in all its elements, and stopped short long ere it had reached anything like completeness, still there were many who ardently desired to

promote the greater purity of the English Church, by additional reforms in doctrine, worship and discipline. This could not be obtained; but the persevering efforts of these true Reformers gave rise to the Puritan party, as they were designated, and prepared for a more intense and formidable struggle.

On the other hand, while the Puritans were striving for further reform, what may be termed the Court party were receding further and further from the principles of the Reformation, and gradually approximating to those of Rome. The evil genius of the unhappy Laud brought matters to a crisis. His influence urged on the unfortunate king to the adoption of measures formidable alike to both civil and religious liberty.

The free spirit of England was at length aroused; and the contest between the despotic monarch and his free-hearted subjects began to assume the aspect of a civil war. The Parliament declared its own sittings permanent; and regarding the despotic principles and conduct of the bishops as the direct cause of the oppression under which they had so long groaned, passed a bill for the abolition of Prelacy. The king unsheathed the sword of civil war; and the English Parliament sought the assistance of Scotland, as necessary to preserve the liberties of both kingdoms.

The leading Scottish statesmen were well aware, that if the king should succeed in his attempt to overpower the English Parliament, he would immediately assail Scotland with increased power and determination. But at the same time, as their whole contest had been on sacred ground, they could not enter into an offensive and defensive alliance with the English Parliament for any less hallowed cause, or with any less important object in view. Had the king not gone beyond his own province, and invaded that of religion, they would have left his jurisdiction and authority unquestioned and untouched. For such reasons they would not frame with England a civil league, except it were based upon, and pervaded by, a religious covenant. To these views England consented; and the consequence was the formation of THE SOLEMN LEAGUE AND COVENANT – a document which we cannot help regarding as the noblest and best, in its essential nature and principles, of all that are recorded among the international transactions of the world.

A considerable time before this important event took place, the idea had been entertained in England that it would be extremely desirable to call a 'General synod of the most grave, pious, learned, and judicious divines,' for the purpose of deliberating respecting all things necessary for the peace and good government of the Church. This desire had been intimated as early as 1641; while it was not till June 12, 1643, that Parliament issued the Ordinance calling the Assembly. Although, therefore, the Solemn League and Covenant exercised no little influence in the deliberations of that Assembly, it was not the cause of that Assembly being held.

At the time when the Assembly was called together, there was no organized Church in England. Prelacy had been abolished, and no other form of Church government was in existence. It did not meet as a Church court, in any accurate sense of that expression, but was in reality merely an assembly of divines, called together in a case of extreme emergency, to consult, deliberate and advise, but not to exercise directly any judicial or ecclesiastical functions. This it is necessary to bear in mind, not for the purpose of casting any slight upon its character and proceedings, but for the purpose of showing how utterly groundless are the assertions of those who charge it with being constituted on an Erastian principle. It could not have met except under the protection of Parliament. It was not an ecclesiastical court at all; for it had no conformity with either the Episcopalian, Presbyterian or Congregational systems of Church government; it neither ruled the Parliament, nor was ruled by the Parliament; it deliberated, reasoned, voted, formed its own free judgment concerning the important matters before it, and gave the results as its advice to Parliament, to be followed or rejected by that body on its own responsibility. When the members of Parliament, who formed a constituent element of it as lay assessors, strove to introduce Erastian principles into its decisions, it met these attempts with strong, persevering, and invincible opposition – willing rather that its whole protracted labours should be rejected, than that, by any weak and sinful compromise, it should consent to the admission of an evil principle.

The greater part of the divines of whom the Westminster Assembly was composed were of the Puritans; but nearly all of these had been originally Episcopalian, so far, at least, as regarded

their ordination, and their having held the ministerial office in connection with the Prelatic Establishment. The Independents were at first only five in number – Goodwin, Nye, Burroughs, Bridge and Simpson – but afterwards increased to about a dozen. There were only two of the divines that entertained Erastian principles – Lightfoot and Coleman. The Scottish commissioners, appointed to consult and deliberate, but not to vote, were six in number, four of whom were ministers – Henderson, Baillie, Rutherford and Gillespie; and two elders – Lord Maitland and Johnston of Warriston. The whole number of the Assembly amounted to one hundred and forty-two divines, and thirty-two lay assessors; but of this number seldom more than from sixty to eighty gave regular attendance. The Assembly was convened for the first time on Saturday, July 1, 1643, and it continued to hold regular meetings till February 22, 1649; when, instead of being formally dissolved, it was formed into a committee for the trial of ministers. In this character it continued to meet occasionally till March 25, 1652, when Cromwell forcibly dissolved the Long Parliament, and put an end to everything to which it had given existence. The number of sessions held by the Westminster Assembly was one thousand one hundred and sixty-three, and the period of its duration five years, six months, and twenty-one days.

The general result of the Westminster Assembly's deliberations was the framing of the Confession of Faith, the Directory for Public Worship, a Form of Church Government and Discipline, and the Catechisms, Larger and Shorter. When these had been completed, the Scottish Commissioners returned to their own country, laid the fruits of those labours in which they had been so long and arduously engaged before the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, and obtained the ratification of those important productions.

So careful, however, was the Church of Scotland to guard against the possible admission of anything that could be even suspected to have the slightest taint of Erastianism, that the Assembly, in its Act approving the Confession of Faith, of date August 27, 1647,² inserted an explanation of chapter 31, relating to the authority of the civil magistrate to call a synod – restricting that authority to the case of 'Churches not settled or constituted in point of government,'

2. The reader will find this Act in Appendix 1.

and protecting the right of the Church to hold assemblies on its own authority, 'by the intrinsical power derived from Christ,' even though the civil magistrate should deny his consent.

To this the Scottish Parliament offered no opposition; but the English Parliament refused, or at least declined, to ratify or sanction it, and re-committed certain particulars in discipline. These particulars were Section 4, Chapter 20, 'Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience'; Chapter 30, 'Of Church Censures'; and Chapter 31, 'Of Synods and Councils.' Let the intelligent and candid reader peruse carefully the above-named passages, and he cannot but perceive the folly, absurdity, or perverse malevolence of those who accuse the Confession of Faith of being tainted with intolerance and Erastianism; since the very passages on which such persons pretend to found their accusations were those which the decidedly Erastian, and not peculiarly tolerant Parliament of England refused to sanction. It is painful to be constrained even to allude to the continued fabrication of such calumnious charges, and that, too, by some who either do know, or ought to know, that they are utterly untrue. 'What shall I do in order to become famous?' said an ambitious youth to an ancient sophist. 'Kill a man who is famous already, and then your name will be always mentioned along with his,' was the sophist's reply. On some such principle those men seem to act, who charge the Confession of Faith with intolerance, as if that were the ready way to procure renown. But the sophist neglected to draw the distinction between fame and infamy; and it may ultimately appear that those who seek celebrity by attempting to kill the reputation of the Westminster divines have committed a similar mistake.

But it is not necessary here to prosecute the vindication of the Westminster Assembly and the Confession of Faith. That has been effectually done recently by various publications, to which the reader is referred. This only would we further state, with regard to such accusations, that Presbyterians in general, and Scottish Presbyterians in particular, have long been guilty of the most ungrateful neglect and disregard towards the memories of the truly great and good men by whom the admirable subordinate standards of their Church were framed. It would be absurd to ascribe perfection either to the men or to their works; but it is worse than absurd to

permit them to be vilified by assailants of all kinds, certainly in no respect the equals of these men, without uttering one word in their defence. The best mode of defending them, however, is to draw to them the quickened attention of the public mind. Let them be read and studied profoundly; let them be exposed to the most minute and sifting examination; let every proposition be severely tested by the strictest laws of reasoning and by the supreme standard of the Word of God. Whatever cannot endure this investigation, let it be cast aside, as tried in the balance and found wanting; for this is only consistent with its own frank admission, that 'all synods and councils, since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both.' But so far as it does stand an examination so searching – and of that we have no fear – let it no longer be exposed to the wanton assaults of rude ignorance, guileful calumny, or bitter malevolence. This, and nothing less than this, is due to the memory of the illustrious dead, and to the living Confession of their Faith, and to our own reverential attachment to the sacred doctrines therein stated and maintained.

d. Our prefatory remarks were begun by directing attention to the necessity for the existence of Creeds and Confessions, and the important purposes subserved by these subordinate standards; and we resume that view for the purpose of stating the inference to which it ought to lead.

Since a Church cannot exist without some Confession or mode of ascertaining that its members are agreed in their general conception of what they understand divine truth to mean; and since the successive rise of heretical opinions, and their successive refutation, necessarily tends to an enlargement of the Confession, and at the same time to an increasing development of the knowledge of divine truth, ought it not to follow, that the various Confessions of separate Churches would have a constant tendency to approximate, till they should all blend in one harmonious Confession of one Church general?

No-one who has studied a harmony of Protestant Confessions can hesitate to admit that this is a very possible, as it is a most

desirable, result. When, further, we rise to that spiritual element to which also our attention has been directed, we may anticipate an increasing degree of enlightenment in the Christian Church, bestowed by the Holy Spirit, in answer to the earnest prayers of sincere and humble faith, which will greatly tend to hasten forward and secure an amount of Christian unity in faith and love far beyond what has existed since the times of the apostles. Entertaining this pleasant idea, we might expect both that the latest Confession of Faith framed by a Protestant Church would be the most perfect, and also that it might form a basis of evangelical union to the whole Church.

To some this may seem a startling, or even an extravagant idea. But let it be remembered, that, owing to a peculiar series of unpropitious circumstances, the Westminster Assembly's Confession of Faith has never yet been adequately known to the Christian Churches. By the Scottish Church alone was it fully received; and in consequence of the various events which have since befallen that Church, comparatively little attention has been paid to the Confession of Faith till recent times. It is now, we trust, in the process of becoming more known and better understood than formerly; and we feel assured that the more it is known and the better it is understood, the more highly will its great and varied excellences be estimated. This will tend, at the same time, to direct to it the attention of other Churches; and we cannot help anticipating the degree of surprise which will be felt by many ingenuous minds, that they had remained so long unacquainted with a production of such remarkable value.

Should this be the case, as we venture to hope, and should any serious objections be entertained by fair and candid minds with regard to some expressions in the Confession, there could be no great difficulty in appending to these some slight verbal explanations, showing what they were intended to mean, and how we understand them; for we are fully persuaded that by far the greater proportion of objections that could be entertained by any evangelical Christian or Church would relate merely to peculiar terms, and would be founded almost entirely on a misconception of what meaning these terms were intended to convey. For our own part, we wish no alteration, even of a single word; but neither

do we think it necessary to allow the erroneous interpretation of a word to operate as an obstacle to the reception by other Churches of our Confession of Faith, if, by the explanation of that word, the obstacle might be removed.

Such a result would be the realization of the great idea entertained by the leading members of the Westminster Assembly, and especially by the Scottish commissioners – with whom, indeed, it originated. No narrow and limited object could satisfy the desires and anticipations of these enlightened and large-hearted men. With one comprehensive glance they surveyed the condition of Christendom and the world – marked its necessities, and contemplated the remedy. Thus they formed the great and even sublime idea of a Protestant union throughout Christendom; not merely for the purpose of counterbalancing Popery, but in order to purify, strengthen and unite all true Christian Churches; so that, with combined energy and zeal, they might go forth, in glad compliance with the Redeemer's commands, teaching all nations, and preaching the everlasting gospel to every creature under heaven.

Such was the magnificent conception of men whom it has been too much the fashion to stigmatize as narrow-minded bigots. It is not in the heart of a bigot that a love able to embrace Christendom could be cherished – it is not in the mind of a bigot that an idea of such moral sublimity could be conceived. It may be said, no doubt, that this idea was premature. Premature it was in one sense; for it could not be then realized; but the statement of it was not premature, for it was the statement of the grand result which ought to have been produced by the Reformation. In still another sense it was not premature, any more than it is premature to sow the seed in spring from which we expect to reap the autumnal harvest. The seed must be sown before the harvest can be produced – the idea must be stated before it can be realized. It must then be left to work its way into the mind of man – to grow, and strengthen, and enlarge, till in due time it shall produce its fruit in its season.

May it not be hoped that the fruit-bearing season is at hand? All things seem hastening forward to some mighty change or development. On all sides the elements of evil are mustering with almost preternatural rapidity and power.

Popery has, to an unexpected degree, recovered from its deadly wound and its exhausted weakness, and is putting forth its destructive energies in every quarter of the world.

In England the dread aspect of Laudean Prelacy has re-appeared – called, indeed, by a new name, but displaying all the formidable characteristics of its predecessor – the same in its lofty pretensions, in its Popish tendencies, in its supercilious contempt of every other Church, and in its persecuting spirit.

The civil government appears to be impelled by something like infatuation, and is introducing, or giving countenance to, measures that are darkly ominous to both civil and religious liberty, as if hastening onward to a crisis which all may shudder to contemplate. The masses of the community are in a state ripe for any convulsion, however terrible, having been left for generations uneducated and uninstructed in religious truth.

The Scottish Ecclesiastical Establishment has been rent asunder; its constitution has been changed, or rather subverted; and those who firmly maintained the principles of the Church of Scotland have been constrained to separate from the State, in order to preserve these principles unimpaired. The Church of Scotland is again disestablished, as she has been in former times; but she is free: free to maintain all those sacred principles bequeathed to her by reformers and divines and martyrs; free to offer to all other evangelical Churches the right hand of brotherly love and fellowship; free to engage with them in the formation of a great evangelical union, on the firm basis of sacred and eternal truth.

Surely these concurring events are enough to constrain all who are able to comprehend them, to long for some sure rallying ground on which the defenders of religious truth and liberty may plant their standard. Such rallying ground we think the Confession of Faith would afford, were its principles carefully considered and fully understood. And we would fondly trust we may cherish the hope of at length accomplishing the Christian enterprise for which the Westminster Assembly met together, and of realizing the great idea which filled the minds of its most eminent Christian patriots.

The errors which prevented the success of the Westminster Assembly may be to us beacons, both warning from danger and guiding on to safety. In their case, political influence and intrigue

formed one baneful element of deadly power. Let all political influence be distrusted and avoided, and let political intrigue be utterly unknown in all our religious deliberations. In times of trouble and alarm, 'Trust not in princes, nor in the sons of men,' with its divine counterpart, 'Trust in the Lord, and stay yourselves upon your God,' should be the watchword and reply of all true Christian Churches.

Dissensions among brethren, groundless jealousies, and misconstructions, and want of openness and candour, were grievously pernicious to the Westminster Assembly. If the Presbyterians and the Independents could have banished the spirit of dissension, expelled all petty jealousy, and laid their hearts open to each other in godly simplicity and sincerity, all the uniformity that was really necessary might have been easily obtained. And if all truly evangelical Christians – whether they be Presbyterians, or Independents, or Baptists, or Methodists, or Episcopalians, such as some that could be named – would but give full scope to their already existing and strong principles and feelings of faith and hope and love, there could be little difficulty in framing such a Christian union – term it Presbyterian or Evangelical, so that it be truly scriptural – as might be able, by the blessing and the help of God, to stem and bear back the growing and portentous tide of Popery and Infidelity, that threaten, with their proud waves, once more to overwhelm the world.

Has not the time for this great evangelical and scriptural union come? It is impossible for any one to look abroad upon the general aspect of the world with even a hasty glance, without perceiving indications of an almost universal preparation for some great event. The nations of the earth are still – not in peace, but like wearied combatants, resting on their arms a brief breathing space, that, with recovered strength and quickened animosity, they may spring anew to the mortal struggle. During this fallacious repose there has been, and there is, an exertion of the most intense and restless activity, by principles the most fiercely hostile, for the acquisition of partisans. Despotism and Democracy, Superstition and Infidelity, have alike been mustering their powers and calling forth their energies, less apparently for mutual destruction, according to their wont and nature, than in order to form an unnatural coalition and

conspiracy against the very existence of free, pure and spiritual Christianity.

Nor, in one point of view, has Christianity been recently lying supine and dormant. Many a noble enterprise for the extension of the gospel at home and abroad has been planned and executed; and the great doctrines of saving truth have been clearly explained and boldly proclaimed, with earnest warmth and uncompromising faithfulness. A time of refreshing also has come from the presence of the Lord – a spirit of revival has been poured forth upon the thirsty Church – and the hearts of Christian brethren have learned to melt and blend with a generous and rejoicing sympathy, to which they had too long been strangers.

Can all these things be beheld and passed lightly over, as leading to nothing, and pretending nothing? That were little short of blind infatuation. What they do fully portend it were presumptuous to say; but it is not difficult to say for what they form an unprecedented preparation. What now prevents a worldwide evangelical and scriptural union? 'All things are prepared, come to the marriage.' 'If ye love ME, love one another.' 'Because HE laid down his life for us, we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.' Had these been fully the principles and rules of conduct of the Westminster Assembly, its great idea might have been realized. Let them be those that animate and guide all Christian Churches now. They have been felt in our great unions for prayer; they should be felt by all who venerate and can understand the standards of the Westminster Assembly. And if they be, then may we not only accomplish the object of its Solemn League and Covenant, concur in its Confession of Faith, and realize its great idea of a general evangelical union; but we may also, if such be the will of our Divine Head and King, be mightily instrumental in promoting the universal propagation of the gospel, and drawing down from above the fulfilled answer of that sacred prayer in which we all unite: 'THY KINGDOM COME: THY WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN.'