

PRESBYTERIAN SCOTLAND: A SELF ASSESSMENT

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The purpose of this address is to try and bring ourselves under the microscopic eye that is fixed upon the seven churches in Asia in the last decade of the first century AD. We take them to represent all of Christ's Church. Our attempt at application bears mainly on ourselves in Scotland. I am almost convinced these epistles may have been written in 94 AD; we are now in 1994. They are as applicable now as then.

It has been my intention to enlarge more on one of the commendations which I feel is foundational. This is the recognition by the Church of one rule of faith and practice and, I ask, Are we who are members and branches of the church in Scotland free and confident to claim that we submit to Christ's will as it is revealed in the Old and New Testaments; in [the] Law and Prophets; in [the] Gospels, Acts, Epistles and Revelation? This aspect of our history as churches continues to cause pain among Christ's flock. Hence this effort at enlarging on the subject.

Scripture

There are in the church those who see their Lord's will given in Scripture, which they submit to, as inspired, inerrant and infallible. Prefacing the letters to the Asian churches are these words: "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand" (Rev 1:3). In His days on earth, the very Christ who writes these epistles said to the Jews one day: "Is it not written in your law ... Ye are gods? If he called them gods ...

and the scripture cannot be broken; say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified ... Thou blasphemest?" (John 10:34-36). How many of them would have known where these obscure words were written? But, as Scripture, they cannot be broken, no matter how obscure, how non-essential in men's estimation! Elsewhere (1 John 4) John makes this a prime test for trying the spirits: "He who knows God, hears us; he who is not of God, does not hear us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

We may note that by the last decade of the first century all of Scripture had been written, but it took some years for the Canon to be formed.

In this world, contention as to what is taught in the Word results from two divergent approaches to its study. One clings to the autonomy of man's reason; the other submits to divine authority in Scripture. James Orr was an influential Scottish theologian at the turn of the century. He may be said to have retreated from strict Calvinism. Still, he could declare: "Though there be disputes about the authority of Scripture, there ought to be no dispute about this, that whatever has no place in Scripture or cannot be legitimately deduced from it, is no part of the truth of revelation for which the Church is set as the ground and pillar." This truth is reflected in histories of the development of doctrine, such as those of Orr and Berkhof. They point out that there was a logical as well as a chronological side to this.

Creeds and Confessions

One of the results of these disputations was the formulation of creeds and confessions. The Reformed and revived Scottish church adopted the Scots Confession in 1560. In 1647 the Westminster confession was adopted [and] in a 1690 Act, office-bearers were required "to subscribe their approbation of the Confession of Faith." In 1694 an Act included a new formula with the promise "to own the doctrine therein contained to be the true doctrine, which I will constantly adhere to." A stricter version was adopted in 1711.

A likely rejoinder to all this might be, Whatever has a Confession of Faith to do with the end-of-the-first-century churches? Simply, the answer is that these churches had Christ's words directly sent in these epistles. These were from the very One who had given attestation to the Old Testament, had given the Gospel to His servants and had by this time inspired all the remaining penmen of Scripture. Those churches, 1900 years ago, knew what they *must* believe.

Subscription to the Westminster Confession

No detailed historical coverage of subscription to our Confession can be given here. Suffice it to say that the first breach in subscription happened in 1796 in the General Associate Synod; the next in 1820 in the United Secession. In 1847 the United Presbyterian Church revised its Formula – it was accused of having abolished the real one. Next, the same Church, in 1879, allowed ministers liberty of opinion in such points in the Standards *not entering into the substance of the faith*, [and] in 1892 the then Free Church followed their example.

It was 18 years later that the Church of Scotland (in 1910) enacted as follows: "I hereby subscribe the Confession of Faith declaring that I accept it as the Confession of this Church and that I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained therein." The 1929 Union between the Church of Scotland and the United Free church consolidated this position.

Reasons for the Breach in Subscription

How did this settled departure from the old, positive, subscription come about? One variant of the answer makes out that the cause of casting off the established subscription was both a healthy and inevitable one. Professor Cheyne lists about eight reasons, all of them described as "new": a new sense of history; a new moral sensitivity; a new picture of the natural world; a new estimate of human nature; a new tolerance and tentativeness – a "reaction," he says, "against theological ironclads like William Cunningham"; a new preference for the apologetic as against the dogmatic spirit; a new awareness of other religions and of the problems posed by them; a new approach to evangelism and perhaps a new understanding of the evangel!

Had there been no countervailing view of events the picture presented would have won total approval, if for no other reason than its pandering to self-gratification in the generations of Scots people who were involved. But do we actually find that there is no other depiction of that epoch? The answer is that some Christian leaders of very analytical minds saw these "new" experiences largely as evidences of some thing other than rapid progress in the spiritual sense.

Dr John Kennedy saw progress in his time, especially in the three areas of commerce, science and religious activity. In these, the spirit of that age was most visible. Of this, he stated, "There is to a great extent a lack of the carefulness which is born of honesty, while there is much of the eagerness born of pride. There

is a lack both of humility and reverence, while there is a vast amount of effort in the form of religious service. There is impatience of authority, a mutinous uprising against the rule of Scripture, both in faith and practice. Novelty, not truth, is what is desired; change according to men's tastes, not improvement according to the rule of Scripture; what shall suit the age, not what shall prepare for heaven."

It is clear that this spiritual giant's anxiety was that the truth would be dishonoured and that the rising generation might suffer great loss. He is incredulous that a speaker at the Assembly could denounce Eli for his trembling at the ark of God. "Is there no reason," he asks, "why one who fears the Lord should tremble in the truth being unrighteously dealt with ... and the God of Truth being dishonoured?"

The Real Reason for Departure from the Confession

Again, we pose the same question, Why did the church in Scotland depart from her Confession? It seems that the answer, willy nilly, that must be faced, is this: the doctrines of the Confession of Faith became unacceptable. One Free Church minister of the time expressed the fear that "the Bible order is to be reversed and now we are to say, Enter ye in at the wide gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way which leadeth to life, and many there be that find it. Because strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth to destruction and few there be that go in thereat."

Some identified the main offenders in these changing times as teachers of theology in church colleges. Their subscription to the Confession, which they had been appointed to teach as the truths of God, they had no hesitation in refuting in their lectures and writings. Responsible reviewers of the Declaratory Act faulted its language as ambiguous, its phraseology as mysterious. In itself it was a very deep contrivance to subvert the Church's Confession; an attempt to hold with the hare and run with the hounds. It was palpably inconsistent with the Church's Confession of Faith.

There was concern expressed even about the cavalier fashion in which certain men in high position in the Church assumed responsibility for determining what Christian people would choose as the confession of their faith, without seeking their consent. They pointed out how the apostles of Christ patently expected the people to understand gospel doctrine and to be held responsible for the soundness of the teachers' instructions. It was said by one critic: "The genius who devised it (the Declaratory Act) would seem to

have derived his inspiration from a professor of somewhat sceptical views whom the late Dr Begg used to talk about. This professor ... was asked by a friend in astonishment: "Does the Westminster Confession really contain your faith?" "Oh, yes," he answered, "it contains my faith," but, he added drily, "and a great deal more."

A serious objection to the Declaratory Act is that "it empowers the Assembly to deal with the whole Confession much as a farmer, by shifting a fence at his own sweet will, lets a sheep nibble in one field today and in another tomorrow." It meant the replacing of a fixed standard by the random decisions of successive General Assemblies. To mutilate the Confession was *ultra vires* of the Assembly. There is thus imposed on a Protestant Church what is essentially a popish conception. It was said in fact that the title "Church" is arrogated for the Assembly; the people are ignored. 'New presbyter is but old priest writ large,' and, it was said, "Very large he'll prove, wielding an Assembly majority vested with such power as the Act conferred."

The noteworthy defender of the Confession in the old Free Church could say that to his knowledge there was not one attempt to prove from the Bible the need to modify the Confession. It had been held for long that one of the Westminster Confession's most conspicuous attributes was accuracy of statement, but one of the characteristics of the time was that men preferred that no limit was set to their thoughts or speech.

During the whole of this century there has never been a large-scale return to former allegiance to the old doctrine by churches which qualified it. Dr B B Warfield, who lived into the 1920s and excelled in his standing as a theologian and in his loyalty to and elucidation of Calvinistic and confessional teaching, says of Calvin, that in him the maxim that "It is the heart that makes the theologian" finds, perhaps, its most eminent illustration. Calvin's entire theological work may be summed up in this, that "he emancipated the soul from the tyranny of human authority. He brought the soul into the immediate presence of God and cast it for its spiritual health upon the free grace of God alone. Where the Romanist placed the Church, it is said, Calvin placed the Deity... What Calvin did was, specifically, to replace the doctrine of the Church, as sole source of [the] assured knowledge of God and sole institute of salvation, by the Holy Spirit." If any country at any time had gained from the effects of their reformational freedom by means of their Church's Confession of Faith, it was

Results of Departure from the Confession

All churches that departed from their old, strict adherence to the Westminster Confession have discovered the following baneful effects. In the estimation of some, it has impaired the training afforded students for the ministry. This has, in turn, invariably resulted in an enervating of the church's pulpit effectiveness. It has caused disunity within the Christian Church and an impoverishing due to the depletion of the numbers united together under the standard of the old Confession. In Scotland the several Presbyterian churches giving unqualified subscription to the Confession of Faith have, *in toto*, less than 25,000 members. This has a dispiriting effect on many faithful Christians in Scotland, some of whom are berated as narrow and divisive; others deplore their own alienation within the church of Christ. In a natural close knit relationship no pain is more hurtful than that of enforced separation. The body of Christ in Scotland is aching throughout for this palpable reason.

The Need for Revival

In the light of our many faults, is there any guidance for us from the Lord's epistles to the seven churches of Asia? In the interest of time we must focus on one piece of counsel only. It is one with which we are familiar in the individual experience of God's salvation – repentance.

Firstly, let us note that this is a commendation of universal application. But someone says: "It is not! What of Smyrna and Philadelphia?" And indeed, one meets with individuals within all denominations who can be identified in this very way. They have no need of repentance, nor has their denomination. But, whatever may have contributed to the blamelessness of Smyrna and Philadelphia, repentance was included – deep and daily repentance. We must believe they were already penitent churches. It is a requirement of Christ's Church as long as any imperfection is found in her.

Secondly, it is a command bearing on specific sins. "My sin," says David, "I ever see." Do the epistles expose our own personal and denominational sins? Is it failure to hold fast our Lord's Name, say, by denying His deity or His virgin birth [or] that He has two natures in one Person. (Here, may I welcome Professor Torrance's recent public defence of the virgin birth. It is sad that it must be added at the same time that we cannot agree with his endorsement

of Barthian neo-orthodoxy.)

Do we have as individuals the very real spiritual faith and love that distinguished the churches of Christ? Have we the proofs of these in [our] activities, in [our] labour accompanied with pain, [in] the practical ministering to others' needs that is clearly commended by Him? (Here, may I commend the Retiring Moderator's Address to the last Assembly.) Do the tribulations and persecution we endure (if any) draw forth the grace of patience in us? Have we, metaphorically speaking, soiled our garments? And have we avoided unholy curiosity in seeking to know the depths of Satan? Do we have but a little strength and are we worthy in our standing as members of our Lord's Church?

For each and all of our sins we need repentance. And if there is any sin that has pre-eminence as a church sin, surely it is the failure to dispel the darkness around us – the dimming of our light almost to extinction.

Thirdly, again, we are to repent if we are given to smugness, to self-praise or vainglorious pride in our own attainments. We must consider with fear that the church among the seven that had no divine commendation was the most full of self-approval. If we approve of our own measure of orthodoxy, or pride ourselves in our intellectual liberation and progress so that we can apply the most powerful philosophic thought of the day to our understanding of religion and morality (or theology and ethics), let us remember [that] the church in Ephesus is charged with leaving her first love immediately after being commended for rejecting false apostles whom she had exposed as liars.

Fourthly, note also the command is to repent, not to deride others. Beware! The churches are all symbolised by golden candlesticks. Someone has said that half of the harm done in the world is due to people who want to feel important. In our case, let us remember that other men laboured and that we have entered into their labours. If we now possess a precious heritage, it is wholly of grace. Neither our labour nor our merit earned them. To whom much has been given, of them also, much shall be required. Must we not also acknowledge with deep gratitude the exemplary Christian work and witness of others!

Fifthly, the word is to repent, not to look back mournfully on other days. "Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this" (Ecc 7:10). Did really, the so-called good old days actually exist? Certainly there was a time in Ephesus when, we believe,

the church clung closely to her first love, when her words would more likely have been as Ruth's to Naomi, "Entreat me not to leave thee." But her present duty is to repent!

Notice also, it is not to confine the hope of God's favour to another world. The hope of the glory of God is not to interpose between us and present duty. "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation" (Psalm 51:12) was not a vain request on the lips of a penitent. They are not to settle down to a dolorous existence. The call to repentance is away from darkness into greater light. Nor is the Lord calling them to censure their rulers, to belittle their generation, upbraiding others, disparaging the efforts of those who labour in the gospel. It is a call, I repeat, to repentance.

Oh! how our beloved land of Scotland needs repentance! The call of our Lord in the first century was to the churches [and] in them to individuals, congregations, teachers of divinity, preachers, office-bearers, members, male and female, old and young.

I know I speak on your behalf and behalf of many throughout our land when I send out a trumpet call. Let us all with one heart return to the everlasting, tried and tested Biblical doctrines of our fathers. Then, as a nation, we "shall look upon him whom we have pierced, and we shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn" (Zech 12:10).

PROVIDENTIAL PRESERVATION (*Continued from page 14*) period) springs from a set of assumptions about providential preservation and the reality of a preserved text completely different from those underlying modern versions. She needs to become aware that modern versions represent the Trojan Horse of a liberal/critical approach to Scripture in the very heart of the evangelical citadel and to take appropriate action, if the triumph of this alien influence is not to become complete. She needs to realise that to buy and use a modern version is to buy a whole package of assumptions hostile to the historic faith and the reality of an infallible Bible, and to regain her confidence in the Old Book given to her by the providence of God, working in and through His church.

There are some hopeful signs of this beginning to happen. May the Lord confirm and establish His own pure and preserved words, for the glory of His Name and the salvation of His people.