

The Church, The People, and the Age

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Analysis and Summary

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CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND CREEDS

THE writer, who is a minister of "the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America," speaks entirely on his own responsibility, yet he is confident that his opinions do not differ much, if at all, from those commonly held by that large body of professed Christians. Possibly some subordinate statements or explanations may be his own, but any such will be intended not to weaken, but to confirm the general Presbyterian position.

First we desire to disabuse any mind of the impression that the Presbyterian Church requires of its members the adoption of any denominational creed. Our

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doors are open to all who profess their belief in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world, and who solemnly declare their intention to live in accordance with that belief. So soon as one realizes that he needs the forgiveness and grace offered in the gospel and is earnestly set on living a Christian life, we Presbyterians believe that he is fit for membership in any Christian organization and heartily welcome him into our communion. When, however, the Church of God is regarded as the pillar and ground of the truth, or any denomination of it as a body instituted to promote right views and principles among men, another case arises. We naturally expect from the wisdom of such a body more or less formal instruction in regard to points both of doctrine and of practise, not indeed that ecclesiastical deliverances should ever be binding upon the mind and conscience, but only that free private judgment may receive any assistance to be derived from the deliberate collective judgment of the Church. Moreover, when the qualifications of men to be ordained as ministers of the gospel are to be passed upon, we deem it right that candidates should be examined in respect to all those teachings of Christianity which conduce to the best edification of God's people. It certainly would not be wise formally to set apart young men to be preachers if they were not well acquainted with religious doctrines, or if they were likely to mingle serious error with their teachings. Then, too, the question arises as to the honorable recognition of ministers of the gospel in general and as to friendly cooperation with them, whether they belong to one's own denomination or not. For, however we may differ from others in matters of faith, we should cherish hearty fellowship with all whom

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Christ has received and who are laboring to extend his kingdom in the world.

These things being so, it is evident that the use of creeds or forms of confession is not a matter to be determined by one simple rule, as if there were only one case to be considered; on the contrary, the situation calls for a thoughtful reply to at least four important questions. We ask, first, what declaration of faith may be expected as a condition of church membership? Secondly, what function may a general ecclesiastical council assume in declaring and interpreting Christian doctrine? Third, what statements of belief should the authorities of a church require from those who are seeking the office of the sacred ministry? And fourth, what rule should govern our attitude toward all those who not only are professed followers of Christ, but are also devoting their lives to the preaching of the gospel? The topics submitted to the symposium relate more to the first and fourth of the foregoing questions than to the second and third, yet it will contribute to clearness of understanding if we consider briefly each of the four points just mentioned.

The Presbyterian Church does not require of its members the adoption of any denominational creed; nor indeed does it call for the acceptance of any formal creed at all. Some individual churches may use simple doctrinal confessions, but this is not common among us, as it is with the Congregationalists; such confessions are, however, not conditions of membership prescribed by ecclesiastical authority; they are rather helps given to the candidate for the clearer expression of his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and our loving Saviour. If any one should prefer to express his faith

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in other words than in the formula provided, he would be at liberty to do so.

Besides, as already stated, for the most part, no formula is used by the Presbyterians. What the officers of the Church chiefly desire to know is not whether the applicant understands the gospel offer of salvation, but whether he has heartily accepted of that offer and whether he has resolved to become a follower of Christ and to live a life of new obedience. For the faith which saves the soul is not the mere intellectual acceptance of any truth however important; it is the practical adoption and realization of the gospel as the law of one's experience and conduct. If we were asked to state in two sentences that profession of faith which the Presbyterian Church expects from its members, they would be as follows. The first declaration alone, indeed, might be taken as a complete confession, but the second is added to show that the faith professed is not to be a mere speculative assent but a deep operative conviction: 1. I believe that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life. 2. I accept the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Saviour, and am resolved, with the help of God, hereafter to abjure all evil ways, and to live according to the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

Of creeds and doctrinal deliverances by general church councils or judicatories, we have this to say: No one can dispute the right, and we believe we all should recognize the duty, of the Church to set forth in a formal way those views of truth upon which its wisest and best men have agreed after prayerful and studious consider-

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ation. Some doctrines of Christianity are quite plain and obvious, but others are abstruse and liable to be misunderstood; besides even those which are the most evident and comprehensible are sometimes obscured by plausible arguments, which originate mostly in false theories of nature, of life or of morals. Moreover in the wisdom of the Almighty truth is not revealed to the human mind in an abstract and systematic form, but in the separate concrete manifestations of creation and providence. It is the office of the analytic and synthetic power of reason to ascertain and to coordinate the laws of nature and of the divine government. Even the sacred Scriptures do not contain any formal system either of theology or of ethics, but rather give us facts and examples, rules and laws, which should be carefully studied, compared and construed together, and upon which we have the right reverently to philosophize.

The various creeds and confessions of the Church, whether in ancient or modern times, were intended as methodical statements of Christian truth, as this was seen by the fathers assembled in solemn council. It is to be acknowledged that excessive claims of authority were sometimes made—and are even yet made—for some of these confessions as if they were absolutely infallible. But Presbyterians, and most Protestants, regard creeds and confessions not at all as binding upon one's acceptance but simply as aids to the understanding and acceptance of the truth. For man is not blessed because he believes that the Church understands and believes the truth, but because he himself understands and believes it; nor is it possible for a rational being truly to accept any statement which is unintelligible to him or for which no adequate evidence appears. For

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this reason we find an obscurity in the words of the venerable Cardinal Gibbons when he said lately, "The mission of the Church is to define faith and morals. In other matters individuals decide for themselves." The mission of the Church is indeed to express clear views respecting faith and morals, but in doing so the Church does not decide for the individual but only seeks to aid him in deciding for himself. In the Presbyterian Church no blame attaches to any one who does not believe some doctrine of our Confession, either because he does not understand it, or because with the understanding which he has of it, he thinks it contrary to fact and reason.

As regards those who would become ministers of the word and official expounders of God's truth, Presbyterians naturally demand higher doctrinal attainments than can be required for simple membership in the Church or even for participation in its subordinate activities. Formerly our ministers were asked to subscribe to the whole Westminster Confession of Faith, but that is no longer the case. It is now deemed sufficient that one declare his approval of the "system of doctrines contained" in that Confession, by which system we are chiefly to understand what are known as "the doctrines of grace." These contemplate the human family as hopelessly lost, were it not for the intervention of divine help and mercy. While man is—and must be—active in his own salvation, his efforts would be unavailing without aid from heaven. And even the first beginnings of the Christian life are to be ascribed to the influence of the Holy Spirit. For it is God that worketh in us to will and to do of his own good pleasure. All the doctrines of grace are in-

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volved in the one thought of man's utter dependence on God as the source of spiritual good.

Yet while Presbyterian ministers assent to a given system of doctrines, it is to be observed that a certain liberty belongs to each of them to interpret every doctrine in his own way. This arises because of a distinction which can easily be made between a dogmatic statement and the reason for it or the explanation of it. For example, the present writer sees no reason to believe that all men will be saved. Such a result may be impossible in the very nature of things. But he believes that the divine aim and purpose is that as many men as possible shall be saved. He does not believe that the present condition of our race, who are born sinful beings into a world of sin and suffering, should be regarded as a punishment inflicted on them because of Adam's first transgression; yet he perceives in this a righteous legal consequence of the trial which human nature had in our first forefather. He does not believe that Christ literally bore the guilt of our sins when he died upon the cross. Guilt is not a thing transferable. But he does hold that our Lord's sufferings were vicarious in the sense that they justify the cancellation of guilt—the forgiveness of sin—in the case of all penitent believers in God's mercy.

Together with this freedom in the interpretation of doctrines, which at the same time are sincerely and honestly accepted, there is also noticeable in Presbyterian judicatories a certain relaxation in special cases of the terms of admission to the ministry. It is the part of a wise man to govern by rules, yet not to be himself absolutely governed by them. Ordinarily candidates for the ministry must fulfil all requirements. Never-

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theless Presbyteries sometimes ordain a man to be a preacher or a missionary when he has not had that education which is commonly a prerequisite. Occasionally too a faithful and able minister of the gospel may be received into our communion and installed as a pastor, even though from the Presbyterian point of view, he may be somewhat doctrinally deficient. The paramount questions in such a case are: What is the best thing to do in the interests of God's kingdom? and: Does the present case really justify any departure from our ordinary regulations?

With regard to ministers of other denominations Presbyterians cultivate fraternal relations with all who preach Christ and him crucified as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. Such ministers are sometimes distinguished as "evangelical," because they preach the gospel as it is plainly set forth in the sacred Scriptures. Evidently fellowship with them is not based on any formal creed but only on that simple profession of faith which admits to membership in Presbyterian and other churches. But while the acknowledgment of Christ as the Saviour of the world is the sufficient ground of general ministerial fellowship, all preachers of the word are held in special honor, because they have devoted their lives to a sacred calling, and because they may be supposed to have progressed further in the knowledge and realization of divine things that can be expected of the ordinary church member.

On account of this maturity of apprehension and for the purpose of clearer understanding, ministerial associations sometimes adopt a simple statement of evangelical views. For such a use we know of no better document than the so-called Apostles' Creed which, though

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probably not written by the apostles, is undoubtedly the production of a very early age. The striking feature of this document is that it emphasizes the supernatural character of the gospel. Jesus Christ is indeed represented as truly a man both in body and mind, yet also as being sent into the world by his divine Father to be the representative of God's love and the Saviour of sinners. He was so possessed by the control of a divine personality that he became, as no other man ever was or can be, a divine person, and so he fulfilled a mission for the redemption of the world which only such a person could accomplish. Many things told of our Saviour would be incredible and inexplicable, were he not, as he himself claimed to be, the only begotten Son of God.

While Presbyterians do not recognize as preachers of the gospel those who do not preach it, they acknowledge the sincerity and earnestness of many teachers who cannot accept a heaven-sent supernatural gospel, but who yet advocate noble theistic doctrines. We have friendly feelings for such and gladly cooperate with them in movements for the betterment of mankind. Besides, we know that men who profess orthodox views are sometimes sadly wanting in that living faith which works by love, and that others are often deeply influenced by truths which they do not clearly and fully comprehend.

If the great president were seeking to-day a church which demanded no subscription to "a complicated creed," and which required of its members only that they should accept the law of love as stated by our Saviour, we Presbyterians would say: "Well, Mr. Lincoln, what do you mean by speaking of Christ as 'our Saviour'? Do you take him to be your Saviour?"

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Do you believe that the Son of God loved us and gave himself for us, that we might be his people, filled with love and zealous of good works? If this be your position (and we believe it is) come right in; we welcome you to our communion; we do not ask you to sign any creed at all."

*A Sensible Statement,
showing that a man can be orthodox
without being dogmatic —*