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I. THE IMPORTANCE OF PREACHING THE ETHICS OF CHRISTIANITY.

Shortly after the writer of this paper entered on his first pastorate, he preached a sermon from the third chapter of the Epistle of James on "Sins of the Tongue." At the close of the service a visiting minister came forward, introduced himself, expressed his interest in what he had heard, and also remarked that ethical sermons were both quite unusual and would be very useful in Presbyterian churches. This remark impressed him at the time, and during the nineteen years that have passed since then it has often recurred to him. In either one of its assertions it would seem to be true and important.

I. Directly ethical teaching does appear to be uncommon in our pulpits. In some quarters there is even a prejudice against it. There are places where, were a minister to expound duty at considerable length, it would be broadly hinted that his views of righteousness were becoming legal.

Where this prejudice against ethical teaching does not exist, the latter is still widely neglected. One of the worst features of the present state of religion among us is the frequent failure to receive the Bible as the infallible rule of practice as truly as of faith. Many who regard it absolutely authoritative in the latter sphere ignore it in the former. Not a few of those who are most earnest in their demand for Biblical theology seem unconscious that there

VII. THE WESTMINSTER CONFSSION'S RIGHT TO CONSTRUE ITSELF.

The recent discussion of the Westminster Confession of Faith, now very general throughout the Presbyterian Church, North, has brought into especial prominence some very important issues relating to what is known as the "Elect infants" clause of that Confession. Amongst these is the question as to whether the Confession's teaching concerning the way of the salvation of "Elect infants dying in infancy" is ambiguous.

The allegation to that effect is recently growing somewhat common. Worse still, upon this is based a charge that the Confession teaches that some of these "infants dying in infancy" are lost. Heretofore, the charge and the allegation of "ambiguity" upon which it is founded, especially the former, have not been taken very seriously. But recent writings of some very worthy critics, whose views are entitled to respect and, if erroneous, to clear refutation, taken in connection with much of rash and hasty admission from less competent sources, would seem to indicate that a paper given to a calm consideration of this subject may be, in some measure, not only timely but also acceptable.

This humble contribution I now offer, not in the spirit of controversy, but solely for the sake of truth.

The probabilities are against the accusation. For two hundred and fifty years, the Westminster symbols have enjoyed distinction for accuracy in expression and for logical positiveness in affirmation. Nevertheless, if the charge of an ambiguity of so serious consequence can be proved, Presbyterians are not the people to evade responsibility. But if not, they are the people to claim that the charge should be withdrawn. Let us notice,

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE QUESTION.

Primarily, the interests of truth are at stake ; truth bear-

ing upon a symbol of faith accepted by millions of intelligent Christians.

Secondarily: Forget not that upon the answer to this question depends the decision as to what methods the Presbyterian Church must adopt in carrying on the whole defensive controversy over the "Elect infants" proposition. To show that this is true, is of vital strategic importance in this discussion. I shall therefore offer no apology for giving this preliminary matter full presentation in the light of the very highest authority.

Throughout the whole realm of enactments, secular or sacred, constitutional or statutory, there is one principle of interpretation widely held and firmly settled, namely:

An unambiguous instrument interprets or construes itself; or, as otherwise expressed, needs no construction, and excludes all interpretations or constructions but its own.

If its own meaning is clear and indubitable, the investigation to ascertain the meaning stops right there. But, on the other hand, if ambiguity be admitted, then the true meaning becomes a question of proof by extrinsic evidence, such as history, personal opinions, debates, etc., when properly introduced. But the relevancy and even the admissibility of this evidence, depend entirely upon the previous question: Does the instrument plainly construe itself?

A prudent debater will settle that question with decided caution.

Not merely to sustain this principle, but to *impress* it, the following quotations from eminent authorities may be introduced:

"When the text of a Constitutional provision is not ambiguous, the courts, in construing it, are not at liberty to search for its meaning beyond the instrument itself. * * It is not until the means of solution afforded by the Constitution have been exhausted without success, that the courts are justified in calling outside facts or considerations to their aid." (Black on Interpretation of Law, pp. 28, 29). The same writer shows that, even to settle admitted

ambiguities, recourse to debates is "a great stretch," seeing that these shed no light upon the views of those "who do not talk." Another eminent authority says :

"If the words are free from ambiguity and doubt, express clearly, plainly the sense of the framers of the instrument, there is no occasion to resort to other means of interpretation. * * * The statute itself furnishes the best means of its own exposition; and if the sense in which words were intended to be used can be clearly ascertained from its parts and provisions, the intent thus indicated will prevail, without resorting to other means of construction. * * * The Legislature must be understood to mean what it has plainly expressed and this excludes construction." (Southerland, Statutes and Statutory Construction, pp. 312, 313.) Hear another, to the same import:

"When the words of a statute are plainly expressive of an intent not rendered dubious by the context, the interpretation must conform to and carry out that intent. It matters not in such a case what the consequences may be." (Endlich, Commentary on Interpretation of Statutes, pp. 6 and 7). But one other:

"It is only when the language is ambiguous that the courts are called on to construe or interpret. * * * The general principle on which we have insisted, that the meaning of a written law is to be found in its terms and that we are not at liberty to resort to extrinsic facts and circumstances to ascertain what the framers might have intended, has frequently been declared to apply to the Constitution of the United States."

This last quotation is from Sedgwick, who goes on and quotes Chief Justice Marshall as condemning the principle that "in any case the plain meaning of a provision not contradicted by any other provision in the same instrument, is to be disregarded because we believe the framers of the instrument could not intend what they say."

These quotations distinctly show that, just as we settle this question of ambiguity, so we decide as to whether or not we must follow Dr. Briggs and others in their long

tramp after the personal opinions of some of the members of the Westminster Assembly, or admit as evidence those unguarded expressions of individual preachers or writers found in all times and in all churches.

It is the purpose of this paper to maintain that the Confession's teaching as to the salvation of "Elect infants dying in infancy" is not ambiguous: consequently, that the Confession itself is its own best and exclusive *authority* of construction.

The whole teaching referred to is short, and is embraced in one proposition, as follows:

"Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when and where and how he pleaseth"

Please bear in mind that the sole question is as to the ambiguity of this proposition, just as it lies in Chapter X., Section 3 of the Wesminster Confession of Faith.

Before moving forward to a positive definition of ambiguity, it is important to point out some things which are not included within it, and, therefore, cannot be adduced as proving its existence.

II. ELIMINATIONS.

1. The mere fact that a proposition has been misunderstood would not necessarily prove its ambiguity. The question might so be raised but could not so be settled. The causes of misunderstanding are very numerous and each instance of it would need to be examined, in order to be classed as proceeding from the man or the matter; whether from inattention, indolence, bigotry, prejudice, unconscious partizanship, educational bias, popular misrepresentation; and so on, almost without limit.

2. The fact that a proposition has to be studied in order to be comprehended, by no means proves its ambiguity. All can recall how blank some of the propositions, and even the definitions, of mathematics seemed when the mind first tried to grapple them. But the propositions were distinctly true, nevertheless; accurate in expression, fixed and definite in signification.

3. Closely related to this is the universally admitted principle that the use of technical or scientific language, or the language of art, by no means necessitates ambiguity. Theological terms may embody an affirmation as unambiguous as any ever written. It is with these terms as with all others; the ambiguity in sense and in particular use, must be proved, not assumed.

4. A word, phrase, clause, or proposition, is not proved ambiguous merely, by the fact that its opposite or contrasted meaning may enter into the mind, and be entertained by it. By a law of mental association, the phrase "a white man" may suggest "a black man," but it would be woefully inconclusive to say that the first phrase is therefore ambiguous. The thing that suggests the idea in the second phrase is, not the ambiguity, but the very definiteness of the idea in the first.

5. Equally inconclusive is the notion that a clause, of two phrases, is proved ambiguous by the fact that the mind can conceive and entertain *two* contrasts, one for the idea of each phrase. The possibility of the two contrasts in the clause "Elect infants, dying in infancy"—"not elect infants," as one, and "infants not dying in infancy," as the other—would not prove any ambiguity in the original positive clause.

The question is as to what this clause has here expressed as in mind. If some curious soul should spring the extraneous question, which of these two contrasts do you include as the meaning of your language? the Confession would very promptly and properly answer: I have said not one syllable about either and you have no right to infer from my language that I have any design to include either as part of my teaching in this clause.

There is no more ambiguity in the clause, "Elect infants, dying in infancy," than in the clause, "Ripe apples, hanging on a tree." What would be thought of one who would profess that he could not tell the meaning of this clause because, forsooth, he avowed himself in doubt as to whether you intended to put a "not" before the word "ripe" or be-

fore the word "hanging?" How quickly would you retort: My kind friend, who told you that I intended to put it *anywhere*? I am talking about "ripe apples, hanging on a tree"; and you know what I mean well enough; the language is not ambiguous.

6. It scarcely needs to be added that a question as to ambiguity of a document has nothing to do with the merits or demerits of its subject-matter. Whether it ought to have said more; whether less; what inferences may flow from it; these are questions for argument. But they do not belong to this discussion which is solely as to intended meaning.

It is hoped that the foregoing exclusions make lighter the work of positive argument. The question next requiring answer is: What is ambiguity?

III. DEFINITION.

The answer must be drawn principally from two sources. The first is, the dictionaries. Probably that of the Standard Dictionary is as good as any: "Uncertain in meaning, especially where either of two interpretations is possible." Similarly, the International: "Doubtful or uncertain, particularly as to signification; capable of being understood in either of two or more possible senses."

The other source of information is the recognized works of law. In these, there is a settled doctrine of ambiguity, the principles of which are common to all documentary instruments. These fundamental principles are as applicable to this as to any other discussion of ambiguity.

Accepting substantially the definitions just given, ambiguity is regarded as of two kinds:

The first is that which arises "from the words of an instrument as looked at in themselves, and before they are attempted to be applied to the object or the subject which they describe." This is called intrinsic, or patent, ambiguity. The second is that which arises, "not upon the words as looked at in themselves, but upon those words when applied to the object or the subject which they describe." (American and English Encyclopædia of Law.)

The first arises from the phraseology; the second, from something extrinsic "referred to but not fully expressed"—or not described in such a way as to prevent it from being confounded with some other exterior object.

Is the proposition: "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit:" (1) A proposition of patent ambiguity? This I deny.

IV. DIRECT ARGUMENT.

I. The *words* are all of settled and definite meaning. That one meaning lies in the chapter, and, as one, is sustained throughout the chapter and the book. The chapter's opening sentence shows that the word "elect" means "predestined unto life." The word "infants" is plainly defined in the immediate context as meaning those too young to be approachable through the outward call of the Gospel. The word "regenerated" is, in a sense, technical, but of absolutely clear and settled significance. There is not an ambiguous word—a word whose meaning the Confession itself does not settle—in the whole proposition.

2. The *phrases* are unambiguous. "Elect infants" are infants "predestined unto life." Charge the phrase with a thousand other things, if you will; its meaning is on its face, and the face is not in any shadow. You may wish it had said something different: or something more, or less; but whatever you may think of its reserve and caution, you cannot deny that it says plainly what it does say. And if this is true, it matters not one scintilla what language in the Westminster Assembly was proposed antecedently or subsequently. No man of any time, no man in all time, can lay upon the Confession the weight of one feather more than it has laid upon itself.

3. These phrases are unambiguous *in their inter-relations*, when forming clauses, "Elect infants, dying in infancy"—or, using the interchangeable language in the same chapter, "Infants predestinated unto life, dying in infancy"—is a clause so definite and clear and single that the man who will try to find even synonymous language for it

will be puzzled; and he who will offer to show any positive description that it may be mistaken for, may be defied.

Professor Warfield, of all his strong sayings, never said anything stronger in truth than this: "I think we may characterize the interpretation of Chapter X, Section 3 which finds a body of non-elect infants dying in infancy implied in its statements, as *one of the most astonishing pieces of misrepresentation in literary history.*" (Italics mine)

4. The *whole proposition* is unambiguous. Its distinctive affirmation rings out in clear plainness; drowns the dissonance of contemporary error, and is the first of any and all churchly symbols to sound forth the music of infant salvation—free from the discord of ceremonial restrictions and from the false notes of ghostly negations and privations in the world to come.

The proposition stands in a chapter which expounds itself so plainly that it positively precludes any construction but self-construction.

This chapter's leading purpose is unmistakable and is pursued from beginning to end. This purpose is, to tell *how* all those whom God hath "predestinated unto life"—the "elect"—are to be saved, capables and in capables.

The former are effectually called by God's word and Spirit; are drawn to Christ irresistibly; but they come freely, answering the call and embracing the grace offered and conveyed in it, as the Spirit enables. The latter, the incapables, "Elect infants, dying in infancy" and "all other elect persons" who are "incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word," "are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit," the mode of whose mysterious working is left just where he has put it—in the inscrutable Holy of holies, with himself, in hidden glory, behind the veil.

Out of all surrounding darkness, leaps in seraphic beauty, a sentence that means *salvation*, clear as the day and lovely as heaven; "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated *and saved.*"

5. It would be easy to show that this self-interpreting

power both of the proposition and of the chapter in which it is environed is in the plainest and strictest harmony with the whole Confession's system. But this will not be denied by any intelligent student.

(2). There remains the question, is the proposition vulnerable as one of *latent* ambiguity? Again I answer, No.

Latent ambiguity can never be urged against any writing unless the writing makes specific or express reference to something not clearly described or defined—and in this way doubt arises as to the application of the reference to its object, as the one indubitably intended.

From these terms of definition, it is transparent that there is no latent ambiguity in the proposition as to elect infants. To nothing extrinsic does the proposition make an express reference whereupon might arise a doubt of application as between two or more, one of which was intended.

If it be said that the Confession uses the phrase, "Elect infants" and does not specify the individuals or the class to whom it desires the application to be made; the answer is that the document uses no such language as would show that it desires or intends such an application at all. And this lack is fatal to the charge of latent ambiguity. The silence is just as unambiguous as is the utterance.

In answer to the question, What is your intended application, particular or universal, of the phrase "elect infants?" the Confession's very muteness says: None whatever. What God has not told me, I cannot tell you. This I do know: Elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit.

There is no ambiguity in that teaching. None patent, as its face shows. None latent, as an essential element in the definition shows. Therefore, none at all. This is our conclusion.

V. IMPORTANT NECESSARY INFERENCES.

I. Let the Confession alone. It is a unit. As it stands, it can construe itself. A change anywhere may materially damage the symmetry everywhere. A body mutilated

is a body weakened. Dr. Warfield is right, the time demands, not revision, but intelligent affirmation.

2. Be serene when somebody tells you that somebody else says that the Confession teaches infant damnation. Base your defence upon the unambiguous Confession's right of self-construction. Be not drawn away from this impregnable citadel.

3. Do not excessively worry over what somebody says the Westminster Divines said. Read calmly Dr. Briggs's book "Whither" wherein he quotes seven of these "Divines" as having held to infant damnation. Listen without terror to the anonymous and spectral shrieker made by misrepresentation to walk up and down through all non-entity saying something about "infants in hell a span long."

In only one of the seven quotations does Dr. Briggs seem clearly to prove his point. But what if he had been successful in all of them? Resort to debates and to personal declarations is not held to be the highest form of evidence in settling the meaning of even admittedly ambiguous documents; and one unambiguous statement from the document's own lips can chase a thousand.

4. Dismiss the thought that anything is the matter with the Confession which is not also the matter with the Bible. The dissatisfaction with the clause "elect infants dying in infancy" arises from its unambiguous silence as to any application, universal or particular, of the word "elect." This reserve is a virtue, not a vice.

It springs from two causes: the one, general; the other, special. The former is the Confession's oath-bound allegiance to the Bible. The latter is its special awe of the whole superhuman subject of election. The Confession takes its own advice. "The doctrine of this *high mystery* of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care."

But right under its impressive silence as to the things which are not seen even in part, the purpose of God as eternity alone can show them—the church prints the words which make the salvation of infants as sure as Christ's own

avement and as broad as the compassion of the heart of him who "gathers the lambs with his arm and carries them in his bosom."

Right beneath the much traduced "elect infants" clause, are the words which the Church binds indissolubly to its teaching: "And they brought unto him infants that he should touch them; but when his disciples saw it they rebuked them; but Jesus called them unto him and said: Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God." The Church thus says: My teaching is as the width of Christ's outstretched arms, and as warm as the bosom that shelters the lamb. Is not this enough?

With reverent spirit, therefore, the Confession ventures to the last limit of divine revelation. With shaded eyes and bowed head, it there pauses, lingering to adore. It hides not the light struggling down from eternity's counsels, but rejoices in it—and none the less because it comes in subdued splendor and in broken gleams. The Confession knows that, with all of the Bible's completeness, there are yet secret things which belong to God; there is yet another veil which the unseen hand is to rend in twain from top to bottom, before Jehovah's awful throne; and then we shall know who are God's elect. Here let the Confession stand before this hidden and most holy place, saying to the Shechinah within: "Speak Lord; thy servant heareth."

CONCLUSION.

Amongst the many defects of this paper, prepared in the midst of a busy pastor's duties, and in the heat of summer, the fault of rashness in choosing position cannot be included. I have slowly and cautiously taken my ground after patient thought and careful correspondence with brethren in whose judgment I place very great faith. It is my deliberate conviction that the Confession's Gibraltar is the unambiguously Scriptural Confession.

To surrender this stronghold would be to fall back upon the less sure utterances of individuals whom the enemy is only too eager to meet. The surrender is as unnecessary

as it might be unsafe. The Confession flies its own flag; from its own walls let it blow its own clear trumpet, to all Christendom and through all time.

Raleigh, N. C., August 20, 1900. EUGENE DANIEL.

[The position as to the unambiguous silence of the "elect infants" proposition is immeasurably strengthened by what an acute and learned friend suggests, namely: the "inveterate habit" of the Confession to *express* an opposition of meaning when it is designed.

The doctrine of so-called "intermediate ambiguity" has been intentionally ignored in this paper. It is obscure, not established, and is generally regarded as of no force.—E. D.]