

THE
PRESBYTERIAN PREACHER.

VOL. II. PITTSBURGH, NOVEMBER, 1833. No. 6.

SERMON IX.

BY REV. EZRA FISK, D. D.

A PROFESSOR IN THE WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

**THE NATURE, LAWFULNESS, AND PROPER USE
OF CREEDS.***

2 TIM. 1:13. *Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love, which is in Christ Jesus.*

THE serious and important matter of this whole epistle cannot fail to engage the attention of every Christian minister. All parts of the letter are interesting; but, as we are about to engage in business of church judicature, there seems to be a special appropriateness in the charge, which I have selected for present meditation. I allude also to a fact, familiar to you all; the prevalence of error at the present day. In all branches of the Christian church, there is a tendency to much philosophical speculation, through which errors are introduced, with more or less subtlety, disturbing their peace and destroying the purity of their doctrine. This is now a painful fact; and threatens to become still more distressing. Can we seriously contemplate the obligations which our office involves, and look at the present state of the church, without acknowledging the appropriateness of the charge? Surely we must all be ready to use it as an exhortation to one another, "let us *hold fast* the form of sound words, which we have received in faith and love, which is in Christ Jesus."

We all believe the preliminary principles of our form of government, for we have adopted them—"that truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness; according to our Saviour's rule, 'by their fruits ye shall know them.' And that no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd, than that which brings truth and

* This sermon was delivered before the presbytery of Hudson, New-York; and is published at the unanimous request of the members.—Ed.

falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man's opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth, or to embrace it."* If we fully believe the principles contained in this extract, there must come over our minds some thrilling emotions, when we think of the multiplied errors which abound, and of their destructive influence in the church.

We ought to ponder seriously in connection with those sentiments, the apostle's charge to Timothy, until our minds shall be imbued with the same feelings which he uttered in close connection with the text: "nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." Then shall we be able to "hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; and to speak the things which become sound doctrine."

The meaning and application of this charge may be developed in answer to the two following inquiries:

WHAT FORM OF SOUND WORDS WAS INTENDED?

WHAT SORT OF ADHERENCE WAS ENJOINED?

I. The *form of sound words* intended in the charge, cannot be intelligently and satisfactorily ascertained, without some attention to the principal words used by the apostle.

The Greek word *υποσηκωσις*, rendered *form*, means a sketch, or concise representation of a thing. It was applied to painting, and signified a first draught or sketch of the picture: and was opposed in its meaning to a full delineation. In this place it is applied to religious doctrine, and denotes some concise formula of the truths which Timothy had received from the inspired apostle, and which he was bound to teach. The proper meaning is the same as creed, or confession of faith. Every symbol of faith may be called *υποσηκωσις λογων*, a form of doctrine. According to the appropriate meaning of the Greek term, it could not be applied to the whole revelation of God, for then it would be a sketch, or concise representation of itself. Such can not be its meaning in this case. A concise representation of the doctrines contained in the bible, or sketch of its truths, must have been a collection of those which are most important and controlling, arranged in proper order for convenient reference. Some such formula was

* Form of Government, Chap. I., § 4.

intended in this charge; but whether it was written cannot be determined.

It can now be only matter of conjecture, what were the books and parchments which Paul desired Timothy to bring with him from Troas, but there may have been among them an autograph of a creed, as well as of decrees and epistles sent to the churches. However that may have been, the appropriate meaning of this word is not difficult to ascertain; it indicates the same as we intend by a confession of faith. The word is used only twice in the New Testament. In 1 Tim. 1:16, the only other place, beside the text, it is rendered *pattern*. "Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all long suffering, for a *pattern* to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting." In this place, it means an *example* of long-suffering mercy. The abstract meaning is nearly the same as in the other case, which may be translated a *pattern* or *example* of doctrine, or belief in the truths of revelation. Paul's case was an *example* of God's long-suffering; so a creed is an *example* of important doctrines contained in the holy scriptures. In conformity with this interpretation, it seems probable that evangelists, pastors, and particular churches received a creed, or *form* of sound words, from the apostles at a very early period of the New Testament dispensation. There are several passages in the writings of the apostles, which seem to indicate the fact as highly probable. It is true there is no explicit declaration of the fact, but there are allusions to a "*form of doctrine,*" "*sound words,*" and "the faith delivered to the saints," in such a manner as to render it probable, that in the apostle's days, the church had a formula of doctrine to which there was frequent reference. Paul commends the Romans for having "obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered them." He often charges Timothy "to take heed unto *the* doctrine, to regard wholesome words, to continue in the things which he had learned, and to hold fast the form of sound words."

The history of the church confirms the interpretation which I have now given of the text, and other indications of an apostolical sanction to the adoption of a creed. There was a very early adoption of the formula called the apostles' creed. It is not probable that it was written by any one of the apostles, in the form which has reached us, but it was early adopted by the church as containing the doctrines taught by them: This fact is well attested by Irenæus and several other Fathers. It was doubtless the most ancient form of a confession which has been preserved to the present time. But there are several other very ancient forms and scattered remains of creeds, found in the early records of the church. Such are the form of apostolical doctrine collected by Origen, the fragment of a creed preserved by Tertullian, a remnant of one in the works of Cyprian, another com-

posed by Gregory Thaumaturgus, the creed of Lucian the martyr, and the Apostolical Constitutions. Besides these scattered fragments of confessions, and frequent references to them in history, there are now extant some entire formulas, as of Jerusalem, Cæsarea, Antioch, and a few others. In the fourth century, the history of creeds and confessions of faith becomes more definite and easily traced. This was probably owing to a prevalence of the Arian heresy, which it became necessary to investigate and expose. From that period to the present time, formulas of doctrine have been used and esteemed scriptural and necessary in the church. There have, indeed, been some individuals, in almost every age, who have denied both their necessity and their scriptural authority. But I am not aware that any *no creed* advocates have been long found among the sound in faith.

Take the whole history of the church, to which I can now only allude in its general character; and the uniform testimony will be found, directly or indirectly, to show that, from the first, there has been a general and almost uniform belief, that forms of faith collected from the revelation of God are sanctioned by apostolical example. I refer to this fact for the purpose of showing, that there has been among the pious and orthodox, in all ages, a practical interpretation of this charge, in accordance with the historical meaning of the Greek word rendered *form*.

There yet remains to be examined, the Greek word *ὑγιαίνοντων*, translated *sound*. This term is used *twelve* times in the New Testament: *three* by Luke, *once* by John, and *eight* times by Paul. Luke and John employ it to express the health of the body; as, "they that are *whole* need not a physician"—"they that were sent, returning to the house, found the servant *whole*" "thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him [thy brother] safe and *sound*."* John, in his epistle to Gaius, wishes that he may "prosper and be in *health*." These are the only passages in which the word is applied to any thing except doctrines or faith. In all the other passages of its occurrence, Paul connected it with religious truth. The first is 1 Tim. 1:10, rendered "*sound*" doctrine—the second is in the same epistle, chap. 6:3, and translated *wholesome*. The whole connection is worthy of notice. "If any man teach otherwise and consent not to *wholesome* words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions, and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself." The next passage is our text; and the fourth is 2 Tim. 4:3, "For

* Luke 5:31, 7:10, and 15:27.

the time will come when they will not endure *sound* doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables." In Paul's epistle to Titus, among the qualifications of a bishop, he is to "hold fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by *sound* doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers." Tit. 1:9. After observing that there are "many unruly and vain talkers,"—and others "teaching things which they ought not," the apostle charges Titus to "rebuke them sharply, that they may be *sound* in the faith." Tit. 1:13. Again, in the second chapter, Titus is charged to "speak the things which become *sound* doctrine: that the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, *sound* in faith, in charity, and in patience." These are all the passages in which the word is found, but these render the meaning very plain. It signifies the agreement of the doctrine with the holy scriptures. Doctrines, which entirely agree with the revelation of God, are *sound*; and none others are so, in the sense of this term.

Thus, the meaning of the text is a formula of doctrine, containing the most important truths of inspiration. It is not now important to ascertain precisely what was that "*form* of doctrine," which the apostle enjoined on Timothy to hold fast, and which the primitive saints used in the profession of their faith. There was no inspired formula or creed, the terms of which were enjoined on all branches of the church. But on this subject the injunction is, that the form of doctrine must be *sound*, or, in other words, consist of the main theological truths, revealed in the bible. Whether Paul gave Timothy a written creed, or whether it was orally communicated, cannot now be known: all that I contend for is, the fair interpretation of the text authorizes the use of a creed, provided it be *sound* according to the scriptures. I repeat it, the proper meaning of the terms fully indicates this: in addition, the decision of the synod at Jerusalem, the references before mentioned, to some formula, the testimony of the Fathers, and the whole history of the church, confirm the interpretation.

II. WHAT SORT OF ADHERENCE WAS ENJOINED?

"*Hold fast* the form of sound words," [formula of scriptural doctrine] "which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus." In answer to this inquiry, and to develop the meaning of this injunction, I make a few short remarks.

Our *adherence* to a scriptural creed is to be *intelligent*. An attachment to a form of words without understanding the import, is a matter of prejudice and very liable to become bigotry, which is always wrong and injurious. Although the prejudice may be in favor of the truth, and much less injurious than a prejudice

against it; yet an intelligent apprehension of the truth as it is in Jesus, in its excellent loveliness, majesty, and glory, is vastly more desirable and profitable, than the attachment of ignorance.

We are commanded to understand and know the truth: to search the scriptures, for they testify of Christ, and in them we think we have eternal life. We are not to place a creed before the bible, nor substitute a confession of faith in the place of God's revelation. But we adopt the formula as a collection of important and controlling doctrines, taken from the bible, arranged for convenient reference, and considered as a basis of agreement and bond of union. A creed may be considered a wise expedient to acquire an accurate and familiar knowledge of the most important doctrines contained in the scriptures. Such an arrangement of those doctrines facilitates their recollection and due estimate, according to their connections and relations in a regular system.

I shall not plead for prejudice or bigotry, but the cry of bigoted prejudice, often raised against men because they adhere to a creed, which they have thoroughly investigated only in part, is foolish and wicked. It is foolish, because it proceeds from those who have rejected the creed without examination, and criminal, because it would induce men to reject the confession without investigation, and so enthrone a prejudice still more ignorant and bigoted than that which would be displaced. We ought, as far as it is our province, to know the things of God; and for the rest, be sure that it is taken from revelation.

This adherence is to be "*in faith*." There are things which ought to be included in a scriptural creed, that are incomprehensible, and yet they are to be as fully believed as those which can be understood. Such are the being and perfections of God, the incarnation and two natures of the Messiah, the special agency of the Holy Ghost, and many other things essential to be received. If they are all scriptural doctrines, they are to be believed. It is so manifestly absurd, for a man to adopt a creed which does not express his faith, or the important parts of which he does not believe, that no man who does it, can have credit for common honesty. This form of sound words is to be received in faith, not only as containing the *system* of doctrines taught in the holy scriptures, but as expressing, accurately and appropriately, all the most important truths, and containing nothing of importance, which is not found in the word of God. In a word, the adoption of a creed is making it my creed, the expression of my faith on all the important subjects which it contains.

I do not say, in my adherence to a confession of faith, that every word and sentence of it are expressed in the best possible manner, nor that the arrangement could not possibly be better, nor that there is no shade of meaning which I do not entirely approve, nor yet that there is no one article which I would not

prefer, just as it is expressed. But I do say, that as a whole, I adopt it as well and truly expressing my faith; in all its important truths, I cordially receive it in the plain, obvious meaning of its language. Adherence to a confession, which is held to be susceptible of various interpretations and in a sense opposite to the plainest construction of language, avails nothing to the purpose of a creed. If I adopt a confession, it is for the purpose of expressing, in an appropriate and plain manner, my faith. In this manner I apply the apostle's injunction, "*Hold fast the form of sound words—in faith.*"

This adherence is also to be in "*love, which is in Christ Jesus.*" A faith which does not operate by love, is dead—and although the possessor may "*hold the truth,*" it is "*in unrighteousness.*" Taking the formula as the doctrine of Jesus Christ, we are to love it as his truth, as the matter of his teaching. Love to Christ is the first and most distinguishing emotion of a soul renewed by the Holy Spirit, consequently the truths and instructions of his gospel are dear to the same soul. All those doctrines, bearing his image and authority, are said to be loved in him, because loved for their resemblance and relations to him.

A cold speculative assent to a formula of gospel truth, is comparatively useless. It warms not the heart, influences not the life, gives no zest to the sweetness and loveliness of its doctrines. We must feel a strong attachment to the symbol of gospel doctrine; and not be as willing to substitute something else in its place, as to hold the form of sound words. If the confession be what it purports, a collection of the most important doctrines of gospel truth, we are bound to love it as the truth in Christ Jesus. It contains the fundamental principles of grace and salvation; those principles, upon which we rest our hope and seek for everlasting life. Can it be, that we collect into one view the dearest instructions of our blessed Saviour, place them before us that their light may beam upon our pathway to heaven, and we not *hold them fast in love?* They must surely be loved.

Without separating, for distinct illustration, other characters of this adherence to the confession of our faith, let me say in few words, it must be held *firmly, perseveringly, in reliance* on Christ, and by *aid* of the Holy Ghost. *Holding fast* the form of sound words must, of course, indicate *firmness* and *perseverance* in the truth, "*not driven about by every wind of doctrine.*" There are those, who consider a creed of no importance, and any alleged obligation to observe it as nugatory. It is quite sufficient for such, that the confession purports to have been compiled by men, without inquiring whether it contains the doctrines of revelation or not. They consider it manly, independent, and dignified, to be free from all formulas of doctrine, that, in their own estimation, they may follow the truth wherever it shall lead them. All this is said with as much confidence as if it were to be taken

for granted, that the truth of God, if found imbodyed in a **creed**, is not to be followed or regarded. Such a spirit is the opposite to that, which I mean by *reliance* on the promise of Christ, and which leads men to seek the gracious influences of the Holy Ghost to keep the heart and mind in the faith. That man, who trusts not in Christ and seeks not the Holy Spirit's influence to keep him in the truth, will be very likely to become restless under any adherence to a creed; and may soon break loose from the whole system of revealed truth. I repeat in brief summary the thoughts contained in this injunction. Every man should *intelligently, in faith, in love of the truth, firmly and perseveringly* adhere to the form of sound words; in reliance on the promise of Christ, who engages to keep him, through the truth and in its love; and under an abiding sense of dependence on the influence of the Holy Ghost, who is commissioned to take of the things of Christ and show them unto him.

I might here properly say many things on the *advantages* of creeds, or "forms of sound words," as *instruments* of union, orthodoxy, firmness, and consistency in the faith; as conducive to practical godliness and the church's salutary influence in the world. Much also might be appropriately said, to illustrate the soundness and excellency of our Confession of Faith, recognized as containing the principles of union in the Presbyterian church. But I have prescribed a different course on the present occasion. If I have given a plain exposition of this passage, one part of my object is gained; and the other will be attempted in some uses of the subject.

This brief exposition may be used for *several purposes*. I suggest some of them in a few remarks.

My *first* remark is, that a creed or confession of faith is *lawful, necessary, and scripturally enjoined*.

When I say it is lawful for a society of Christians to compile an epitome of scriptural truth, in form of a creed, for adoption by its members, I mean several things—that it contravenes no law of revelation, or of the country in which we live—that it is the recognized right of a Christian society to adopt its religious creed; and the laws of the country defend those who peaceably exercise the right—and that it is in accordance with the spirit of the bible. I speak not now of any positive enactment to be found in God's word, which binds a religious community to adopt and publish its creed, but of the considerations above named. In this sense it is lawful, because it interferes with no statute and with no right of any one, and is in accordance with the spirit of God's revelation.

When I say that a confession of faith is *necessary* for every Christian society, I mean that their *purity* of doctrine, their *unanimity* and *peace* render such an instrument indispensable. **The whole history of the church shows this most conclusively.**

The nature of the case seems to decide this point, on the face of the church's organization and relations. The church of God is a society, consisting of *many members* but composing *one body*. This church is bound, by the law of her only Head, to maintain "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"—to "stand fast in one spirit, with one mind." Moreover, this church is bound to reject heresies, to avoid such as preach another gospel, to rebuke those who sin, to withdraw from such as walk disorderly, and to cast out such as are unworthy. Take these two relations and classes of obligations; the one to maintain *purity, unanimity, and peace*; the other to exercise discipline towards the disorderly and heretical—and tell me if it be possible, without a creed, to fulfil these obligations? I do not ask, is it expedient to have some well-defined and understood test, but is it at all practicable to accomplish the objects without it? Every candid and well-informed judgment will at once say, it is not possible.

When I say that the Christian church is bound by *scriptural injunction* to adopt a confession of faith, I mean something more than what I have explained to be its *lawfulness* and *necessity*. All the injunctions to maintain purity of doctrine, union, and peace in the church—to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints—to hold forth the word of life—and all the directions to exercise discipline in the church,—imply the adoption of a creed. What is more, the fair interpretation of the text and several other passages already considered, enjoin the adoption of a creed and a firm adherence to a scriptural confession of faith. This remark is worthy of careful attention. It places us on commanding and unassailable ground. Creeds are *lawful, necessary, and scripturally enjoined*.

My *second* remark is, that a creed or confession of faith must be *sound* and *judicious*, embracing the fundamental and important doctrines taught in the holy scriptures.

It was a "form of *sound* words," which the apostle enjoined upon Timothy to "*hold fast*." This scriptural right and duty may be abused to bad purposes: and creeds, in defiance of divine authority, may contain for doctrines the commandments of men. This has been done and probably will yet be done. The Scribes and Pharisees of old did it, the Papists are now doing it, and I know not how many others have thus erred, or may hereafter thus err. Simply what God has enjoined as indispensable, is to be incorporated in the confession as *fundamental*; and what God has revealed as important to the purity, union, and peace of his church, that is to be included in the creed, for all the purposes of its revelation in the bible, and for no other.

It is not necessary that every truth in the bible should be embodied in the formula of our faith. There are certain leading and controlling principles, which if a man hold correctly, he will be sure to receive the other parts of the system to which they

belong. My meaning may be thus expressed: if a man has correct views of the perfections and government of God, correct views of the character and relations of man, correct views of the divine Mediator, the Holy Ghost, and the plan of salvation by Jesus Christ, there are many things involved in the system of truth, of which these are controlling, which need not be expressed in a formula, while there are others which cannot be omitted without impairing the whole scheme of gospel truth. When I say the creed is to be *judicious*, I mean a wise selection of those doctrines which occupy a conspicuous station in the scriptures, and exert a controlling influence in the system. We cannot be too cautious against error, and careful that all the articles of our faith stand upon a "thus saith the Lord" and not in the wisdom of men. The revelation of God alone can bind the conscience and the faith of intelligent, responsible men. We adopt a confession of faith for the purpose of agreement in the articles of revealed truth, not in the principles of philosophy or speculation. Our standard is the truth of God, imbodyed in a form of sound words, which we adopt and by which we abide.

My *third* remark is, that we ought thoroughly to *investigate* and well to *understand* our creed.

It is possible that some have adopted the confession of faith, in that branch of the church to which we belong, without having examined its truths and doctrines. This may have been better than to have rejected it without examination: a fault perhaps more common than the other. Although it is not the worst thing a man could have done, it is certainly not the best. For presbyters, especially ministers and elders, it is inconsistent and ought never to be done. It is a very solemn transaction to adopt a religious creed, having for its articles the doctrines of Christ, on which salvation depends; a creed, which recognises the way of access to God and to his acceptance; doctrines, which are to encourage men in all the way of their pilgrimage to heaven.

I fear there are not a few members of ecclesiastical courts, who know very little of that "form of sound words," called the Presbyterian Confession of Faith. There is too much ignorance of that formula of doctrine among us. It is a rich document of truth, which, as ministers and elders, we ought to study. Let us carefully examine and compare it with the scriptures in all its details.

I must say, in this connection, that a neglect to teach our children those important doctrines of our confession, imbodyed in the catechisms, is a criminal omission of duty, and must be attended with great evil to the church. Allow me to mention one fact, which others have doubtless observed. In all the examinations of candidates for admission to the church communion, which have come under my notice, I have had occasion to observe a great difference in the distinctness and intelligence

with which those persons gave the reasons of their hope in Christ, who had, from their childhood, been familiar with the Assembly's Shorter Catechism, and those who had never learned that formula. It is not a matter of sectarian training, but storing in the mind a "form of sound words," which helps greatly to recollect the truths of the bible, and to apply them in ascertaining the reasons of our hope.

But what shall I say of the elder of the church, or minister of the gospel, who neglects to study the formula which he has subscribed? He deserves rebuke, and in this day of theorizing speculation, he cannot be too strongly urged to examine that document, which is so indispensably necessary to the purity and harmony of the church. Let us, my brethren, study this confession, with much prayer and deep interest, comparing all its doctrines with the scriptures of truth, and learn how to estimate its particular parts. Some of its doctrines are more vitally important, and a departure from them far more dangerous, than others. It should be our object to estimate all the doctrines as they are estimated in the word of God. I am persuaded that in proportion as we faithfully examine our creed, so shall we hold it fast as a form of sound doctrine not to be gainsayed.

My *next* remark is, that the same firm and consistent adherence to our creed, which this subject demands of us as presbyters, we are bound to exact of those who unite with us.

If a man is to hold fast the summary of gospel doctrine, which he professes to receive, the transaction involves the adoption of both the form and the sentiment. This tampering with a creed, adopting a part and rejecting a part, receiving some of its contents according to the obvious meaning of its terms, and others in a sense opposite, or entirely different from the common and obvious meaning, is introducing a confusion into the church. Are not the facts so at this hour? Are there not many presbyteries in great difficulty, from having neglected to require an adherence to the standard of faith in its obvious sense? It is passing strange, how men, claiming to be honest, can adopt a creed, many of whose essential features they do not believe, and by which they do not consider themselves at all bound. Such cases have doubtless occurred. We ought to guard against the admission of such persons. We ought to exact of every man, who would enter our connection, an agreement with us in the essential and important articles of our confession. The right of presbytery to examine every man, who seeks admission as a member, is just as clear as the obligation of the man so admitted to hold fast "the form of sound words" which he adopts. Can there be any doubt on this subject? Certainly every presbyter is bound, intelligently, consistently, and firmly, to hold the confession of faith, which he has adopted. He owes it to his divine Master. Has he adopted a summary of faith from the inspired

directions of his Lord; and is he not bound by it? If obligation can bind a conscience, it reaches him. But he owes it to the church, and to his brethren who bear office in the church. They have a right to know what he believes and what they may expect him to teach. The church looks to that form of sound words, which he has said he "sincerely receives and adopts" as his pledge to teach them gospel truth. To hold a sentiment opposite to this would subvert all confidence, and destroy all security that the church will not become the sport of philosophical speculation—it would unsettle the principles of verity, soundness, and peace. Are ministers of the same communion and fellowship, bound to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, and yet are they to have no common principles of union, no recognized test of soundness, and no admitted basis of peace? The supposition is absurd and ruinous. Every minister who adopts the confession, owes to the church the fulfilment of his pledge; and the judicatory is bound to exact both, from all who unite with it or come under its care as religious teachers. At such a time as this, the presbytery would be untrue to its responsibility, in neglecting to exact of its candidates for admission, this adherence to the standards of the church.

Another remark may here be made; whenever a minister changes his views of religious doctrine, and abandons the creed he had formerly adopted, he ought to leave that branch of the church, and give his presbytery the earliest notice of his change of sentiment and instruction.

Plain, simple honesty demands all this of him. The pledge which a man gives when he unites with a judicatory, is not a declaration that he is infallible. I admit that a man may honestly change his theological views, and embrace doctrines at variance with his formerly adopted creed. But the same conscientious honesty should induce him peaceably to withdraw from the connection, and connect with some other branch of the church. The principle and object of the creed demand this honest course.

It also follows from the same premises, that those who abjure their formula, and at the same time refuse to withdraw, must be treated according to the rules of discipline adopted along with the creed.

Such cases of change and refusal, we know have occurred in many instances, both in the earlier and later history of the church. But how to reconcile them with the principles of honesty and truth is to me unknown. That a man should be under a promise to do one thing, and be bound to do the opposite, in such a case, is inexplicable. His pledge covers his whole continuance in the relations assumed. Here it should be remembered, the change of relations only can absolve from the pledge. If he believes his pledge was wrong, he must change his relation to his brethren, in order to withdraw his consent to abide their

decision in the Lord. If he now believes that the presbytery is not a court of the Lord Jesus Christ, is he to testify that by defiance; in all the effrontery of his self-gratulation, to trample on the order and authority of the judicatory, to disregard the feelings of his brethren, and to despise their conscientious attachment to their creed and form of government? Because he happens to think differently from what he once thought and what his brethren still think, is he to treat them as bigots and persecutors, when they insist on fulfilling their pledge given to him most solemnly and, as they think, in the fear of God? If he believes the formula, which he once adopted, is not a form of sound words, let him orderly and peaceably withdraw his pledge; then, and not till then, will we give him credit for his honesty, however we may regard his zeal.

It has been alleged that the church of God is not a voluntary society, and therefore a man cannot withdraw from any one of its branches. In order to appreciate this objection and take away all apology for its use, we will glance at a few facts relating to the organization and character of the church of God. Our time will not admit of an extended discussion of this topic. There are many passages of the scriptures, which authorize the following descriptions of the church: "It is a society of believing and holy persons, whom God has called, by the gospel, out of all mankind, to the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ"—it is also "a spiritual, independent, regular and visible society." The scriptures designate the qualifications of membership in the church. So far the society is organized on the divine plan, and under the divine direction. It must have these characteristics to be a church of Christ, and in this sense is not voluntary. But how is this organization effected? How do believers, who receive the truth, become a visible church, to enjoy, as a society, the comfort and advantages, and to perform the duties of brethren in unity? It must be by *mutual agreement*. When men receive the truth, they give themselves to the Lord; and then to one another by the will of God. This is the history of the organization, and all additions to the church are on these principles. In this respect, therefore, the church of God is a voluntary society; and can be no other.

This view is confirmed by a scriptural statement of the objects to be attained, by this church union, viz: to maintain and exhibit soundness in the faith, simplicity of gospel worship, impartial exercise of discipline, propagation of the gospel among the nations, and purity of life, becoming the religion of Christ. Finally, the whole character and duties of members in the church, confirm the statement that the form of union is by *mutual agreement*.

Now if there were but one branch of the church, and there were no room for different forms of mutual agreement, and nothing, in this respect, voluntary in this society, it would not

directions of his Lord; and is he not bound by it? If obligation can bind a conscience, it reaches him. But he owes it to the church, and to his brethren who bear office in the church. They have a right to know what he believes and what they may expect him to teach. The church looks to that form of sound words, which he has said he "sincerely receives and adopts" as his pledge to teach them gospel truth. To hold a sentiment opposite to this would subvert all confidence, and destroy all security that the church will not become the sport of philosophical speculation—it would unsettle the principles of verity, soundness, and peace. Are ministers of the same communion and fellowship, bound to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, and yet are they to have no common principles of union, no recognized test of soundness, and no admitted basis of peace? The supposition is absurd and ruinous. Every minister who adopts the confession, owes to the church the fulfilment of his pledge; and the judicatory is bound to exact both, from all who unite with it or come under its care as religious teachers. At such a time as this, the presbytery would be untrue to its responsibility, in neglecting to exact of its candidates for admission, this adherence to the standards of the church.

Another remark may here be made; whenever a minister changes his views of religious doctrine, and abandons the creed he had formerly adopted, he ought to leave that branch of the church, and give his presbytery the earliest notice of his change of sentiment and instruction.

Plain, simple honesty demands all this of him. The pledge which a man gives when he unites with a judicatory, is not a declaration that he is infallible. I admit that a man may honestly change his theological views, and embrace doctrines at variance with his formerly adopted creed. But the same conscientious honesty should induce him peaceably to withdraw from the connection, and connect with some other branch of the church. The principle and object of the creed demand this honest course.

It also follows from the same premises, that those who abjure their formula, and at the same time refuse to withdraw, must be treated according to the rules of discipline adopted along with the creed.

Such cases of change and refusal, we know have occurred in many instances, both in the earlier and later history of the church. But how to reconcile them with the principles of honesty and truth is to me unknown. That a man should be under a promise to do one thing, and be bound to do the opposite, in such a case, is inexplicable. His pledge covers his whole continuance in the relations assumed. Here it should be remembered, the change of relations only can absolve from the pledge. If he believes his pledge was wrong, he must change his relation to his brethren, in order to withdraw his consent to abide their

decision in the Lord. If he now believes that the presbytery is not a court of the Lord Jesus Christ, is he to testify that by defiance; in all the effrontery of his self-gratulation, to trample on the order and authority of the judicatory, to disregard the feelings of his brethren, and to despise their conscientious attachment to their creed and form of government? Because he happens to think differently from what he once thought and what his brethren still think, is he to treat them as bigots and persecutors, when they insist on fulfilling their pledge given to him most solemnly and, as they think, in the fear of God? If he believes the formula, which he once adopted, is not a form of sound words, let him orderly and peaceably withdraw his pledge; then, and not till then, will we give him credit for his honesty, however we may regard his zeal.

It has been alleged that the church of God is not a voluntary society, and therefore a man cannot withdraw from any one of its branches. In order to appreciate this objection and take away all apology for its use, we will glance at a few facts relating to the organization and character of the church of God. Our time will not admit of an extended discussion of this topic. There are many passages of the scriptures, which authorize the following descriptions of the church: "It is a society of believing and holy persons, whom God has called, by the gospel, out of all mankind, to the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ"—it is also "a spiritual, independent, regular and visible society." The scriptures designate the qualifications of membership in the church. So far the society is organized on the divine plan, and under the divine direction. It must have these characteristics to be a church of Christ, and in this sense is not voluntary. But how is this organization effected? How do believers, who receive the truth, become a visible church, to enjoy, as a society, the comfort and advantages, and to perform the duties of brethren in unity? It must be by *mutual agreement*. When men receive the truth, they give themselves to the Lord; and then to one another by the will of God. This is the history of the organization, and all additions to the church are on these principles. In this respect, therefore, the church of God is a voluntary society; and can be no other.

This view is confirmed by a scriptural statement of the objects to be attained, by this church union, viz: to maintain and exhibit soundness in the faith, simplicity of gospel worship, impartial exercise of discipline, propagation of the gospel among the nations, and purity of life, becoming the religion of Christ. Finally, the whole character and duties of members in the church, confirm the statement that the form of union is by *mutual agreement*.

Now if there were but one branch of the church, and there were no room for different forms of mutual agreement, and nothing, in this respect, voluntary in this society, it would not

be competent for a church judicatory to recognize a withdrawal of any member in any other light than contumacy; and the fact, of a distinct organization, professing to be a branch of the church, only as schism.

But on the principle of voluntary, mutual agreement, entering into the form of the church's visibility, we may recognize, as branches of God's church, some who do not, in all respects, agree with us. If they hold the Head and essential truth, we may recognize them, although they dissent from our form and government. On this ground a respectful declination of our government, pleading a change of views and conscientious attachment to another form of church order, may be accepted. But to prevent all abuse of this principle, let it be understood, if there be a promulgation of dangerous error, or process of discipline has been commenced, the door is closed against its reception.

I cannot forbear to remark, that those, who refuse to adopt any creed, and oppose the use of all confessions of faith in the abstract, are generally opposed to the truth contained in the creed. They desire to be free in the propagation of error. Sooner or later this will be found their principal object and the main-spring of their objections to creeds. I have not time to gather the facts, which substantiate this remark; nor to trace the facts to that self-exalting spirit, which leads men to place as much confidence in the result of their own speculations as in a "thus saith the Lord." But I appeal to the whole history of the church, in which the course and conduct of all opposers of creeds will be found to confirm this statement.

Finally, my brethren in the holy ministry, suffer me to repeat the injunction, "hold fast the form of sound words, which you have heard and adopted, in faith and love, which is in Christ Jesus." This is a time when the enemy of righteousness is employing his subtilty to root out the influence of gospel truth in the church. Already philosophy, so called, has transformed a portion of our denomination, to say nothing of what is effected in others. It is time, my brethren, to study well, and use freely, the language of our formula of doctrine. It is time to hold it fast in its spirit and letter. It is time to speak out plainly on this subject; to call old errors, new modelled, by their old and proper names. The cause of truth is too precious to be wrested from us by a specious philosophy. The responsibility under which we act is too solemn and fearful for us to be silent or indifferent. Souls are too precious to be neglected or misled by dangerous error. Let us be faithful unto death. May the Lord keep us in the truth, as it is in Christ Jesus.

[Contrary to the expectations of the author, the preceding discourse has proved insufficient to occupy our pages. We therefore give some short extracts from the Rev. Dr. Miller's lecture on "Creeds and Confessions," which may be studied with profit, in connection with Dr. Fisk's valuable sermon.—EDITOR.]

By a **CREED, or CONFESSION OF FAITH**, I mean, an exhibition, in human language, of those great doctrines which are believed by the framers of it to be taught in the Holy Scriptures; and which are drawn out in regular order; for the purpose of ascertaining how far those who wish to unite in church fellowship are really agreed in the fundamental principles of christianity. Creeds and Confessions do not claim to be in themselves *laws* of Christ's house, or legislative *enactments*, by which any set of opinions are *constituted truths*, and which require, on that account, to be received as truths among the members of his family.

Now, I affirm, that the adoption of such a Creed is not only *lawful* and *expedient*, but also indispensably *necessary* to the harmony and purity of the visible church. For the establishment of this position, let me request your attention to the following considerations.

1. Without a Creed explicitly adopted, it is not easy to see how the **MINISTERS AND MEMBERS OF ANY PARTICULAR CHURCH, AND MORE ESPECIALLY A LARGE DENOMINATION OF CHRISTIANS, CAN MAINTAIN UNITY AMONG THEMSELVES.**

2. The necessity and importance of Creeds and Confessions appear from the consideration, that one great design of establishing a church in our world was, that she might be, in all ages, **A DEPOSITORY, AND A WITNESS OF THE TRUTH.**

3. The adoption and publication of a Creed, is **A TRIBUTE TO TRUTH AND CANDOR, which every christian church OWES TO THE OTHER CHURCHES, AND TO THE WORLD AROUND HER.**

4. Another argument in favor of Creeds publicly adopted and maintained, is that **THEY ARE FRIENDLY TO THE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE, AND OF COURSE, TO THE PREVALENCE OF CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE.**

5. It is an argument of no small weight in favor of Creeds, that **THE EXPERIENCE OF ALL AGES HAS FOUND THEM INDISPENSABLY NECESSARY.**

6. A further argument in favor of Creeds and Confessions, may be drawn from the remarkable fact, that **THEIR MOST ZEALOUS OPPOSERS HAVE GENERALLY BEEN LATITUDINARIANS AND HERETICS.**

7. The only further argument in support of Creeds on which I shall dwell, is, that **THEIR MOST ZEALOUS OPPOSERS DO THEMSELVES VIRTUALLY EMPLOY THEM IN ALL THEIR ECCLESIASTICAL PROCEEDINGS.**

The favorite maxim with the opposers of Creeds, that all who acknowledge the *Bible*, ought, without hesitation, to be received, not only to christian, but also to ministerial communion, is invariably abandoned, by those who urge it, the moment a case turns up which really brings it to the test. Did any one ever hear of a *Unitarian* congregation engaging, as their pastor, a preacher of *Calvinism*, knowing him to be such? But why not, on the principle adopted, or at least *professed* by

Unitarians! The Calvinist surely comes with his Bible in his hand, and professes to believe it as cordially as they. Why is not *that* enough? Yet we know that, in fact, it is *not* enough for these advocates of unbounded liberality. Before they will consent to receive him as their spiritual guide, they must be *explicitly informed*, HOW HE INTERPRETS THE BIBLE; in other words, WHAT IS HIS PARTICULAR CREED; whether it is substantially the same with their own or not: and if they are not satisfied that this is the case; all other professions and protestations will be in vain. He will be inexorably rejected. Here, then, we have, in all its extent, the *principle* of demanding SUBSCRIPTION TO A CREED; and principle carried out into practice as rigorously as ever it was by the most high-toned advocate of orthodoxy.

We have before seen, that the friends of truth, in all ages, have found, in their sad experience, that a general profession of belief in the Bible, was altogether insufficient, either as a bond of union, or as a fence against the inroads of error. And here we find, the warmest advocates of a contrary doctrine, and with a contrary language in their mouths, when they come to *act*, pursuing PRECISELY THE SAME COURSE WITH THE FRIENDS OF CREEDS, with this difference, that the Creed which they apply as a test, instead of being a written and tangible document, is hidden in the bosoms of those who expound and employ it, and, of course, may be applied in the most capricious as well as tyrannical manner, without appeal; and further, that, while they really *act* upon this principle, they *disavow it*, and would persuade the world that they proceed upon an entirely different plan.

Can there be a more conclusive fact than this? The enemies of Creeds themselves cannot get along a day without them. It is in vain to say, that in their case no Creed is *imposed*, but that all is voluntary, and left entirely to the choice of the parties concerned. It will be seen hereafter that the same may be with equal truth asserted, in all those cases of subscription to articles, for which I contend, without any exception. No less vain is it to say, again, that in their case the articles insisted on are few and simple, and by no means so liable to exception as the long and detailed Creeds which some churches have adopted. It is the *principle* of subscription to Creeds which is now under consideration. If the *lawfulness* and even the *necessity* of acting upon this principle can be established, our cause is gained. The *extent* to which we ought to go in multiplying articles, is a secondary question, the answer to which must depend on the exigencies of the church framing the Creed. Now the adversaries of Creeds, while they totally reject the expediency, and even the lawfulness, of the general principle, yet they cannot proceed a step without adopting it in practice. This is enough. Their *conduct* is sounder than their *reasoning*.—And no wonder. Their *conduct* is dictated by good sense, and practical experience, nay, imposed upon them by the evident necessity of the case; while their *reasoning* is a theory, derived, as I must believe, from a source far less enlightened, and less safe.