

**THE WESTMINSTER
CONFESSION OF FAITH:
WITH INTRODUCTION AND
NOTES**

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The Westminster confession of faith: with introduction and notes by John Macpherson

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JOHN MACPHERSON

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With Introduction and Notes

BY

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THE REV. JOHN MACPHERSON, M.A.,
FINDHORN.

SECOND EDITION.

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION.

I N sending forth a new edition of this Handbook, I have little to say by way of preface. The announcement from the Publishers that the first issue was nearly exhausted came upon me unexpectedly, and I have not been able to give anything like a thorough revision to the book. Many friends have favoured me during the past year with communications regarding my work, from which, had more time been allowed, I might have profited more largely. I cannot forbear expressing my special indebtedness to Principal Douglas,—my only surviving divinity Professor,—who kindly called attention to certain imperfections in my notes, some of which I have endeavoured to correct in this new edition. The sale of a large issue within twelve months is to me peculiarly encouraging, as it shows that this Handbook has been the means of awakening considerable interest in the Westminster Confession, and giving a new impetus to its systematic study.

JOHN MACPHERSON.

FINDHORN, FORRES, 18th March 1832.

THE CONFESSION OF FAITH.

INTRODUCTION.

CHAPTER I.

THE PLACE AND PURPOSE OF CONFESSIONS OF FAITH.

1. **Confessions of Faith—Subordinate Standards.**—The Confession of Faith adopted by any church may be in certain respects compared to a set of rules accepted by an ordinary association as a term of membership. If these rules have been carefully and wisely drawn up, they will make prominent those principles which are specially to characterize the society; and reluctance on the part of any one to observe the fundamental articles of association would imply unwillingness to join or to remain in its membership. Society rules, however, may be purely arbitrary. Even if some reason may have determined their original adoption, this reason may be unknown to persons accepting them. It may not be a term of membership that each one who adopts the rules of the association must have acquainted himself with the grounds on which they rest, or the circumstances under which they were originally framed. To the members of such associations, the set of rules which they have adopted is their supreme standard of reference, and they have nothing to do with the source from which he who originally drafted them may have drawn. A Confession of Faith, however, is accepted by members of churches acknowledging it, simply as a subordinate standard. This designation in no way modifies its authority or relaxes the obligation of those who join the communion of the church by which it is received. The subordination intended is that of derivation. The members of the church receive the Confession as a statement of the truth contained in Scripture, and not as a document in itself authoritative apart from its scriptural ground. In entering into the communion of a church holding by any particular Confession, we not only agree to maintain the doctrinal positions therein contained, as the members of an association promise to observe the adopted rules, but we further make the affirmation that we hold the statement of doctrine in that Confession to be in

accordance with the truth of Holy Scripture. To appeal from the Confession to Scripture on doctrinal points in the way of repudiating the confessional statement in favour of the scriptural, involves the abandonment of that communion of which the Confession is the bond. If any particular doctrine has been carefully formulated in the Confession, our adoption of that Confession is an expression of our belief that the doctrine thus formulated is the very truth revealed in Scripture. We must not therefore suppose that by calling our Confession of Faith a subordinate standard, we give ourselves liberty to set its exposition of doctrine aside in favour of any other interpretation of Scripture passages bearing on that doctrine. If we feel compelled to do so, we repudiate the Confession as a standard altogether. While careful to avoid the Romish notion of the indefiniteness of Scripture, which led to the introduction of an infallible interpreter, we must guard against the abandonment of those definite views of Scripture truth to which the church has attained by painful discussion and sustained investigation. The demand for a return to Scripture is virtually a plea for individualism, and is inconsistent with Church organization. This has been a favourite resort of those who wished to introduce novelties of belief without sacrifice of position. The Remonstrants at the Synod of Dort, in the endeavour to render plausible their Arminian doctrine, were wont to disparage the authority of Covenants and Confessions under pretence of accepting Scripture only as their rule. To a similar pretext of the Erastian Coleman, we find George Gillespie making a very pointed rejoinder in his controversial tract *Mare Audis*. 'It is in vain for them,' says he, 'to palliate or shelter their covenant-breaking with appealing from the Covenant to the Scripture, for *subordinata non pugnant*. The Covenant is *norma recta*,—a right rule, though the Scripture alone be *norma recti*,—the rule of right. If they hold the Covenant to be unlawful, or to have anything in it contrary to the Word of God, let them speak out.' We do acknowledge only one authoritative rule of faith—the Holy Scriptures. No church Confession is ever set forth as co-ordinate with Scripture in authority. The Confession simply expresses our view of the teaching of Scripture on important doctrines, and the acceptance of this basis of a common faith becomes a convenient bond of union, a fitting term of communion for those thus doctrinally agreed. In an Act of Parliament there is commonly a clause inserted for the purpose of interpreting the terms employed throughout. In the administration of that law, the meaning authoritatively given to terms occurring therein must be accepted. It will not avail to say that these terms may possibly convey certain other impressions. Now the Confession is an interpretative clause, which the particular church accepting it appends to the Scripture. We find in Scripture, for example, such terms as these,—counsel of God, sin, the wages of sin, justification, faith, etc. Various interpretations have been given of those terms, and they have been employed in the setting forth of

doctrinal views diametrically opposed to one another. All claim the Bible as favouring their particular doctrinal opinions. The Confession authoritatively interprets such terms for our church, and definitely states what form of doctrine, in the use of these terms, may be maintained in the church.

2. **What the Adoption of a Confession implies.**—It is important to determine as nearly as possible what the acceptance of a Confession of Faith ought to be regarded as implying. All the great and influential church creeds have been produced in peculiar crises of the church's history, and each necessarily reflects to some extent the local colouring and the accidental circumstances of its origin. Without in the least impairing the integrity of the document, we may distinguish between that in it which is merely local and occasional, and that which is essential and characteristic. This is the distinction commonly made between the substance and the details of doctrinal formularies. The American formula of subscription explicitly limits the adoption of the authorized standards to an acceptance of the system of doctrine. It must be admitted that such a phrase is capable of being used in a very vague and uncertain way. It is also very evident that any such general distinction as that between the spirit and the letter, the substance and the particular details, is liable to great abuse, and has been often sadly misapplied. Yet that a difference must be made between divergencies from certain accidental modes of expression and view, and divergencies from points of doctrine fundamental to the general course of doctrine represented in the symbol, must be clear to every candid mind. This distinction between type and formula has been well expressed by Martensen; and what he says of Lutheran standards may, of course, be with equal truth applied to our own Calvinistic standards: 'By the *type* of Lutheranism we mean its ground form, its inextinguishable, fundamental, and distinctive features. As we recognise in a man or in a people an inward peculiarity, an impress, which belongs to them from eternity, never appearing in perfect clearness in time, and yet recognisable even amidst temporal imperfections; so we can detect in the Christian Confessions a church individuality, a fundamental abiding form, which, amidst change and growth, is constantly reproducing itself; whereas the theological *formule* in which this form is expressed are more or less characterised by relativity and transitoriness' (*Chr. Dogmatics*, p. 55). When this distinction is honestly made, room will be found under the same Confession for independent thinkers, who, while holding by the same general type of doctrine, have their own way of explaining the several points of the common faith. On a careful examination of the Westminster Confession, it is found that certain doctrines are therein maintained, no one of which may be denied without involving the overthrow, or at least a breach in the integrity, of the general system which they together constitute. Dr. Hodge has enumerated eighteen distinctive doc-