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THE WESTMINSTER FORMULAS OF DOCTRINE, WORSHIP AND
GOVERNMENT:

THEIR VALIDITY AND OBLIGATION IN THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

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Controversy is eminently diffusive and rarely terminates at the point at which it commences, or remains satisfied with its claims in the outset. It spreads, not always like oil imparting lustre and durability, but like fire, hurtful to the sight and destructive in its progress. The deacon question, very indefinite in its form from the beginning, and even yet scarcely capable of being accurately ascertained, has brought up some new issues which are calculated to disturb the very foundations of our ecclesiastical order and render it doubtful in what position we stand as it regards our subordinate standards. Among the matters which have become involved in disputation is one which is comprehended in the following words in our terms of ecclesiastical fellowship, Article 3: "An acknowledgment of the divine right of one unalterable form of church government and manner of worship—and that these are, for substance, justly exhibited in that Form of Church Government and the Directory for Worship agreed upon by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, *as they were received by the Church of Scotland.*"

While there are other things in this article which have been brought into dispute, the particular matter contained in the words which are in italics, is one of equal interest at least, to any other. Whatever may be the character of the documents themselves—the form of Church Government and the Directory for Worship—the manner in which they were received by the Church of Scotland is very naturally and reasonably supposed to determine the degree and nature of their authority with us.

In the words themselves, the founders of our church in this country certainly appear to have understood that these documents had been truly and *bona fide* received by the church of Scotland. This fact had been admitted and acted upon almost time out of mind in the Reformed Presbyterian Church. It had originated in an early period of our history, when our forefathers were contiguous and near to the very time and events in which this circumstance of their being received by the church of Scotland took place, and the fact itself has been handed down as a matter incapable of question or dispute. The manner in which they were so received, perhaps, may not have been very closely examined, possibly because that also may have been thought too plain a case to require much examination, or afford any conscientious scruple or difficulty in the acknowledgment required. It seems to have been reserved for the present age to discover that, both in fact and form, all this matter is involved in uncertainty and obscurity. If I am right in my perception of discussions now before the church, it appears to be questioned, 1st: whether the church of Scotland ever received them at all, and 2d: whether the manner in which she received them has been so understood in our church as to direct us to a knowledge and observance of all the obligations it involves. I propose to consider both these questions in a brief view of the facts before us in each case. It seems that the same questions have relation also to the "Westminster Confession of Faith, and Catechisms larger and shorter," both, because they are entirely of the same origin, shared in some respects the same history, and are so connected in the 2d and 3d articles of our terms of ecclesiastical communion, as to appear to have been designedly located in the same condition of authority, "as they were received by the Church of Scotland." This is confirmed by the fact, that in the formula of questions to Ruling Elders for ordination, this qualification is confined exclusively to these very documents.

1. Did the Church of Scotland ever receive them at all? I know not on what grounds this fact is questioned, but it would seem to involve our forefathers in the charge of great ignorance, stupidity or intentional imposture, to assert in so grave and solemn a document as the terms of ecclesiastical communion, a matter of which there was even any reasonable doubt. It would involve the charge of great unfairness also, to suppose that they left our people to the embarrassing alternative of employing historical records difficult of access to most of them, and absolutely inaccessible to many, in order to determine a matter in which a most solemn profession was involved before God, his church, and the world. It is rather to be believed, for the credit of all concerned, that the fact itself was understood to be indisputable, and that the evidence was at hand, and such evidence as would be reasonable, intelligible and conclusive in all similar cases. And so it happens to be in this. In

all the editions of these works published in the old country, and in all the proper and legitimate editions republished in this, they are understood to have been published by authority, civil or ecclesiastical, or both, and to be part of the law of the land as regards the established Church of Scotland. Thus on the title page of all such copies is furnished the most direct testimony in the very first matters that meet the eye of the person who is required and who intends to make himself acquainted with the contents of the book. I furnish at large, though it might seem a work of supererogation, a title page common to all the authentic copies, and open to every reader of these works:

“The Confession of Faith; the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, with the Scripture proofs at large, together with the sum of saving knowledge, (contained in the Holy Scriptures, and held forth in the said Confession and Catechisms,) and practical use thereof; Covenants, National and Solemn League; acknowledgment of Sins, and encouragement to duties; *Directions for Public and Family Worship; Form of Church Government, &c.* OF PUBLIC AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND, with Acts of Assembly and Parliament, relative to, and APPROBATIVE of the same.

Deut. vi. 6, 7: And these words which I command thee this day shall be in thine heart. And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children; and thou shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

Edinburgh: Printed by Sir D. Hunter Blair and J. Bruce, Printers to the King's most Excellent Majesty. 1810. *

As it is not every body that does so much justice to a book as to read the title page, I have given the one in question at full length, and as the title page often suffers by being mutilated or lost, it is put here *in perpetuam memoriam rei*. Moreover, the disputed fact of *its authority in the church* is printed in large letters, that people of *weak eyes* may read and be satisfied; and the Scripture quotation also is given, that all may understand what use they are to make of this matter and of all others pertaining to it. In conclusion the names of the highly distinguished and respectable printers are given, and these are empowered by the highest, the sovereign authority of the realm. If any one still doubts and fears that all this may be imposture, he may institute further inquiry and he will learn, that all Professors of Theology, all Principals, and Professors and Officials of almost every description, in the literary institutions under the authority of church and state, and all Ministers of religion, are required, at their induction into office, to give their written adhesion and acknowledgment, to the whole and every part of

* An equally perspicuous and determinate attestation is given separately in the title page of the Form of Church Government in the same volume, to which the reader is referred.

these documents as of public authority in the Church of Scotland. The Acts of Assembly and of Parliament relative to and approbative of the same, are also printed at large in the same volume, and having with these, the declaration of their being of PUBLIC AUTHORITY, and the legitimate interpretation of these Acts of Assembly and Parliament in the efficient manner in which they are applied to all officers in the church and the literary and theological institutions subject to its authority, no reasonable doubt can be entertained that they have been in fact received by the Church of Scotland. Wise-aces here, three thousand miles off, may attempt to question and mystify the *enacting deeds* by which they are there sustained and acknowledged, but men more shrewd and deeply interested there, many of whom would be glad to get office and salary without the subscription and acknowledgment it required, have found the laws too stringent and determinate to escape the obligation, and know if they will get the one they must also give the other and sign with their own hand a formal recognition, proving that they are in all and every part “of public authority in the Church of Scotland.”

2. Has the manner in which they were received by the Church of Scotland been so understood in our church as to direct us to a knowledge and observance of all the obligations they contain? Until very lately I think it was, and with scarcely a whisper of doubt or dissension. The inquiry resolves itself into two particulars: 1. Do the words, “as they were received by the Church of Scotland,” refer to the prior and then existing ecclesiastical deeds of the Church of Scotland relative to doctrine, government or worship, whereby these documents, Confession of Faith, Catechisms larger and shorter, Form of Church Government and Directory for Worship, were augmented, modified or defined in their import, meaning and authority? If so, of course it would behoove all who make this acknowledgment, to make themselves thoroughly acquainted with such ecclesiastical deeds then in existence, in all their extent, number, variety and application; for without this knowledge they could not intelligently and uprightly give their acknowledgment and approbation of them “as they were received by the Church of Scotland”—unless, despairing of such an attainment, they should cast off chart, compass and helm, and abandon themselves to the wide waste ocean of Papal uncertainty: “I believe what the church believes,” and leave that to time and leisure to discover! But this last is a condition into which no pious and upright member of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of a former or of the present age intended to place himself. His conviction, his judgment is, “what I am required to profess to believe now, I demand to know now,” that I may bring it to the law and the testimony of my Maker and my Judge. He has informed me that the teachings of a former age must be brought to the standard of his present and ever living word now. “Ye have heard that it hath

been said by them of old—but I SAY UNTO YOU;” Math. v. 21, 22, giving us clearly to understand that whatsoever was said by the highest human ecclesiastical authority of old, must be brought to the ordeal of what he says unto us now.

And what are the facts in this case. At present, and for some time past, two or more of our distinguished brethren have been discussing this matter with great industry, acumen and zeal. The integrity of these brethren I do not question, but cheerfully acknowledge, and give to those on either side of the question large credit for devotion to what they conceive to be the truth, and large praise for ecclesiastical erudition and research. I have listened with interest and with great entertainment, and have read with like feelings, much of what has been spoken and written on this subject. An interest and gratification, I do most solemnly protest, only mingled with a painful conviction of the unavailing nature of the contest, its complete departure from the actual issue in the case, and the most heartfelt grief lest it should terminate in the rending of bonds so sacred as those which have so long held the Reformed Presbyterian Church in a godly and happy union. And what has been attained? Why, it is made evident to all, that our principal and most active leaders in the investigation and determination of this important matter, with all the light of history before them, actuated by the most devoted purpose, and certainly each respectable for intellectual endowments, have not been able to bring the matter to an issue clear and satisfactory to all the church. The matter has become more complicated instead of being more clear. What then must be the condition of a large portion of our people who have nothing but the Bible and the Confession of Faith with its accompanying documents at their command? What must be the condition of others whose opportunities are better than these but still much behind our more learned and favored brethren? Very true it may be that the respective adherents of these conflicting arguments, may profess themselves more and more satisfied. But it should be inquired, has this controversy originated and is it now prosecuted with the view of causing, widening and perpetuating division? Or is it aimed at preserving the unity and promoting the edification of the whole church, now solemnly bound in one holy profession of the truth of Christ? “By their fruits ye shall know them.”

Indeed the whole course that the argument now has taken, originates in a misconception of the strict import and design of the clause in question. It is readily acknowledged that much information may be obtained from the actual condition of the church and the circumstances of that eventful period as to the meaning of our subordinate standards and their application. It is even so with the Bible—it is so with every book. Yet it is evident from the nature of the case, as I think has been made to appear, that it cannot be

the meaning of the words in question to require of us to receive them as they may be understood to be modified by the prior action or existing laws of the Church of Scotland. And therefore I remark:

2. That we are required to receive them in that original integrity and entireness with which they were by that church received, unaltered, unmutilated and incorrupt. And this is suggested by the very phraseology employed—it is not in the active form, expressive of the modifying action of that church in her own prior ecclesiastical state; not as *they received them*, but as they, the documents themselves, *were received*; in other words it refers not to the qualifying circumstances, or prior state of the church of Scotland in receiving them, but to the condition of the documents when received or adopted. A man receives something given him in trust; he returns or delivers it as he received it, that is complete, uninjured, entire, unimpaired, unaltered. Now as the Church of Scotland received them in their original and proper form, unimpaired and unaltered, so we receive them. And is this nothing? Why it is the very circumstance that distinguishes the Reformed Presbyterian Church from all the ecclesiastical bodies around bearing the Presbyterian name. While all these churches have been corrupting, as they say improving, these documents, by perverse explanatory notes, “darkening counsel by words without knowledge,” by actual and unsparing expunging and altering the whole work in various forms and degrees, omitting some parts altogether, and giving to the system such a form as scarcely to admit of determining its original character—the Reformed Presbyterian Church continues to hold them as they were received, in their original entireness and integrity, unmutilated, unimpaired, unaltered. And there can be no doubt that it is this very consideration that has determined the minds of a large portion of our people in giving in their adherence to our ecclesiastical terms of communion. They take these documents, Confession of Faith, Catechisms larger and shorter, Directory for Worship and Form of Church Government, not as they have been explained by the Associate Church, not as they have been mutilated, altered and compressed by the Associate Reformed Church, or by the General Assembly in this country, New School or Old—but as they were received by the Church of Scotland. Our people thought of nothing more—I think I speak their common mind—than gaining these standards in their pure and original form, nor dreamed of an obligation to enter upon a research into what limitations may have been affixed by the previous laws, statutes, doctrines or discipline of the Church of Scotland. With these pure and original documents in their hands they are furnished with the means of bringing the whole of what they are required to believe and profess to an examination by the word of God, to which they appeal for proof, and so make an intelligent profession of their faith. And how can we require, or how can we desire more?

Besides, it is remarkable that the very title of the whole work in question, and the enumeration of its parts, furnish proof and illustration of the soundness of this interpretation. For on that title page is made mention of the "sum of saving knowledge," as of *public authority* in immediate connexion with the Confession of Faith, &c. and the Form of Church Government, &c. This is surely *more* than can be said of some other documents plead for. Now if the words "as they were received by the Church of Scotland" mean with the same existing ecclesiastical deeds of doctrine, order or worship, already in being in that church, or at the same time, and by the same act adopted and recognised, of course the "sum of saving knowledge" goes along with those we adopt and recognise, and we are bound to the one as much as the other. But the silence of our judicial acts on that document—"the sum of saving knowledge"—and the constant silence of our whole church in relation to it, leave it without any judicial authority, and only open to such reading, use, or improvement as each may think proper to bestow. Therefore, it is evident that the clause in our terms of communion, "as they were received by the church of Scotland," refers not to any accompanying action of that church as regards other documents, not to any prior or existing enactments of doctrine, government or worship whereby obligations are augmented or diminished, but only to that character of integrity belonging to these documents themselves. In conclusion we are bound to acknowledge the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Catechisms larger and shorter, the Directory for Worship and the Form of Church Government only as in that condition of integrity and entireness in which they were when they were received by the Church of Scotland. They are then open to such application as is consistent with the usages and order of our church, and as may be observed without violation of these venerable guides themselves.

"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned, and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple." Rom. xvi. 17, 18.

THE DEACONS: No. 3.

Phil. 1: 1. "—with the Bishops and Deacons.

PROPOSITION IV. *All the ecclesiastical property should be under the hand of divinely appointed officers.* This will appear from the following considerations.

1. Such property was under the hands of the Priests and