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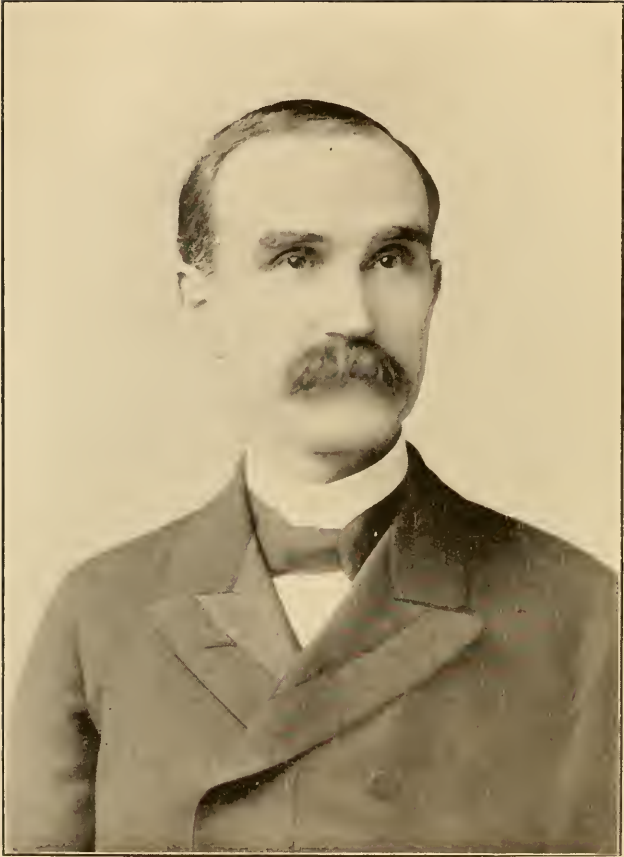


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X.

THE INFLUENCE EXERTED BY THE WESTMINSTER  
SYMBOLS UPON THE INDIVIDUAL, THE FAMILY  
AND SOCIETY.

BY

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## ANALYSIS.

References to Froude and Bacon.—The tree is known by its fruits.—The Westminster Standards are fully vindicated by the test which time and experience supply.—Two modes of treating the subject combined.—One is the argument from the doctrines of the Standards and the constitution of man's nature.—The other is reasoning from the actual verdict of history.—Both lines concurrent and conclusive.—The Catechisms meet the youthful mind at a time of life when deep impressions are made.—Baxter quoted.—The first question of the Catechism strikes a high key.—This high key is kept up all through.—The divine sovereignty exalted.—The fearful nature of sin emphasized.—Salvation by grace made clear.—The security of the believer established.—His glorious hope unfolded.—These doctrines tend to produce a strong and elevated type of piety.—The Standards also give a large place to distinctively ethical teaching.—Half the Catechisms, almost, is ethical teaching.—The whole sphere of man's duty is here covered.—The foundation of duty is made to rest upon the authority of God in his word.—Beecher quoted.—History cited to confirm this.—Many examples given.—Huguenots.—Dutch Protestants.—Puritans.—Covenanters.—Scotch-Irish.—Even rejectors of the doctrines of the Standards praise their ethics.—Their very strictness one of their excellencies.—Conviction rather than sentiment controls.—The effect on the individual is good.—Cases quoted.—Courage produced by this teaching.—Contrast with Arminian doctrine.—Ireland used to illustrate.—The Standards deal largely, also, with domestic and social life.—The family made sacred.—The covenant relation of parents made plain.—On this basis the children are to be trained for the Lord.—The value of this for the family shown.—“The Cottar's Saturday Night,” to illustrate.—Good citizens are thus produced.—The individual made right and the family held sacred have this result.—The Standards also honor the Sabbath.—The sacred day protected.—This is of great value to society in a variety of ways.—The family and the Sabbath are the two Edenic institutions which the Standards exalt and protect.—A solemn warning uttered.—An earnest exhortation given.

## X.

### THE INFLUENCE EXERTED BY THE WESTMINSTER SYMBOLS UPON THE INDIVIDUAL, THE FAMILY, AND SOCIETY.

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I<sup>n</sup> his celebrated essay on "Calvinism," Mr. Froude says: "The practical effect of a belief is the real test of its soundness." It is true of creeds, as of men, that they are to be known by their fruits. Men do not gather grapes of thorns, nor figs of thistles. "Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit."

There is a most real and vital connection between belief and conduct, between creed and character. What men believe, that they become. As Bacon says: "Truth and goodness differ but as the seal and the print; for truth prints goodness." The same may be said of error and evil. Evil in conduct and character is ever the imprint of error.

Two hundred and fifty years afford a sufficient probation for fairly testing a system of religious doctrine, especially when that system has been tried among different peoples and under different social and political conditions. To-day we are to inquire how the Standards, framed by the Westminster Assembly, abide this test. How have they stood translation into real life or incarnation in living men and women? Have their practical effects been such as to vindicate their right to survive among the creeds of Christendom? What influence have

they exerted upon "the individual, the family, and society," where they have been embraced? The question may be answered in two ways :

First, we may reason *a priori* from the nature of the doctrines set forth in our Standards, and from what we know of human nature as to the moral effects which they must produce.

Or we may appeal to history to ascertain what are the effects which they actually have produced. We shall try to combine these methods ; although it will be readily perceived that the subject is too extensive to receive anything like exhaustive treatment within the limits of a single discourse.

1. In the first place, in order to estimate the influence which these symbols of faith exert over the individual who comes in contact with them, the fact must be taken into account that they meet him very early in his career.

The Westminster divines well understood the necessity of training up a child in the way he should go in order to insure against his departing from it in age. They heard and heeded the risen Master's commission to Simon Peter, "Feed my *lambs*." Their very best work, in the judgment of many, is found in the provision which they made for the lambs of the flock.

Richard Baxter is quoted as saying : "If the Westminster Assembly had done nothing more than produced the Shorter Catechism they would be entitled to the everlasting gratitude of the Christian church." He further expressed the opinion that, next to the Bible, it was probably the best book in the world. Its many excellencies, and its admirable adaptation to the purpose for which it was framed, have been well set forth in a preceding address, so that it is needless for me to enlarge upon it.

That Catechism meets the youth first of all with the significant question, "What is the chief end of man?" and the pregnant answer, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." It has been said that the first question in each of the most widely used Catechisms of Christendom is a key to its character and contents. Of the Westminster Shorter this is unquestionably true. Its opening question strikes the keynote of the whole system of doctrine which it unfolds. God is exalted. His sovereign supremacy is asserted; he is all and in all; his glory is the only proper end both for himself and all his creatures; he is not for the sake of the creature; the creature is for his sake. As one has said, "In all place, in all time, from eternity to eternity, Calvinism sees God."

Along with this supreme exaltation of God, the Westminster Standards inculcate the teaching of Scripture as to the enormity of sin, and the hopelessness and misery of man's fallen estate. On this crucial question they go to the root where truth and error divide. There is nothing superficial or compromising in their treatment of it. They make no concession to the pride of the human heart. In proportion as God is glorious and great, the sin of man is heinous and fatal. It is recreancy to his supreme relation; it separates him from his God, and hence leaves him "dead in trespasses and sins." The sinner is lost. Left to himself his condition is one of hopeless condemnation and woe.

Then a salvation is revealed which is *all* of grace; a salvation which from beginning to end is "of the Lord." No flesh is allowed to glory in his presence. No inch of room is left for human boasting. But it is a salvation which is *complete*. It embraces the believing sinner in the arms of unchanging love. It secures him by the



bonds of an everlasting covenant. It gives him an inalienable place in the family of God. It sets before him a hope which is unclouded by a single doubt. Now the objection which men have urged against this scheme of doctrine from the beginning until now is that it is unfavorable to holiness and morality; that it takes away all motives to godly and righteous living, and opens the way to licentiousness.

The Scriptures distinctly refute the objection, and so do all history and experience. *Grace* is the spring of holiness, and its only spring, "The grace of God which bringeth salvation . . . teaches us," and it only teaches the lesson effectively, "that denying ungodliness and worldly lust we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present world."

Love is the fulfilling of the law, and love is evoked by grace. The only hope of our emancipation from sin, according to the Apostle Paul, arises from the fact that we are "not under the law but under grace." The sinner is in no condition to render acceptable obedience or devoted service until all confidence in the flesh has been completely shattered, and he has been freed from every vestige of legal bondage, and brought into the liberty of grace. He is only brought into this condition when he has been humbled and then exalted, smitten, and then healed by the doctrines of grace which are formulated in the Westminster Standards. Hence, wherever these doctrines have been received they have brought forth the fruits of righteousness. What Dr. Chalmers said of Scotland is true the world over: "Wherever there has been most Calvinism, men have been most moral."

Another feature of our Standards which deserves to be noticed in this connection, as a feature which makes for righteousness, is the prominence which they give to

ethical teaching. They are an exposition not only of doctrine but of duty. They do not treat only, as some ignorantly suppose, of dogmas of faith. They set forth not only "what man is to believe concerning God," but also "what duties God requires of man." Following the order of Holy Scriptures, having laid a foundation of doctrine, they proceed to rear upon it a superstructure of duty.

More than half of each of the Catechisms is devoted to ethical subjects. The perpetual obligation of the moral law is recognized. It is expounded precept by precept, in the light of the Sermon on the Mount, and with a simplicity, and precision, and spiritual insight which have never been surpassed.

It is shown that the life redeemed and directed by grace is not a lawless life, but is bounded and regulated by the statutes of the Lord.

The whole sphere of human conduct is covered. Duty is grounded on its only sure foundation—divine authority. The conscience is commanded by the only voice to which it owes obedience, the voice of God. The heart is plied by the only motives to holiness that have ever completely swayed it, motives drawn from the cross of Christ. Surely, such teaching, when accompanied by the Spirit's grace, must conduce to righteousness of life. Mr. Beecher never spoke more truly than when he said of Calvinism: "There never was a system since the world stood which put upon man such motives to holiness, or which builds batteries which sweep the whole ground of sin with such terrible artillery."

As a matter of fact, wherever this system of truth has been embraced it has produced a noble and distinct type of character—a type so clearly marked that secular his-

torians, with no religious bias, have recognized it, and pointed to it as a "remarkable illustration of the power of religious training in the formation of character." We see it among the Huguenots of France, the Protestant Dutch of Holland, the Puritans of England, the Covenanters of Scotland, the Scotch-Irish of Ulster, and also among the descendants of them all in our own country. Widely as these people differ as to race and language and national habits, there is a strong family likeness between them, a likeness which can only be accounted for by the fact that they were trained in a common religious faith. And the type of character developed among them was as pure and noble as it was distinct. It is safe to say it has never been surpassed in the history of the world. That they had their faults goes without saying. But even their "failings," as Burns said of his father's, were such as "leaned to virtue's side."

The accusations which their opponents have made against them have, in most instances, been encomiums. They have been criticised for being too strict and uncompromising in their views of life and duty. But all excellence is marked by strictness. Strictness certainly characterizes everything which truly represents God. The laws of nature are all strict; the laws of hygiene are strict; and the life which would secure their benediction must be a strict life. So with the laws of morals. Like him who ordained them they know "no variable-ness nor shadow of turning." Any pretended exposition of the moral nature and claims of God which is characterized by looseness, by that very fact brands itself as false. Their narrowness has been unctuously deplored. But after all is it not the narrowness of truth?

The Master himself said, "Strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there

be that find it." "Narrowness," it has been said, "is often the badge of usefulness." Great leaders of men have been narrow. Elijah was too narrow to adopt the worship of Baal. Martin Luther was too narrow to include in his creed the errors of the Papacy. Wesley was too narrow to sympathize with the cold ritualism of his age. William Carey was so narrow that he had no sympathy with the anti-mission spirit of his age. Gideon was so narrow that he could not tolerate the idols in his father's house, but rose in his might and tore them down." The narrowness of Calvinists has usually been of the same sort. One thing cannot be questioned—the adherents of this faith have always been marked by *intelligence*. It is a plain fact of history that Calvinism and ignorance have never dwelt together in unity. Wherever they have met, one or the other has had to quit the field. They have been men who were possessed and controlled by convictions rather than sentiments. They have believed something, and have been ready to stand for their belief against all odds. They have been men in whom conscience was developed, who were inspired by a high regard for right and duty. Stanley, the African explorer, giving his impressions of Livingstone and Mackay, whose missionary work he had observed in the heart of Africa, expressed the opinion that Scotchmen make the best missionaries in the world; and that what gives them their preëminent qualifications for this arduous work is their supreme devotion to duty. That devotion is the legitimate fruit of their religious training.

Courage is another trait which to a marked degree has characterized such as are moulded by this creed. It is not true that "conscience makes cowards of us all." This is true only of a bad conscience. A good conscience

makes a man a hero. He who walks in the fear of God is emancipated from lower fears. He who believes in an Almighty Father, who has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass, and who through his overruling providence is preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions, is made superior to those experiences of life which cause others to quake and fear. Hence, Bancroft says, "A coward and a Puritan never went together."

And with them, as always, the fear of God has been accompanied by a regard for man. Honesty, integrity, and all social and domestic virtues have been developed among them to a degree that is rarely seen in this selfish and grasping world. "Men may talk as much as they please," says Mr. Beecher, "against the Calvinists, Puritans, and Presbyterians, but you will find that when they want to make an investment they have no objection to Calvinism, or Puritanism, or Presbyterianism. They know that where these systems prevail their capital may be safely invested."

In the providence of God a most significant object lesson has been given to the world as to the practical effect of our Presbyterian faith, on character in contrast with the effect of an antipodal faith, the full-blown Arminianism the papacy.

Forty years ago a German traveller in Ireland wrote that in passing from Leinster into Ulster he seemed to have entered another world, so great was the contrast. That contrast still exists. In the latter, one meets everywhere an intelligent, industrious, moral, and law-abiding people. In the former, he is confronted on every hand with ignorance, and poverty, and lawlessness, and crime. Thirty thousand soldiers are quartered in Ireland, only three thousand of them in Ulster. Four times as many policemen, in proportion to the population, are re-

quired in the south of Ireland as in the north. There is but one explanation of the difference: the Ulster men have been moulded by the teachings of the Westminster Assembly; their southern neighbors have been moulded by the decrees of the Vatican, and the Council of Trent. We claim, then, for our venerable creed, that whatever the world may say of it, it is fitted to be, and, according to the testimony of impartial history, has proved itself to be a *character-making* creed.

2. But the Westminster Standards do not concern themselves alone with the individual; they take into account also his domestic and social relations. Green, the English historian, says: "Home, as we conceive it, was the creation of the Puritan." Certain it is that the ideal Christian home has been most nearly realized in those places where the influence of the Westminster Symbols has been most dominant. Nor is it strange. For, first, they jealously guard the inviolable sanctity of the marriage bond. In an age of intolerable looseness they expounded fearlessly and without compromise the teaching of Holy Scripture as to marriage and divorces, and the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord. It is stated as a historical fact, that "in all the history of the Puritans there is not an example of a divorce." Thus they cleared from its abuses, and set forth in its original sanctity, that fundamental relation of the family.

Again, they seized more clearly than any other symbols of faith have ever done the scriptural idea that the family, rather than the individual, is the unit upon which the church and society are built; that the family of the believer is included in the provisions of God's covenant with him; that the children of believing parents have a place in the visible church, and that baptism, instead of being an empty, meaningless ordinance, to be adminis-

tered indiscriminately to all children, is the appointed sign and seal of a sure covenant between God and the believing parent. The original charter of the church was, "I will be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee." Its New Testament form is, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved *and thy house.*" The grace of God has ever expressed itself through a two-fold covenant. It has not been content to offer life and salvation to the individual believer, but has always included in its offer the children whom God has given him. No smaller gospel can adequately express the exceeding riches of redeeming grace; no smaller gospel can perfectly satisfy the need of the human soul. In vain is the message sent down from heaven to the individual believer, "Say ye to the righteous, it shall be well with him." The parental heart will send back the anxious question, "Is it well with the child?"

That deep yearning of the soul the gospel answers with the assurance that as we confidently commit ourselves, so may we commit our children, into the arms of redeeming love. This precious feature of our holy religion the Westminster Standards clearly expound, and I am not sure but it is their most distinctive glory. Now when this full gospel of the grace of God is embraced; when Jesus Christ is accepted not only as a personal Saviour, but also as the Saviour of the house, Joshua's resolve becomes the natural response of the heart: "As for me *and my house*, we will serve the Lord." The home takes on the character and shape of a religious institution. It becomes a Bethel. The family altar is reared. The rule by which the household is ordered is the word of God. Hence, as a matter of fact, wherever Presbyterianism has prevailed, homes have been found, like the home of Abraham, characterized by two features,

*family discipline and family worship.* It is no accident that the *Cottar's Saturday Night* was written by a poet trained under the Westminster Standards, and that its scene is laid in a land moulded by Presbyterianism. A Scotch servant-girl hearing the poem read before a company of admiring English people, naively said that she saw nothing very wonderful about it, for that was the way they did at her father's house every night. Such scenes are indigenous to Presbyterian soil; and if our beloved old church ever loses her glory, it will be when the fires go out on her family altars.

3. From such homes as these it is needless to say good citizens come. Children who have first learned to show their piety at home naturally grow up to be loyal, orderly and useful members of society. What the numerous springs scattered through yon western mountains are to your broad and beautiful Catawba, such are the pious homes of a commonwealth to its social and political life. Hence, wherever Presbyterianism has been planted, and has been true to her doctrinal Standards, she has made a distinct impression upon the face of society. She has never failed to bless the state under whose ægis she has dwelt. Not by intermeddling in its administration, or seeking to shape its policies, but in a more legitimate and more effective way: by contributing to the state, men and women who fear God and order their lives and homes according to his word.

But the Westminster Symbols have made one contribution to the weal of society which is so notable as to deserve specific mention; that is, the sanctity with which they have invested the Sabbath-day. The fourth commandment is recognized as perpetually binding, and is enforced by the sanctions of Scripture drawn both from creation and redemption. No other holy day is acknowl-



edged. The Sabbath alone is exalted as the one holy day of the church—set apart not by human but by divine appointment. The whole day, it is taught, is to be sanctified by a holy resting, and spent in good works and the public and private exercises of God's worship. Accordingly, Presbyterians the world over have had no more distinctive mark than this that they have been a *Sabbath-keeping people*.

Now the relation which this sacred institution sustains to the welfare of society is too well understood to need any vindication in this presence. The Sabbath law is written as distinctly on man's nature as it ever was on the table of stone. An observance of it is absolutely essential to his physical, moral and social well-being. Daniel Webster said, "The Sabbath is the bulwark of our liberties, because it is the bulwark of morality." Blackstone said, "A corruption of morals usually follows a profanation of the Sabbath." Show me a community where the Sabbath is observed according to the teachings of our Standards, and I will show you an orderly, law-abiding, and moral community. Show me one where the Sabbath is desecrated, and I will show you one which is a very breeding-place of anarchy and vice and crime. The family and the Sabbath! The two institutions of Eden which survived the wreck of the fall! They are the two strong supports of all social order, the Jachin and Boaz upon which human society rests. Let them be disintegrated and social chaos inevitably follows.

These two institutions our venerable Standards exalt as no others do. For their maintenance the Presbyterian Church has always stood. Fathers and brethren and Christian friends, they have been handed down to us as a precious legacy from God-fearing ancestors. We have received them as a high trust, to be passed on in unim-

paired integrity to generations yet to come. Shame upon us if they suffer loss in our hands! When Isaac sojourned in the valley of Gerar he found that the wells which his father Abraham had digged and used had been stopped up by the envious Philistines. They were no longer sources of blessing and refreshment. He showed himself a worthy son of his father by digging them again, that they might be to him and to his all that they had been in his father's day. He thus sought to preserve and perpetuate the good which his father had done. These two springs of blessing have been opened for us, at unspeakable cost, by hearts and hands long stilled in death. We have drunk from them and been refreshed. But alas! the Philistines are at work to close them up with the rubbish of earth and hinder their outflow of blessing. There are no institutions of our holy religion which the great enemy of all good is attacking to-day with more persistent or subtle malignity and zeal. We are threatened with the dire calamity of losing the home and the Sabbath that our forefathers know.

Does not this commemorative occasion summon us by every sacred and inspiring motive to rise up for their defence, to open them up afresh in all their original fulness that they may send their sweet and purifying streams down through the coming years?