

THE VISIBLE CHURCH: ITS NATURE UNITY AND WITNESS

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I. THE NATURE OF THE VISIBLE CHURCH

“THE visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”¹ Thus according to the Westminster Confession the criterion of membership in the visible Church is profession, whereas the divine election and gathering “into one, under Christ the Head thereof” is the criterion of membership in the invisible Church.²

While of course the ideal condition of the visible Church would be complete coincidence with the invisible Church (or more precisely, with that portion of the invisible Church which at a given time is present on earth), still it must be recognized that this ideal will not and cannot be attained in this age, but must await its full realization in the age to come when the distinction between the visible and the invisible Church will have passed away in the state of glory. The visible Church, being *visible*, must of necessity be essentially a *professing* body, for profession is a visible phenomenon, whereas divine election and vital spiritual union with Christ are not. For this reason all the attempts which have at various times and in various circles been made to limit the membership of the visible Church to the regenerate, or to such as profess to have assurance of regeneration or real piety, must be adjudged to be wrong in principle and harmful in tendency.

¹ The Westminster Confession of Faith, XXV, 2.

² *Ibid.*, XXV, 1.

No doubt these attempts have been motivated by a praiseworthy and pious desire to promote the purity and holiness of the visible Church by excluding unregenerate persons from her membership. But such attempted exclusion of the unregenerate is, and always has proved, impossible to carry out in practice. Who shall say with certainty whether a particular applicant for membership is regenerate or not? Certainly no Protestant ecclesiastical judicatory can claim to be infallible. The Scriptures teach that it is possible for a Christian to attain full assurance, or certainty, concerning *his own* salvation, but this is something quite different from attaining certainty about another person's salvation. If it be admitted that ecclesiastical judicatories cannot pronounce concerning an individual's regeneration, what shall we say about the proposal to throw the burden of responsibility on the applicants, and admit to membership only such as profess to have assurance of their own regeneration? Not only is there no warrant in the Scriptures for such a criterion of Church membership, but the effect in actual practice must be, as it has been, to exclude many who no doubt are true believers, but who, because of diffidence, or because of misunderstanding of the grounds of assurance, or because of lack of spiritual maturity, do not or cannot claim assurance of their own regeneration. Thus persons who ought to be members of the visible Church, and who need the benefits of such membership even more than those mature Christians who have attained full assurance, are excluded from the household of God and placed on a par with unbelievers. The practical evils which must result from such a condition are obvious.

The visible Church, then, is a society composed of those throughout the world who profess the true religion, together with their minor children, and the criterion of membership in it is not election, regeneration or "real saintship", but a credible profession of faith in the true religion. By a credible profession is not meant a profession which compels belief, but one which it is *possible* to believe, that is, a profession which is adequate in content and which is not contradicted by known facts of the applicant's life. In *The Larger Catechism* the Westminster Divines affirm that "Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profes-

sion of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament. . . ."³ Thus those who are found to be ignorant, that is, whose profession lacks an adequate and correct content, and those found to be scandalous, that is, those whose profession is contradicted by their manner of life, are to be authoritatively debarred from the Lord's supper, and no doubt such persons should also be excluded from actual membership in the visible Church until their ignorance or scandalous living has been corrected. But apart from persons whose profession is rendered incredible by reason of ignorance or scandal, those who profess the true religion are to be received as members of the visible Church. The fact that there has been, and no doubt will continue to be, diversity of opinion as to what constitutes ignorance or scandal of such a nature and degree as to render a person's profession incredible, does not militate against the validity of the principle outlined above. As in all matters of faith and practice the Scriptures must be the source of guidance, but obviously reasonable latitude must be allowed ecclesiastical judicatories in the difficult task of applying the Scriptures to this problem. Although some deficiencies or aberrations of faith and life can with general agreement be pronounced "ignorance" or "scandal", yet there are many matters of faith and especially of life concerning which it is far from easy to decide confidently, and about which there is little unanimity even in "the best Reformed Churches". The temptation to try to formulate a cut-and-dried, classified list of all forms of ignorance and scandal must be resisted because in the nature of the case such a formulation cannot be complete, and moreover cannot take account of the varying circumstances of life which may affect the question of the credibility of an applicant's profession.

The Scriptures teach, and it has been generally accepted throughout the history of the Church, that the members of the visible Church are to be associated in particular local congregations under officers who sustain a special relation to their respective congregations. The Church being a visible body must necessarily have some form of organization or

³ The Larger Catechism, Q. 173.

government. Although it seems to be common at the present day to regard the form of Church government as a matter of indifference, to be determined according to human prudence or preference, the Reformed Churches historically have taken higher ground than this, and have held that the government of the Church is a matter of divine appointment in Scripture, and that the form appointed in Scripture is to be continued in the Church *jure divino* until the end of the world. Of the four historical forms of Church government, episcopal, papal, congregational and presbyterian, generally only the last two have claimed to be founded exclusively on the teachings of the Scriptures. While a superficial reading of the New Testament might seem to favor the congregational or independent polity, a more careful study reveals data which cannot be reconciled with independency, and discloses the basic elements of presbyterian government in the New Testament documents and in the apostolic Church which they portray. It is well known that the Westminster Assembly spent a great amount of time wrestling with the problem of the divinely appointed form of Church government. The product of the Assembly's labors, *The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government and of Ordination of Ministers*, sets forth, with a closely reasoned discussion of the relevant portions of Scripture, the Bible basis for the presbyterian form of Church government. Clearly the Westminster Divines believed that presbyterian government exists *jure divino*; their view of the matter was far removed from that of a professor in a well-known American Presbyterian seminary who said to his students: "Presbyterianism is a form of Church government set forth in Scripture, but that is very different from affirming that presbyterianism is *the* form of Church government set forth in Scripture".

Yet to affirm that the presbyterian form of Church government is appointed in Scripture and to be continued *jure divino* in the Church does not imply that this form of government is *essential to the being* of a Church. No doubt every adherent of the Westminster Standards will agree that presbyterian government is *essential to the well-being* of a Church. But it would be going too far to assert that bodies of professing Christians which maintain other forms of Church polity are

therefore no Churches, nor parts of the true visible Church of Christ. The true Presbyterian will avoid, on the one hand, the error of allowing that Church government is a matter of indifference to be arranged according to human prudence, and, on the other hand, the error of insisting that presbyterian government is essential to the being of a Church. Avoiding both of these extremes, he will stand on solid Scriptural ground.

It should be said that the modern trend toward independency, whether in fact only or in name also, is wrong and to be deplored. That such a trend exists, and among Christians whose heritage has been Presbyterian for generations, can hardly be questioned. There are today not a few but very many persons, including a considerable number of ministers, who are members of denominations holding the presbyterian form of government, who yet conduct themselves very much as if they were independents. This attitude may be termed the delusion of virtual independence. There is a widespread tendency on the part of conservatives in some formerly conservative denominations to disclaim all responsibility for the acts and policies of presbyteries, synods, general assemblies and their boards and agencies, and to take refuge, so to speak, within the four walls of a comparatively orthodox congregation which exists as an evangelical island in a denominational ocean of Modernism. This delusion of independence may go so far that ministers and elders seldom or never attend the stated meetings of presbyteries and higher judicatories, and claim that by reason of non-participation in the deliberations of these bodies they are exempt from responsibility for their acts and policies. Such an attitude can only be regarded as wishful thinking. A denomination having the presbyterian form of government has a *corporate* existence as a denomination, and is no mere loose voluntary association of separate independent congregations. Every member and minister of such a denomination sustains a necessary relation to the denomination *as a whole*, and is *ipso facto* responsible, to a greater or less degree, for the doctrines, policies and acts of the denomination as a whole. The idea that a member, minister or congregation may be enrolled in a denomination having presbyterian government and yet be virtually inde-

pendent is simply a delusion, which may perhaps be explained psychologically as a rationalization by which evangelical Christians seek to justify their continued membership in denominations which have corporately succumbed to the deadly virus of modern unbelief.

Somewhat less ominous than the widely cherished delusion of virtual independence, but still serious, is the widespread trend, among persons with a Presbyterian background and training, to forsake the presbyterian polity altogether and join independent Churches. There exist today even such anomalies as "independent" or "denominationally unrelated" "Presbyterian Churches". It is hard to see wherein such "Presbyterian" Churches differ greatly in polity from the Congregational Churches established by the Puritan settlers in New England in the early years of the seventeenth century. These Churches were indeed originally "presbyterian" in the sense that each possessed a number of ruling elders associated with one or more ministers of the Word; but historically it has always been recognized that *normal* presbyterian polity involves the association of a plurality of congregations in a *corporate* life under *common* superior judicatories, although of course exceptional circumstances may exist under which such association is impossible, at least for the time being.⁴

It is obvious that a great many Christian people whose background and religious nurture have been Presbyterian are today in independent congregations of varying doctrinal complexion which may generally be classified as "Fundamentalist" Churches. No believer in the *jus divinum* of presbyterian government can justify this state of affairs. But how is it to be explained? Certainly it must be regarded as the end-product of a long and gradual declension from the strictly Reformed view of Church government held by Presbyterians in general in times past. Presbyterian government could not be so easily and so completely abandoned in favor of independency unless those who make this change had already lost their conviction of its Scriptural character as a

⁴ Cf. the section entitled "Touching the Power of Ordination" in the *Form of Presbyterial Church-Government and of Ordination of Ministers* adopted by the Westminster Assembly.

matter of divine appointment for the Church. Along with this gradual loss of conviction which must have taken place, there may exist in many cases a certain illogical conclusion drawn from the premises of existing conditions. Because certain denominations, while adhering, in general, to the presbyterian or some other form of government, have been guilty of apostasy from the essential truths of the Gospel itself, the conclusion has apparently been drawn by many persons that apostasy from the Gospel itself is somehow inevitably linked with the fact of a corporate denominational organization as such. Because some denominations in their corporate capacity have become apostate, many earnest Christians have become disgusted with corporate denominational organization itself and have taken refuge, with other like-minded persons, in independent congregations of a generally "Fundamentalist" character. This tendency to forsake denominations as hopelessly corrupt, and on forsaking them to establish independent congregations rather than to combine congregations in doctrinally sound denominations, is one of the major developments in the ecclesiastical situation of our day. A great multitude of such independent congregations have sprung up across America during the past few years. This tendency is to be deplored, because in many cases it marks the end of a decline from Calvinism to a general evangelicalism, and from presbyterian government, regarded as existing *jure divino*, to independency held on grounds of mere expediency.

II. THE UNITY OF THE VISIBLE CHURCH

The visible Church being a divine institution, the question of its unity cannot be an unimportant one. Nor is it an easy problem to solve, for besides the distinction between the invisible and the visible Church, that between the visible Church as an organism and the visible Church as an institution must be kept in mind. Obviously the modern "church union" movement greatly over-simplifies the problem. An instance of the superficiality with which it is often faced is the frequent quotation of I Corinthians 1:10 ff. as if this passage were a direct condemnation of denominationalism.

Now it is perfectly clear that the four parties mentioned by Paul in verse 12 were not competing denominations, but rival factions within one and the same congregation, "the church of God which is at Corinth" (verse 2). Factions such as the apostle condemns may occur in any Church, and have occurred even within the supposed uniformity of the Church of Rome. This passage has no doubt an indirect bearing on the question of denominationalism, especially by reason of its insistence upon the Christian duty of cultivating unanimity (verse 10), but it does not prove that for which it is often cited, namely, that denominational divisions can never be legitimate.

It is very common to cite such Scriptures as our Lord's petition in John 17:21 ("That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.") and assume without proof that such texts are directly applicable to the visible Church as an institution, and that every separate denominational organization must therefore be inherently wrong, and ought to be abandoned as soon as possible in the interest of obedience to the requirement of unity involved in such texts of Scripture.

What John 17:21 and similar Scriptures really require is not necessarily *organic union* of the visible Church as an institution, but rather *unity* of the visible Church as an organism in this world. The rhetorical question of Amos,⁵ "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" implies a negative answer, and certainly any form of Church union which is not founded on true unity is without value and moreover is no real fulfilment of the ideal set forth in our Lord's petition. He prayed that his people might all be one with a mutual unity similar in some way to his own reciprocal unity with the Father. He prayed also that his people might be one in himself and the Father. While the ontological unity of the Son with the Father is of course unique and cannot be fully paralleled by any unity among Christians, still it is clear that our Lord's prayer requires something quite different from, and much more than, a mere indiscriminate union of

⁵ Amos 3:3.

professing Christians, of various divergent shades of belief, in one organization. Certainly what is required first of all is a true unity of doctrinal conviction; not a mere walking together, but a real state of being agreed; and in the second place this condition of unity must have its root and strength in the relationship of Christian people to God the Father and God the Son. There can be no real and worthy horizontal unity which is not itself the product and expression of a real vertical unity — a unity with the Triune God on the basis of the self-revelation of God given in the Scriptures.

It is clear that the current church union movement, despite its many pious phrases and its apparent moral indignation against the alleged evils of denominational divisions, falls far short of embodying the Scriptural ideal of Christian unity. The modern church union movement must be adjudged to be far less holy than it seems and claims to be. In reality it is not the product of an ardent desire for obedience to Christ and conformity to his revealed will. On the contrary, it is the offspring of widespread religious skepticism and general depreciation of the importance of doctrinal truth. A well-educated layman recently told the writer that he had been successively a Presbyterian and a Methodist, each for a period of years, yet he did not know the doctrinal difference between the two. This may illustrate the state of affairs which seems to be prevalent in contemporary American Protestantism. It is from such soil that the current urgent demand for organic union has sprung. If people who have been members of a denomination for years do not know wherein it differs from other denominations, of course they will see no reason why immediate union should not take place. We face today a situation in which the ordinary denominational labels have largely become meaningless, because of the general abandonment of doctrine: not merely this doctrine or that doctrine, but the abandonment of doctrine as such. This is extremely serious, for it means that the product of the current church union movement, in so far as it attains its objective, will not be a compromise between the distinctive tenets of various denominations, nor even a setting-forth of a minimal substratum of evangelical Christianity which may be supposed to be common to them all, but rather the ecclesiastical expres-

sion of a spineless non-doctrinal religion which will be called, but will not really be, Christianity. The real issue is not Presbyterianism *versus* Episcopalianism, nor Lutheranism *versus* Methodism; it is historic Christianity *versus* a vague, non-doctrinal religion which can only be labelled pseudo-Christianity, a religion which at bottom can only be pure humanism. The non-doctrinal and even anti-doctrinal tendency of the modern church union movement was clearly seen by Dr. B. B. Warfield more than half a century ago when he wrote:

"What is ominous in the present-day drift of religious thought is the sustained effort that is being made to break down just these two principles: the principle of a systematized body of doctrines as the matter to be believed, and the principle of an external authority as the basis of belief. What arrogates to itself the title of 'the newer religious thinking' sets itself, before everything else, in violent opposition to what it calls 'dogma' and 'external authority.' The end may be very readily foreseen. Indefinite subjectivism or subjective indifferentism has no future. It is not only in its very nature a disintegrating, but also a destructive, force. It can throw up no barrier against unbelief. Its very business is to break down barriers. And when that work is accomplished the floods come in.

"The assault on positive doctrinal teaching is presented today chiefly under the flag of 'comprehension.' Men bewail the divisions of the Church of Christ, and propose that we shall stop thinking, so that we may no longer think differently. This is the true account to give of many of the phases of the modern movement for 'church union.' Men are tired of thinking. They are tired of defending the truth. Let us all stop thinking, stop believing, they cry, and what a happy family we shall be!"⁶

Having decided that the modern church union movement is in essence really anti-Christian because it is anti-doctrinal, shall we also affirm that union of the visible Church as an institution is not a valid ideal, and need not be sought even as an ultimate objective? By no means. That the current

⁶ B. B. Warfield: *Studies in Theology*, pp. 587 f.

church union agitation is subversive of real Christianity does not imply that there cannot be a legitimate and worthy church union movement. Certainly the Scriptural emphasis on unity of the visible Church as an organism implies the validity, as an ultimate objective, of the ideal of union of the visible Church as an institution. Certainly very few Christians would venture to defend denominationalism as good in itself. It may be inevitable; it may be a necessary evil under existing conditions; it is certainly far less of an evil than would be an indiscriminate organic union of denominations on a vague, non-doctrinal basis; but after all, it is an evil; it is not inherently good.

By denominationalism is not meant all co-existence in the world of distinct ecclesiastical bodies each possessing autonomy subject only to God and his Word. Two communions may be organically separate because of geographical, linguistic or other reasons, and yet be of identical faith. Such are not really different denominations. They are in no sense rivals the one of the other. Rather they are one in all respects except their actual external organization. Real denominationalism, on the other hand, exists where of two or more bodies occupying, in whole or in part, the same territory and seeking to present their message to the same public, each claims to be more faithful to the Scriptural pattern than the others, and therefore competes, more or less, against the others. On the other hand, various examples could be cited of true "sister Churches", of identical or virtually identical faith, each of which is nevertheless ecclesiastically fully autonomous. Such co-existence of separate communions is not to be regarded as something evil; rather it is in itself morally indifferent, and in view of actual conditions in the world, may be quite proper and necessary for adequately carrying out the functions of the Church.

Denominationalism properly so-called, however, must always be regarded as an evil. It is only because of the fact of sin that error exists, and it is only because of the fact of error that real denominationalism exists. Where two denominations hold mutually contradictory doctrines, clearly at least one of them — perhaps both of them — must have deviated from the path of truth. Because error is sinful *per*

se, we must hold that the denominationalism which results from error is something evil. The modern church union movement sheds many tears over the "shameful divisions" which exist among Christians, but it never sheds any tears over the sinful error which must lie at the basis of these divisions. It is perhaps characteristic of Liberalism to be more concerned about the consequences of sin than about the sin itself. But as Christians we should be much more concerned about the sin itself than about the consequences of the sin. The really deplorable thing in denominationalism is not so much the external divisions as the sinful, even though sincere, adherence to error which has produced and perpetuated the divisions. This is what most needs to be repented of.

It follows that there can be no real remedy for denominationalism without facing the fact of error and dealing with it. Any program of Church union which starts out by assuming that opposing views are inherently equally valid and equally true is doomed to failure so far as really remedying the trouble is concerned. The prevalent skepticism concerning the existence of absolute truth tends to result in regarding the creed of a denomination as possessing only a relative value as the tradition or preference of that denomination, instead of its being regarded as that denomination's understanding of the absolute truth given in the divine special revelation. It is quite true of course that absolute and final authority may not be claimed for any creed or confession; only the Scriptures constitute the absolute and final authority for faith and life, and the creed of a denomination has at best the value of a limiting concept or landmark of progress already made in understanding the Scriptures. Thus no creed may ever be regarded as complete and final, that is, not subject to future revision or additions as more light is gained from the Scriptures. But thus to recognize that no creed can be absolute, complete and final, is something quite different from the attitude toward creeds which modern skepticism has produced. That attitude is begotten of the notion that *truth itself* cannot be absolute and permanent, but changes with the times. Thus there are those who say that the Westminster Confession was an excellent expression of Christianity for the seventeenth century, but is not suitable for the twen-

tieth century, because today men think in other categories than those of the seventeenth century. For our own day, it is said, there must be a new construction of Christianity in terms of modern thinking. Now those who think thus of the creeds which form their denominational heritage will of course not venture far in defending those creeds, nor will they be inclined to insist upon the doctrines formulated in them. Rather the tendency will be to regard the creeds as pieces of antique furniture, not indeed without interest and importance, but hardly relevant to the issues of the present day. If two denominations are negotiating a merger, where this attitude toward creeds prevails, even flatly contradictory propositions in their respective creeds will not prove a real barrier to union. Creeds which are not held to be landmarks of attainment in the grasp of absolute, unchanging truth, can easily be treated as material for bargaining and compromise, or even be relegated to the museum of curious antiques as possessing a historical interest only.

Wherever this perverse skeptical attitude toward creeds prevails there can only be failure to provide any real remedy for the evil of denominationalism. For this attitude of indifference fails to face the fact of error and take it seriously. Any real remedy must start out with the recognition of the supreme, absolute and permanent authority of the Scriptures, and with the assumption that the creed of one's own denomination, *as far as it goes*, is a faithful formulation of the teaching of the Scriptures. It must then be recognized that various denominations have creeds which, in some points at least, are mutually contradictory. The fact must then be faced that where two creeds are contradictory, at least one of them must be in error. Although every denomination must necessarily start by assuming that its own creed is true, and must therefore also necessarily start by assuming that the other denomination's creed, in the contradictory points, is false, still these assumptions must be regarded as provisional only. That is to say, if there is to be any real progress in providing a remedy for denominationalism, all parties must recognize that, after all, only Scripture is the absolute and final authority; no party may claim infallibility over against other parties; no party can absolutely rule out the possibility that

it is in error and the opposing party is holding the truth on a particular matter. Otherwise even discussion of contradictory points would be impossible; there can be no real discussion where each party insists that its own rightness, and the other party's wrongness, are matters beyond dispute. To take such an attitude would be to assume that which, for a real remedy of denominationalism, requires proof, namely the *actual* Scriptural character of doctrines which one or another party *alleges* to be Scriptural.

Even where the above-mentioned presuppositions of a remedy for denominationalism exist, it is obvious that any real progress in this matter will require a great deal of effort, much patience and a high degree of Christian humility on the part of the denominations concerned. The temper of our times is against it. The Westminster Assembly of Divines, representing all parties of English Protestantism except the high episcopacy of Archbishop Laud, sat for about seven years, during which time 1163 sessions were held. Ample time was taken for the unhurried and thorough investigation and discussion of the matters under consideration. There was a patient and painstaking effort to ascertain the real sense of the Scriptures on these matters. No doubt the Assembly's work, for industry, patience, thoroughness and whole-hearted devotion to the Word of God, has never since been paralleled. There seems little reason to suppose that any present-day assembly called to attempt to resolve denominational divisions would equal or even approach it. The hurried sessions of synods and assemblies of the present day, with their ready-made dockets and pressure of business and inevitable struggle to finish their work by a fixed closing date, afford but an unfavorable climate for the calm, deliberate investigation and discussion of doctrinal matters which is so urgently needed today. Mutual agreement among the people of God in their confession of the truths of his Word is a plant that cannot be forced; it must grow slowly, even in the most favorable soil. The impatient, pragmatic temper of the twentieth century is too much in evidence, even in the most orthodox denominations, to permit sanguine expectation of any early or marked progress toward a real elimination of denominational divisions. Not that such an elimination of

divisions should be regarded as impossible, in whole or in part; it is only that the Churches do not value truth highly enough to make the necessary efforts and sacrifices. No doubt most Church members of today would regard a contemporary Westminster Assembly of Divines, called to meet for seven years and hold over a thousand sessions in the pursuit of mutual agreement on doctrinal truth, as a waste of time and money which ought to be devoted to more "practical" ends. But we may rest assured that there is no short-cut to the desirable goal. There can be no real progress toward Church union on a truly Scriptural basis without the payment of a heavy price by the parties involved. Comparatively few would be willing to pay that price.

III. THE WITNESS OF THE VISIBLE CHURCH

Scripture affirms that the Church is "the pillar and ground of the truth",⁷ and it must be the visible Church that is referred to, for in the same verse it is called the house of God, in which persons are to conduct themselves according to the instructions Paul had just written concerning public worship, the silence of women, and the qualifications for the offices of bishop and deacon. But in what sense is the visible Church the pillar and ground of the truth? Although Roman Catholic commentators naturally take the phrase as relating to the alleged infallibility of the Church, most Protestants who have interpreted the phrase as referring to the Church rather than to Timothy have followed Calvin in holding that the Church is the pillar and ground of the truth because it is the divinely appointed instrument by which the truth is perpetuated, lest it perish from the memory of men. The visible Church is thus the custodian, defender and proclaimer of divinely revealed truth. Although this proposition will be readily accepted by orthodox Christians in general, a problem inevitably arises in connection with it. Of what truth is the Church the pillar and ground? To how much divinely revealed truth is the visible Church to bear testimony? Human fallibility results in diverse and conflicting views of divinely

⁷ I Tim. 3:15.

revealed truth. In view of this diversity of faith, how can the visible Church really bear witness to the truth?

The problem under consideration at this point should not be mistaken for the problem of the degree of conformity to the Church's creed which ought to be required of officers, members or applicants for membership. That is indeed a real and important problem, and it will be discussed later in the present article. But the question before us now is how the visible Church, in view of the diversity of faith which inevitably exists among those who profess the true religion, can have a creed at all. We are raising not the question of what should be required of candidates for Church membership or office, but the question of how those who are already members can express their Christian faith not merely as so many individuals, but in a corporate testimony for the truth. It is true, of course, that the Church decides who can be its members; but it is also true that the members determine what the Church shall stand for. This may perhaps be illustrated by considering the civil government of a nation. The government indeed decides who is qualified for citizenship in the nation; but it is also true that the citizens determine what shall be the character of the constitution and government itself. Similarly there exist two reciprocal functions in the visible Church: (a) the function of determining the membership of the Church itself; and (b) the function of the members in determining what shall be the character of the Church's corporate witness to the world. The Church is the pillar and ground of the truth, certainly; but after all, the Church is not an abstract ideal; it is a real body made up of individual members each of whom is subject to error and therefore views the truth somewhat differently from all others. If the Church is in any real sense the pillar and ground of the truth, it must bear a corporate witness to the truth. But that witness cannot be merely an ideal detached from the actual beliefs of the Church's members. In some sense it must be the collective product of the doctrinal convictions of individual persons as these view the divine special revelation. How can the visible Church, made up as it is of fallible individuals, bear a corporate witness to the truth?

The fact that every Christian is subject to error must

always be reckoned with. Just as every Christian, even the most holy, has within him a remaining element of the corruption of original sin which inevitably finds expression in actual transgressions, so every Christian, even the most enlightened, has within him a remaining element of intellectual perversity which inevitably finds expression in some degree of doctrinal error in his personal convictions. Every Christian, it must be realized, has within him the germs of heresy. Just as the corruption of original sin, and its expression in actual transgressions, are subdued, but not eradicated, by the process of sanctification, so the germs of heresy in the Christian, and their tendency to find expression in actual errors, are kept under control, but not eradicated, by the gradual process of illumination by the Holy Spirit which accompanies the work of sanctification. And like sanctification, illumination cannot be total in the present life. There are also those in the visible Church who are only *professing* Christians, and who lack the Spirit's work of regeneration, sanctification and illumination. Such persons have only those operations of the Spirit which pertain to the realm of common grace. Yet they exist and have an influence among the regenerate members of the visible Church, and will inevitably have an effect on the character of its witness to the world.

In seeking a solution of this problem, two extremes must be avoided as destructive of any real testimony to the truth. In the first place, it is necessary to avoid the conception of the Church bearing witness to the truth by means of a total body of dogma issued by an inner hierarchy and published to the world as an infallible statement of truth, to be accepted by all men with an implicit faith. This is the Roman Catholic conception. In criticism of this it may be said that it is destructive of a real testimony to the truth because in this system everything is made contingent upon the validity of the hierarchy's claim to infallibility. Moreover in this system it is not really the visible *Church* that is the pillar and ground of the truth, but a select inner hierarchy headed by the Pope. The lay members, even though constituting perhaps more than ninety-nine percent of the total number, have no part in the Church's corporate witness except by an unquestioning and absolute acceptance of whatever is placed before them

by the hierarchy. As the Westminster Confession asserts, this is "to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also",⁸ and we may add, it is to destroy all real corporate witness to the truth on the part of *the Church*. Rome virtually equates the Church with the hierarchy, so far as testimony to the truth is concerned; the laity is not regarded as essential to this function.

In the second place, it is necessary to avoid the extreme which lies at the opposite pole from that of Rome, and which would give full play to the so-called atomistic tendency of Protestantism. If we reject the claim of the Pope of Rome to be infallible, we must also avoid that disproportionate recognition of the right of private judgment which would allow every individual Christian to claim to be a pope. While it is certainly true that Rome is wrong in virtually excluding the lay Christian from participating in the corporate witness of the Church, and that there must be a real, and not merely a fictitious, relation between the Church member as such and the Church's testimony to the world, nevertheless it must be realized that as long as human fallibility exists there will be no two Christians, who think at all seriously about divinely revealed truth, who are in complete agreement in their view of the truth.

Now if the principle of private judgment is to be exalted above measure, every individual Christian can demand that the visible Church as a body bear witness to the entirety of revealed truth *as he sees it*. Since every other Christian could with equal right make the same demand, and the various demands thus made would conflict with each other, the result of this tendency would be only confusion and anarchy. There being no agreement concerning the extent and content of the truth to which the Church is to bear witness, and every Christian naturally being unwilling to surrender his own private judgment to some other Christian's view of the truth, a corporate witness to the truth would be impossible. The logical end of this state of affairs would be the existence of as many denominations as there are individual Christians in the world. Only so could each be a member of a denomination which

⁸ XX, 2.

would fully bear witness to the truth as each, in the exercise of his right of private judgment, views the truth. That is to say, if the right of private judgment is to be allowed unlimited scope, there can be no visible *Church* on earth, but only a multitude of individual, and individualistic, Christians. Now this "atomistic tendency" of Protestantism is only too real, and while it would be unthinkable to surrender the right of private judgment to Rome's demand for an implicit faith, still this does not mean that private judgment may be allowed to assert itself without any limits, and demand an ecclesiastical confession of every element of doctrine that any individual Christian believes to be truth. If every Christian were to refuse, as a matter of principle, to be a member of any Church that did not bear a corporate witness to *everything* that he held to be divinely revealed truth, all agreement and hence all corporate testimony would be impossible. Again, if every Christian were to refuse, as a matter of principle, to be a member of any Church that bore a corporate witness to *anything* that he regarded as error, all agreement and hence all corporate testimony would be out of the question.

Thus it is clear that the Scriptural doctrine of the visible Church as a witnessing body requires a balance to be struck between the concept of corporate ecclesiastical testimony and the concept of private judgment. Somewhere between the two extremes represented by Rome and by the atomistic tendency of Protestantism in its full logical development, the true course must lie. A line must be drawn, an area must be defined, within which unity of confession exists and is insisted upon even at the cost, if need be, of excommunicating those who dissent, but outside of which divergence of belief is tolerated. Thus in the nature of the case no Church can really bear a corporate witness to *all* the truth which God has revealed in his Word, nor may any denomination make such a claim. To claim such a total testimony to divine truth would amount to claiming infallibility as Rome does. And in the nature of the case no Christian can expect to find a Church which will bear a complete and exact testimony to his own personal faith. Inevitably there will be divergence, at least at the periphery which lies outside the area of ecclesiastically defined dogma. Those zealous persons who look for

a visible Church on earth which will fully and precisely embody their personal faith — no more and no less — as its corporate witness, are looking on earth for what can exist only in heaven. They overlook the truth that even the best Christians are still subject to error, and that neither in individuals nor in Churches can there be such a thing as total orthodoxy on earth. The removal of the intellectual effects of sin, like the removal of the moral effects of sin, is a gradual process, and can never be complete in this life.

Just where this line is to be drawn — just what area is to be marked off — constitutes the confessional problem of Protestantism. Divergent ideas on this question have produced denominationalism, at least in its creedal aspect. This is a very serious and difficult problem. The present generation is not even inclined to face it frankly. We live in an age when creeds are seldom taken very seriously, and are more often by-passed than honestly accepted or rejected. Men are not seldom ordained to ecclesiastical office who have not even read the confessions which they profess to accept, and who after they have been ordained go blithely on their individualistic way in utter disregard of the express statements of the creed they have solemnly vowed to defend and propagate. Where such conditions exist, the problem stated above cannot really be faced, much less can it be solved. When men are indifferent to truth as such, or when they have lost all interest in corporate testimony to truth and care only about their individual witness, there will be no serious concern about the problem of just what and how much doctrine a denomination is to bear witness to in its confession.

Nor can the problem be solved by the short-cut of concentration on a few generally recognized "essential truths". Such a solution would be an unscriptural over-simplification. Moreover it cannot solve the problem because there will inevitably still be disagreement as to which truths are to be regarded as "essential". One Christian insists that the doctrine of Christ's two natures is of the essence of Christianity; another holds that it is unimportant, and may be omitted. One asserts that the so-called "Apostles' Creed" is an adequate statement of the "essential truths" of Christianity; another replies that it is inadequate because it leaves out

everything that was gained by the Protestant Reformation. One maintains that the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture must be included in a Church's confession; another counters by saying that it is only a "theory" and by no means to be insisted on. The inevitable result must be that any creed pared down to such a few "essential truths" as to suit the generality of professing Christians would in reality suit very few of them, and would leave the visible Church to bear a corporate witness to almost nothing. No Christian who believes that the Bible as a whole, with its wealth of divinely revealed truth, is the Church's supreme authority, will be satisfied with attempts to solve the confessional problem of Protestantism by concentration on a few selected "essential truths". This is a false trail which must necessarily result in the rejection as "non-essential" of the greater portion of what God has committed to the Church in his Word.

There can be no short-cut or easy solution to this problem. To say that the Church as the pillar and ground of the truth ought to bear witness to *all* that God has revealed in his Word is axiomatic, but does not solve the problem we are considering. For the problem consists precisely in the fact that Christians differ in their conceptions of the content of the system of truth revealed in the Word. If all were in agreement there would be no problem. The Church is faced with the task of bearing a corporate witness for divine truth while no two of her members are in complete agreement as to what that truth is. Now unless it is attempted to solve the problem in a purely arbitrary way, a key to its solution must be sought in the Scripture itself. Although the Scripture does not present a body of doctrine already formulated in logical, systematic form, still it does present not merely an aggregate of individual doctrines, but a *system* of doctrine which possesses an organic character. Now if we regard the Scripture in its entirety as special divine revelation, and discover in it an organic system of doctrine, and if the visible Church is to bear a corporate witness to divine truth, then *at least* the system of doctrine presented in the Scriptures, in its integrity, must be insisted on as the content of the visible Church's corporate witness for the truth. Nothing that is essential to that system of doctrine may be disregarded or omitted. (We are

not of course considering what is necessary for a person's *salvation*, but what is logically essential to the system of doctrine).

There are indeed professing Christians who deny that the Bible presents a system of doctrine. Some hold that it presents elements of mutually contradictory systems of doctrine. Others say that the doctrine contained in the Bible is incidental and "the life" is the important thing. And of course there are those who maintain that Arminianism, Socinianism or even "Christian Science" is the system of doctrine presented in the Bible. We can only say that we believe they are profoundly mistaken and that their convictions are not substantiated either by express statements of Scripture or by valid logical inference from the Scriptures. But among Calvinists (not necessarily among members of Calvinistic Churches) there is general agreement that the Bible presents a definite system of doctrine, and also general agreement as to what that system of doctrine is. There exists a certain organic complex of doctrine, every element of which is logically essential to the system, which every Calvinist will insist must be exhibited in its integrity in his Church's confession as a matter of public corporate witness.

There are also certain truths revealed in the Scripture — even truths generally recognized as such — which are not essential to the system of doctrine. For example it is generally recognized among Calvinists that defensive warfare, "upon just and necessary occasion", is sanctioned by Scripture. There is also perhaps general agreement that Scripture teaches that pastors are justly entitled to adequate compensation for their services. Few Calvinists would question the Scriptural character of either of these principles, yet it can hardly be maintained that they are essential to the system of doctrine set forth in the Scriptures. That system would still possess its organic integrity even though neither of these principles were found to be taught or implied in the Bible. On the other hand, it is universally recognized by Calvinists that the doctrines of election, creation, providence, total depravity, the limited and substitutionary atonement, and many others, are not only Scriptural but also essential to the system of doctrine revealed in Scripture; if any one of them were to be

omitted, the system would be deformed and inconsistent, or it would fall to the ground.

To affirm that the Church's corporate witness must at least be a witness for the system of doctrine set forth in its integrity in the Scripture still does not eliminate all difficulties. There remain some divergent views with respect to various elements of the system of doctrine itself. For example, all Calvinists believe that the doctrine of election is essential to the system of doctrine, yet among them some hold the supralapsarian view of the logical order of the divine decrees, while others accept the infralapsarian view on the same question, and there are those who hold a post-redemptionist scheme. What shall be our attitude toward such divergences as these? No doubt the great majority of Calvinists would readily agree to dispose of post-redemptionism at once by saying that while it may indeed be logically capable of being fitted into the framework of Calvinism, still it is so plainly unscriptural that it cannot be regarded as an open question. With respect to the other two views of the logical order of the decrees, the Westminster Standards are prudently non-committal, thus leaving this an open question on which diversity may exist within the Church. Similarly the question of the origin of the human soul, with the three competing views of creationism, traducianism and pre-existentism, has generally, and no doubt very properly, been left as an open question, not only because the Scripture does not afford sufficient data for a confident decision concerning it, but also because no one of the three views, as over against the others, is essential to the system of doctrine. To select one of these views and exalt it to be an element of the Church's public corporate testimony would amount to an unjustifiable sectarianism.

There will also inevitably remain a whole series of problems arising from the difficulty of attaining agreement concerning the implications and legitimate applications of those doctrines which may have been agreed upon as being essential to the system of doctrine. Here the Church must face the danger of affirming too little and also the contrary danger of affirming too much in its corporate testimony. What is the bearing of the doctrinal system of Calvinism on evangelism? On foreign missions? On the civil magistrate? On the family? On the

realm of economics? Since Calvinism is precisely that system of doctrine which recognizes the sovereignty of God and the authority of Holy Scripture in *every* sphere of life, its implications and applications in these various spheres cannot be neglected or regarded as matters of indifference, nor can they be entirely omitted from the Church's corporate witness and left to the individual convictions of ministers and people. As a matter of fact it is just such questions as these that have occasioned some of the historical divisions among Churches holding the Reformed Faith. It is not the purpose of the present article to attempt to solve, or even to state, all these problems, but it is in order to call attention to their existence and the difficulty of their solution. It may be suggested that there has been a tendency, especially among some of the smaller Calvinistic denominations, to elevate to the status of public corporate testimony points of doctrine concerning which there is not only no general agreement among Calvinists, but for which the Scriptural proof may be exegetically or logically doubtful. For example, when a denomination makes a matter of corporate witness the proposition that it is *sinful* to observe the Lord's supper in a kneeling posture, its zeal against the Romish Mass has exceeded its exegetical sense and logical consistency. There should always be a thorough searching of the Scriptures before *anything* is made a matter of public corporate witness, but when the matter in question is one on which there is general disagreement even among those who hold the Scriptural system of doctrine, then there exists far more need for an extremely thorough and deliberate searching of the Scriptures. Under such circumstances to adopt a point of doctrine as an element of corporate witness after a hasty and superficial study of the Scripture bearing on it, or no study at all, is inexcusable. There are always those who would like to make a requirement of the practice of tithing, or of abstinence from certain amusements, or peculiar and highly debatable eschatological views, or special views on economic questions, matters of corporate witness for the Church, who yet evidence little or no grasp of the doctrinal and exegetical problems that are involved, and who quite fail to appreciate the real difficulty — or it may be impossibility — of presenting a really relevant and cogent Scriptural

proof for their doctrinal specialties. On such naive oversimplification of problems sectarianism thrives.

It has been stated that for the visible Church to bear a corporate witness to the truth involves *at least* a testimony for the system of doctrine set forth in the Word of God, and that it is desirable for a Church to bear corporate witness to some of the implications and applications of that system of doctrine. This is not to be taken as implying that the Church's witness must stop with these. The system of doctrine forms not the maximum but the minimum content of a corporate witness. There is certainly no valid reason why other doctrines should be excluded. Nor have the historic Reformed creeds so limited themselves. The Westminster Confession, for example, deals with a number of matters which are not elements of the system, nor, in the strict sense, implications or applications of it. Yet these matters are unquestionably teachings of the Word of God. Mention may be made of the Confession's teaching on war, on oaths, and on marriage and divorce, for example. Certainly nothing revealed in the Scripture can be regarded as without importance, and the visible Church may properly maintain a corporate testimony for any proposition which can be demonstrated to be a real teaching of the Word of God. But when we are off the beaten path of the system of doctrine and its implications and applications in the strict sense, the danger of falling into unwarranted and erroneous interpretations of Scripture is greatly increased. We have only to think of the diverse views which exist on some details of the subject of prophecy, and in particular of the maze of interpretations of the Apocalypse, to realize that this is so. It has long been recognized as a sound principle that no creedal doctrine should be based solely on symbolic portions of Scripture, because of the danger of misinterpretation. It is of the greatest importance that the Church confine its witness to propositions which can be clearly and unanswerably shown to be the truth of God. Where the teaching of the Scripture is not clear the Church should maintain reserve, and wait for further light from the sacred volume before venturing to bear a public testimony. Needless to say, where the Scripture is silent on a question the Church has no right to utter any testimony. To do so

would amount to a presumptuous attempt to improve upon the revelation of God. To respect the silences of Scripture is a sign of true reverence.

We have been considering the problem of the visible Church's public corporate testimony to the truth. Such testimony of course is to be embodied in confessions and other creedal standards. These set forth the Church's official doctrine and constitute not only the norm of truth, subordinate to the Scriptures, for its own life, but its manifesto to the public. We must now consider the question of the degree of conformity to a Church's testimony that is to be required of its own membership. It is generally recognized as sound in principle, and it is certainly unavoidable in practice, that a less complete knowledge may be required of members as such than is properly required for ordination to ecclesiastical office. Should members as such be required to profess their acceptance of the confession or creed of a denomination? The practice of Churches holding the Reformed Faith has varied in this matter, the majority, including the large bodies, having no such *formal* requirement, but some of the smaller ones maintaining it. Even in the latter it is unavoidable that some dissent on the part of members be tolerated. It would be out of the question for any Church to require of every communicant member an *ex animo* acceptance, without permitting any dissent whatever, of every proposition contained, let us say, in the Westminster Standards. To attempt to enforce such conformity would inevitably lead to one or the other of two results. Either the membership would readily profess acceptance of the whole by an implicit faith, and the matter would rest there as a mere formality, or (in the case of more conscientious and serious-minded persons) some proposition or other would be likely to prove a stumbling block to the member, and being forced to choose between his conscience and his Church, he would have no alternative except to leave the denomination. Some dissent on the part of members, then, must be tolerated. How much, and what kind, will in some cases be very easy, and in other cases extremely difficult, to decide. In any case, this decision must be made by the judicatories of each denomination. Such decisions by Church courts, made originally in specific cases

that have arisen, will in the course of time develop into a body of precedent having the effect of common law in dealing with similar cases which may arise later. Where the judicatories of a denomination take no cognizance of the doctrinal conformity of the membership as such, a condition of doctrinal indifferentism is likely soon to prevail. It is easy to think of specific examples of dissent which may have to be faced by Church courts. For example, a man and his wife wish to join a denomination holding the Westminster Standards. They profess general acceptance of the Standards and give evidence of an intelligent understanding of them, but have scruples on the subject of infant baptism. May they be admitted as members with the understanding that their children are to remain unbaptized until they reach an age when they can make their personal profession of faith and thereupon be baptized? Obviously unless there is to be an anarchic condition in which every man does that which is right in his own eyes, a denomination must have a definite policy concerning such matters. Suppose that several such families, each with children growing up unbaptized, were to be admitted to a Presbyterian congregation. Each in turn might be regarded as an exception to the ordinary rule; but what would then become of the Church's corporate witness for the doctrine of infant baptism, and for the doctrine of the covenant of grace which lies back of it? Clearly it would be hazardous to admit members who oppose infant baptism, even in exceptional cases. But suppose an applicant for membership gives a satisfactory account of his faith except that he is a convinced pacifist, and is therefore opposed to the affirmation of the Confession of Faith that to wage war, upon just and necessary occasion, is not inconsistent with Christian duty. Although, from the standpoint of the Confession, pacifism is an error, still, so far as the Church itself is concerned, to tolerate this error will not necessarily destroy the corporate witness of the Church, for the doctrine concerning which error exists directly concerns neither the system of doctrine nor the Church as such, but the sphere of the civil magistrate. To admit a member who is a pacifist would not of itself introduce an element of anarchy into the life of the Church as would the toleration of a family with children growing up unbaptized.

While every denomination will have a growing body of precedent for dealing with such matters, obviously no body of precedent or formulation of rules can prove adequate for all cases which will arise. Cases are bound to come up which will tax the Christian wisdom and prudence of those whose office it is to govern the house of God.

To affirm that the Church must unavoidably tolerate some degree of dissent on the part of members as such, does not at all imply that the Church may tolerate a *contrary propaganda*. The applicant for Church membership who has scruples about this or that point of doctrine in the Church's creed is in the position of the weak brother of Romans 14. As such he is to be treated with sympathy, and if it can be consistently and honestly done, he should be received into membership, but always with the understanding that he has no right to carry on a propaganda within or without the Church for his personal convictions which are at variance with the corporate testimony of his Church. The "weak brother" who claims, and exercises, a "right" to engage in propaganda against the official standards of his Church, thereby claims to be not weak, but strong, and to regard the Church as occupying the position of the "weak brother". The Church may properly receive a weak brother and tolerate his weakness and the error associated with it, but the weak brother who claims to be strong, and acts accordingly, becomes intolerable. For the Church to tolerate a weak brother is one thing; to tolerate a contrary propaganda is quite another matter. Even with respect to minor points of doctrine which are defined in the official standards of a Church, to tolerate a contrary propaganda amounts to tolerating anarchy in the ecclesiastical sphere. It is true here as elsewhere that a house divided against itself cannot stand.

Lest this be misunderstood, it should be explained that by "a contrary propaganda" is not meant any discussion of an issue whatever, nor any effort to have the Church's standards amended to bring them into line with the dissenter's personal convictions. These may be entirely legitimate and proper provided they are carried on in a lawful rather than a lawless manner. The Church member who has scruples about, or dissents from, a point of doctrine set forth in his

Church's creed certainly has the right to seek to have that creed altered, by addressing the judicatories of the Church with a petition setting forth his reasons for the desired change. Such a petition may of course properly be supported by discussion before the appropriate judicatory, and the latter may decide that the question shall be discussed, pro and con, in writing in some Church periodical for a certain period of time. None of this legal and orderly procedure is to be regarded as "a contrary propaganda". Rather, "a contrary propaganda" is one which disregards and by-passes the judicatories of the Church and addresses itself to the public just as if the matter were not one already defined in a certain way in the creed of the Church. Even worse is that form of contrary propaganda which addresses the public, within or without the Church, in denouncing the standards of the Church themselves because of their statements on some matter. Thus a minister who has scruples about some doctrine set forth in the creed of his Church may properly bring the matter before the judicatories of his denomination, but for him to preach from the pulpit against official doctrines of his Church is intolerable. A denomination which tolerates this practice is indeed a house divided against itself, and cannot long stand. It may continue to exist as an organization, but it will no longer bear a real corporate testimony.

The question of the form of subscription to the doctrinal standards of a denomination which should be required of ministers is an important one but too large to be taken up in any detail in this article. Among Churches of the Presbyterian family in America the prevalent form of subscription has been one to the Confession of Faith, or to the Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures. The question as to the meaning of the expression "the system of doctrine" — whether it means every proposition in the Confession, or the "substance" of doctrine, or the Calvinistic system of doctrine — has been thoroughly discussed in the past.⁹ The first of the views listed cannot be defended, for it would

⁹ Cf. Charles Hodge: *The Church and its Polity* (London, 1879), pp. 317-342.

amount to claiming infallibility for the Confession. The second, which would define "system" as "substance", distorts the meaning of words, and would open the door to serious errors; a candidate for ordination could reject doctrines which are essential to the system of Calvinism, and yet claim to hold the "substance" of doctrine taught in the Scriptures. The third view, namely, that which defines "the system of doctrine" as consistent Calvinism as set forth in the Confession of Faith, is undoubtedly correct and should be insisted on.

Something should be said about preaching and teaching on the part of ministers in its relation to the corporate witness of the Church. It is not necessary to state that a minister should faithfully teach and preach the body of truth set forth in the Standards of his Church. But what about the portion of Scriptural ground which lies beyond the area of confessionally defined dogma? Is a minister limited to preaching truth embodied in his Church's corporate witness? Must he refrain from handling matters on which his Church's standards are non-committal? For example, may a minister in preaching advocate the "Restitution theory" of the meaning of Genesis 1:1, 2? The traducian view of the origin of the soul? The Pauline authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews? The view that the earth is to be destroyed as to form only, and not as to matter, or the contrary view that it is to be destroyed as to both form and matter?

With respect to this problem it may be said, first of all, that a minister is ordained to proclaim the *whole* counsel of God, and therefore is not limited to that portion which has already been defined as dogma by his Church; indeed no doctrine would historically have been defined as dogma unless it had previously been preached by ministers and thus had come to be recognized as Scriptural by the Church. Yet a minister in his preaching and teaching must never *contradict* anything which he has professed to accept in his subscription to the Standards of his Church at his ordination.¹⁰ In the

¹⁰ It has been generally recognized historically that there are certain minor points in the Westminster Confession, not in any sense pertaining to the integrity of the system of doctrine, the acceptance of which is not necessarily implied in subscription to the Confession. The statement of the Confession (XXV, 6) that the Pope of Rome is the fulfilment of the

second place, he may never represent any doctrine as an element of the corporate witness of his Church unless it really is set forth in the Standards. Common honesty would seem to involve this, yet it is not infrequently violated in practice; ministers who hold some extra-confessional doctrinal specialty with great zeal sometimes preach it so fervently and so persistently that the public gets the impression that it is a chief point of the denomination's testimony. When a minister preaches an extra-confessional doctrine he owes his hearers a statement that what he is about to preach is not a part of the public testimony of their Church, that it is not in conflict with that testimony, and that he believes it to be a doctrine of God's Word. In the third place, preaching of extra-confessional doctrines should be kept in strict subordination, as to time and emphasis, to the task of preaching the doctrines of the Church's corporate testimony. The main burden of every minister's pulpit work should always be the doctrines which his Church holds as a body. The practice of some denominations of requiring ministers to devote one service each sabbath to doctrinal preaching following the order of the Church's catechism has much to commend it. There could hardly be a better safeguard against the exploitation of extra-confessional doctrinal specialties in the pulpit.

The principles just outlined cannot of course be applied to expository preaching in exactly the same way as to doctrinal preaching. In the nature of the case, much expository preaching will deal with the historical and biographical portions of the Bible. It would be absurd to expect a minister who preaches on the life of Joseph, for example, to explain to his

prophecy of II Thess. 2:3, 4, is of the nature of an *obiter dictum*, as it is obviously based not merely upon exegesis of the Scriptures, but upon ordinary fallible human records of mediaeval history, and thus departs from the Confession's own principle that "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men" (I, 6). Obviously the content of the phrase "the Pope of Rome" is derived not from Scripture but from human tradition. To contradict such a point should not be regarded as inconsistent with subscription to the Confession.

hearers that what he is about to say is taught in the Bible, but is not mentioned in the Standards of the Church. Church members of ordinary intelligence understand that their Church's Standards present a formulation of *doctrine*, not a condensed summary of everything in the Bible. Still it must be remembered that expository preaching, while not *formally* doctrinal, cannot be divorced from doctrine. The doctrines which a minister holds will inevitably come to the surface even of expository preaching. And surely if in the course of expository preaching a minister wishes to emphasize some extra-confessional doctrine, he should take care to make its status clear to his hearers. The minister is not merely an individual proclaimer of the Gospel; he is also an organ of the visible Church, and this fact involves an obligation to maintain a distinction between that which he holds and proclaims merely as a matter of personal conviction concerning the meaning of the Scriptures, and that which he holds and proclaims as also the corporate witness of the Church of which he is a member, and in which he is a servant.

Finally, something may be said about the question of whether the corporate witness of the visible Church is to be regarded as static or progressive. There sometimes appears a spirit of blind and complacent conservatism which would regard that witness as static, as if the Holy Spirit's work of leading the Church into all truth had come to a conclusion in the seventeenth century and no further development could be expected. This excessively conservative spirit tends to look with suspicion on anything new. While conservatism is enjoined in the Scriptural command to "hold fast that which is good",¹¹ the same text also requires us to "prove all things". Certainly the promise that the Holy Spirit would lead the Church into all truth is rightly understood as referring to a process which must continue until the consummation of the age. Clearly, too, the Church's grasp of the doctrines of special revelation hitherto has come through such a process. There has been a progressive development, not indeed without its ups and downs, but still a line of progress from the age of the apostles to the present. One area of doctrine after another

¹¹ I Thess. 5:21.

has been clarified and has become a matter of corporate testimony, especially on the part of those branches of the visible Church which have been located nearest to the "line of orthodoxy", which can be traced from the apostles, through Augustine, the Reformers and, later, the Puritan divines, down to the Reformed theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This has been a wonderful fulfilment of our Lord's promise, but we show scant appreciation of it if we regard it as already complete. Clearly there remain some areas of Christian doctrine in which further clarification and development are needed. The areas of eschatology, the Church, and the civil magistrate may be regarded as such. There are also some particular parts of doctrines which need further clarification. For example, the manner of the transmission of the corruption of original sin has remained rather obscure, and the statements of the Reformed confessions on this subject perhaps leave something to be desired. The same is true of the matter of marriage and divorce, in several particulars.

But progress in developing a Scriptural corporate witness must always be kept in balance with a true conservatism. True progress means building on what has come to us from the past. This does not imply that *nothing* which has come from the past as a matter of corporate witness may ever be torn down. "All synods or councils, since the Apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred",¹² and therefore we must recognize that there has always been an element of error in the visible Church's witness to the truth. Therefore no creed or confession is to be regarded as sacrosanct; it may really need to be amended, even by the striking out of some item. But it should be realized that such changes will affect only minor details, and also that future additions to the Church's witness must necessarily be comparatively minor ones. The great work of building up a corporate witness to the truth has already been done; it stands today in the historic Reformed creeds, not indeed as infallible, nor as complete in every element nor in detail, but as substantially complete. In its main outlines and in all its

¹² The Westminster Confession of Faith, XXXI, 4.

principal features, this work has been done for all time, and can never be improved upon. We should remember, too, that the anti-doctrinal temper of our age, which has to some extent infected even the best Churches, will make real progress in further development of the Church's witness very difficult, at least for a time. The Church has to struggle desperately today to maintain her grip upon the confessions which followed the Reformation. We should hope and pray for the dawn of a better day when the development of the Church's witness can go forward with new confidence and vigor.

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