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I. THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SEMINARY CURRICULUM.¹

I AM disposed to look upon the subject the discussion of which I have been asked to open, as a practical rather than as a purely theoretical one. One result of this mode of looking at it will be that we shall approach it from the point of view of our existing institutions, and ask, not what is the ideal curriculum for theological study, but what is the ideal and what the practicable curriculum for such institutions as our theological seminaries actually are.

The fundamental facts here, I take it, are three.

(1), Our theological seminaries are not the theological departments of universities, but training schools for the Christian ministry. That is to say, the object they set before themselves is fundamentally a practical one. They do not exist primarily in order to advance theological learning, but in order to impart theological instruction; their first object is not investigation, but communication; and they call their students to them, not that these may explore the unknown, but that they may learn the known in the sphere of theological truth. They do not exist primarily, again, in order to place in reach of all who may be interested in theological thought facilities for acquiring information concerning whatever department of theological learning each inquirer may for the moment desire to give his attention to; but in order that they may provide for a select body of young men, who

¹ A paper read before the "General Association of the Professors of the Theological Seminaries of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America," June 3, 1896.

IV. THE AUTHORITY OF THE CATECHISMS AND CONFESSIONS OF THE REFORMED CHURCHES HOLDING THE PRESBYTERIAN SYSTEM.¹

It is a historic characteristic of this family of churches that they emphasize the importance of a correct apprehension of the truth. "Truth is in order to goodness," and the right acceptance of the truth is necessary to a right attainment of the goodness. Accordingly, the history of symbolics is one of the largest chapters in the chronicles of Reformed Christianity.

It is a psychological truism that the mind must interpret to itself any body of truth in order intelligently to accept it. Chillingworth's remark that the Bible is the religion of Protestants, may be the watchword of an Arius or an Athanasius, of an Arminius or a Calvin, of a Theodore Parker or a Joseph Parker.

The confessions of christendom are only intellectual interpretations of the word of God. Such a confession may be formed *de novo* by the believer himself, or it may be accepted by him from the hands of those who have gone before him. The prerogatives of private judgment are in neither case invaded if only the mental assent be hearty, intelligent, and free.

The truth alone has supreme authority upon the mind of man. Any attempt to add to its claims is adventitious and gratuitous. The axioms of geometry are true, apart from any authority of the geometer. The principles of Christianity are true, apart from any authority of the theologian or the church.

This intrinsic self-evidencing ground of the truth which a confession contains is one canon of its authority. It is not because it is a confession, but because it is true. In so far, Coleridge was right in saying, "He who begins by loving Christianity better than truth will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all."

¹ Read at the Sixth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian system, June, 1896.

To throttle the reason is to cripple faith. No theory of the unknowableness of the Infinite, or of the irrationality of the intuitive visions, or that, inasmuch as God has revealed his truth to man, there is, therefore, nothing for man's reason to do, has changed the historic conviction of the Reformed churches, that there is an antecedent authority of the truth, *qua* truth, apart from all logical and practical consequences, and if that truth be embodied in a confessional dogma, its force, as truth, is neither added to nor taken from by the particular form into which it is thrown.

The scripturalness of any Christian confession is a first and final test of its authority. The supreme *regula auctoritatis* for the church of God is the "word of God as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments." Dogmatic Christian thought begins where preliminary biblical criticisms end. Rob us of our Bible, and you have bereft the world of the dogmas of the Christian faith—in any case, those dogmas must look elsewhere for their binding force.

The ecclesiastical sanction of a confession is another test of its authority.

It is necessary to remember that the Christian church is pre-eminently a propagandic, a dogmatic institution. She is at her best in the chapel, rather than in the laboratory; in the sanctuary, rather than in the university. Her apostles were not philosophers, or critics, or scholars, but preachers. The work of the church is not to be "ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." The very command to preach presupposes the *Κήρυγμα* to be preached. With her credentials in one hand and her message in the other, the present errand of the church is primarily to proclaim, and not to argue, to witness, and not to analyze or defend.

The church of God is the bride of Christ. Her origin is divine. Her charter is from heaven. Her laws are based upon principles that are necessary and eternal. She has no rival in the spheres for which she is ordained. Her government is a means to an end; this end is the dissemination of the gospel and the salvation of the elect. That government is only nominal, if it be not in-

vested with authority for its enforcement, and with disciplinary apparatus for the maintenance of its integrity and the accomplishment of its ends. The promise of her Lord is on record that his Spirit shall guide his church into all truth. The infirmities of her human representatives and the divergencies of discordant branches of christendom may prove the fulfilment of that promise a sluggish though progressive process; but the transcending elements of Christian history, the underlying unity of the church, catholic and invisible, and her inflexible loyalty to the fundamentals of the truth, prove that that promise is also the pledge of divine guidance, even unto the end.

It is always fully recognized that the functions of the church are purely ministerial and declarative. Her interpretations of the Scriptures are only interpretations; but, as such, they have the sanction of an institution which is divine in its origin, and divinely guided in its work in so far as the promised guiding Spirit has been yielded to and obeyed.

Manifestly is this true of that form of the church which we hold to be distinctively apostolic in its origin, abundantly vindicated in its history, and intrinsically invested with the blessings of regulated self-government. All representative government, civil or ecclesiastical, must sink into anarchy if it lack its carefully-guarded system of sanctions and penalties.

To be sure, it is now an accepted postulate of all Protestantism that the church has none other than a moral power for the enforcement of her laws. The crown of Cæsar was never made nor meant for her benignant brow. But, happily bereft of all other, she regards as the more sacred and potential the sole power she does possess. Her subjects are not unwilling subjects. Her faith for ages has been published to the world. Gratefully and voluntarily has every ordained elder avowed allegiance to her gracious sceptre. Born within or without her pale, he has set the seal of fealty to her constitution, and subscribed to her confession that it is true.

Hence it is that there is added to the authority of the truth as truth the authority of the Confession as a confession. The very avowal of a confession creates new relations, to which obligations

of gravest moment attach themselves. The church is not less a human association because it is also, and first, a divine institution. The purely spiritual relation which the believer sustains to God in no degree impairs the purely ethical relation which he, at the same time, assumes in connection with his church. They are co-existent and co-relative.

This being true of the *credenda* as well as of the *agenda* of the church, it becomes a matter of serious concern whether it is proper that men should, by avowing ethical relations emphasized by solemn spiritual sanctions, thus forswear, as it is said, their intellectual independence for to-morrow, or even for to-day. The question gains timeliness from the acknowledged achievements of modern research, and the consequent shifting centres of gravity in human knowledge. The undisguised distaste for dogmatic pronouncement, the negative drift of a prevalent skeptical spirit, and the various tendencies that have combined to exalt the heroism of emancipated thought, have led honest men to reconsider whether, after all, on the whole, it be consistent with the highest type of intellectual conscience and religious principle to subscribe to any confessional dogma, with the stipulation, tacit or explicit, that the subscriber is bound by, or bound to, the dogma which he thus adopts as his own.

It must not for a single moment be overlooked that the specific subject-matter of this inquiry is not in any sense the faith of the believer, but rather the solemn relations assumed in its public avowal. The theme set for this paper is not the *content*, but the *authority*, of the confessions. Upon one who has not avowed it, a confession, however worthy of veneration as such, has no authority whatever; its only force is that of the truth which it contains. With him who has avowed it, however, the free, rational assent is presupposed in the ecclesiastical; for him, therefore, it is not only the truth that binds; it is the confession with all its pursuant obligations.

The base-line of orthodoxy is not truth rationally apprehended; it is the confession, ecclesiastically enunciated on one side and voluntarily affirmed on the other. Orthodoxy and heterodoxy, though contradictory, are correlative terms; they refer not to the

utterances of the reason, not to the system of some great master, not, immediately, even to the Scriptures themselves, but only to the formally promulgated symbols of some ecclesiastical body. Thus it appears that truth may be heresy and error orthodoxy. The norm is the confession and the test is harmony or disharmony therewith. If the straight-edge be crooked, then absolute straightness itself is guilty of departing from the line. If Unitarianism be the creed, Trinitarianism is heresy; and if the Confession teach that men die as the beast, then faith in immortality becomes heterodoxy.

A Presbyterian to-day believes what the standards of his church set forth. He agrees to be a Presbyterian to-morrow, provided, first, there is not meanwhile a change in his own belief; and, provided, secondly, the Presbyterian Church does not change its standards. In the former event, he may honorably sever his connection with the Presbyterian Church, and there should be none to say him nay. In the latter event, we may all expect the heavens to fall. The authority of the Confession, therefore, is sacred and determinative, because it involves certain obligations of highest religious solemnity, certifying to the world the belief that certain tenets are scriptural and true, and, especially, implying a personal devotion to him who is himself eternal Truth, and, therefore, the supreme Lord of the conscience.

And yet it will hardly be reckoned that a question so deep and delicate is to be decided for every case on *a priori* principles. Honest heresy is better than pretending orthodoxy, but it is not always easy to know what is honesty and what is orthodoxy. A candid spirit desires above all things to have "a conscience void of offence toward God and toward men"; certainly a supersensitive honor may lead to disastrous ruptures where healthier conceptions would avoid them. The widening of mental horizons after assuming ordination vows, the natural disappearance of youthful immaturities in "the years that bring the philosophic mind," the variability of incidentals and essentials in accordance with the personal perspective, the undefined elasticity of the terms of subscription, the inexact latitudes of private interpretation, the crowding, driving tasks of a busy life, the boundless field

and transcending implicates of the truth in contemplation, and, besides all this, oftentimes a timid mental temperament that shrinks from calling anything truth lest, peradventure, there be those who believe otherwise, or, indeed, lest haply it so be that, by the next moon, it may think otherwise itself—all this grievously embarrasses and encumbers the solution of this most perplexing of all problems. Honestly are doubts suppressed and fearlessly is the truth proclaimed. Fervently is guidance sought and faithfully is duty done. Cautiously is the *man* weighing evidence on this point, and loyally is the *minister* preaching God's word on that point.

It is easy to believe that not a few godly and successful ministers of the gospel in the Reformed churches of christendom are in this frame to-day. They are not traitors, but loyal sons of the church. They are not candidates for harsh measures, but for sympathy and guidance. They need the fraternal counsels of their brethren in the Lord. They need to know that the believer's doubts are infinitely above the unbeliever's faith. They may hear the stalwart man of faith declare, "He who doubts religiously has the true religion," and there will be not a few to comfort them with the strained epigram of the poet—

"There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds."

The weak in faith will not grow strong by doubtful disputations. Paul's words to the church at Rome are not obsolete to-day, and the modern church should never forget that gentleness makes it truly great, and that to leave unspoken the kindly word of sympathy is the most ungracious heresy of all.

But there is a doubt less tentative and timid. There is a doubt that crystallizes into the bold affirmations of dogmatic error.

It is neither possible nor desirable that there should be a lifeless uniformity within the church. The more men think for themselves, the less likely they are to think exactly alike; and the less men think for themselves, the more likely it is that they will think exactly alike. It is needless to say that the Presbyterian system provides a proper method of revising its confessional standards. Such revision, however, is only revision. The

authority of the Confession should always be above the easy reach of those who recognize its binding force. The fundamental elements of a Reformed confession can never be transformed by any possible process into another confession in which those fundamental elements are wholly forfeited and lost. NEVERTHELESS, there is generous room for discussion and agitation and public education, within confessional limits; and not unfrequently does it happen that the most loyal champions of the truth are they who clamor most earnestly for needed revivals of faith and for needed reforms in practice. But clear conceptions of faith should always be matched by clear conceptions of duty. If a minister's creed change, the sequent relations which that creed alone can make honorable should also change.

If the champion of *laisser-faire* should suggest that the church, having ministerial functions only, has no proper right to define her limits along confessional lines, it remains to be said that, even if that were true, such a challenge is ethically defensible only before entering upon solemn covenant relations in which the very rights that are challenged are both tacitly conceded, and, in the vows of ordination, explicitly acknowledged.

This paper does not discuss the status of the laity, from whom very few of the Presbyterian Reformed churches exact any full confessional subscription. Every ordained elder, however, is a recognized exponent of the doctrinal positions of his church. The very continuance of his official relation is tantamount to a continuous renewal of it. Accordingly, the church is properly regarded as giving her deliberate *imprimatur* to the utterances of her elders. She speaks with their lips. Her voice were better silent than speaking words of error. If the conscience of the diverging elder do not suggest a change of relation, the conscience of the church must supply the need. The individual is now the elder, and the elder stands upon his ordination vows. The glory of Presbyterianism is in its representative self-government, and the essence of that grand principle is embodied in the American motto that under God the majority rules.

With the Presbyterian succession of appellate courts, all constitutional rights are fairly safeguarded, and if human infirmity

should defeat the will of the guiding Spirit to the very last, then, with the single remaining contingency that the judgment of the court enlightened may be modified by the court better enlightened, there is, beyond the possible consciousness of a misjudged integrity, no redress or remedy this side of that supreme court from whose assize all error is eliminated, and from whose verdict there is no appeal.

When such an unfortunate crisis comes, and such unwelcome problems follow, the duty of the church has always been held to be as clear as the light of day. For the sake of the truth, for the witness and for the defence of which she is set; for the sake of a beholding world, which looks to the church for the true setting-forth of the word of God; for the sake of her fidelity to her Christ-given trust, and of her loyalty to her risen, ruling, but absent, Lord, it becomes obligatory upon the church of God, summoning her highest wisdom, and carefully observing every constitutional safeguard, to vindicate her honor, and to republish her unswerving devotion to the word of God as the enlightening Spirit has given her to understand the word of God.

Not otherwise is coherent organic Christianity possible. A house large enough to take in all out-doors ceases to be a house. Universalism, here and hereafter, ignores or obliterates all distinctions. Any evangelical church must be exclusive in order to be inclusive. The Reformed churches, therefore, have always believed, and believe to-day, that while no shackles should be fastened upon the hands and feet of intellectual enterprise and inquiry, yet in the confessional relations of their ordained eldership, it is not a matter of mental caprice, or of rational apprehension only, it is also a matter of solemn ethical and religious import, born of the church's commission, involved in the very genius of her organization, fraught with transcendent consequences and bearing, with commanding cogency, both upon the intellect and upon the conscience. At whatever cost, therefore, the church of Christ must stand by and stand for the truth which he has given for her own edification and for the enlightenment of the world.

It were, indeed, a work of supererogation for the church to justify the wisdom of obeying her Lord. The churches represented

in this august body have led the van of intellectual and moral progress in the history of the modern world. Their educational centres count the circles of science, and philosophy, and literature largely their debtor. The churches that honor the intellectual possibilities of mankind are the churches that do most to develop and realize those possibilities. If history is the tribunal of the world, the Reformed churches need take no appeal from the findings of that court.

Let their past be a pledge of their future. They have their own work to do. They have their own mission to fulfil. They have their own elucidation of divine truth to stand for, and with Christ the Lord for their leader, with his word for their charter, with that interpretation thereof for their standards, which has been crimsoned with the blood of martyrs and sealed by his blessing in the ages of the past, "with malice toward none and with charity for all," with a warm hand and a warm heart for all who trace their faith to the same divine source, and vowing eternal resistance only to those who resist the truth and word of God, they bid fair by his grace to go on from age to age in rational freedom, in scriptural loyalty, in ethical allegiance, in ecclesiastical unity, and in spiritual fruitfulness, fighting a good fight, and keeping the faith until the Lord, the righteous judge, shall come with a crown of righteousness to bestow upon all them that love his appearing.

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