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# REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

## SECOND GENERAL COUNCIL

OF THE

# PRESBYTERIAN ALLIANCE,

CONVENED AT PHILADELPHIA, SEPTEMBER, 1880.

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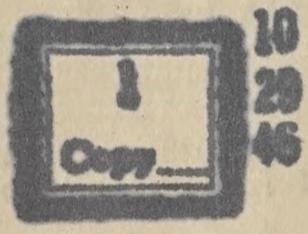
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The REV. A. B. VAN ZANDT, D. D., LL. D., "JAMES SUYDAM, Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology," of New Brunswick, N. J., then read the following paper on

### CREEDS AND SUBSCRIPTIONS TO CREEDS.

A Creed may be a brief formula to which assent is given in terms a "*Credo*," or it may consist in the more extended statements of a confession or catechism, as embracing "*res credendæ*."

In either case it is an authorized expression of the faith of those by whom it is adopted. And when it is adopted as expressing the faith of a church, it becomes also a solemn compact or covenant, obliging those who thus receive it to abide by the doctrines therein expressed, so long as they remain in the communion of that church.

In this country, where the separation of Church and State is complete, we recognize no authority in the civil government to impose any Creed, however brief or general in its terms or import. There are, indeed, certain regulations, municipal and social, based upon the principles of the Christian religion, necessary to conserve the rights of conscience in the unmolested worship of God, and no less necessary to good order, which the civil government has a right to establish, and is bound to establish, because this is a Christian nation. But it has that right under that grant of power which belongs to it as "an ordinance of God," by his good providence here established as the government of a free Christian people, and not by virtue of any inherent authority over the faith or consciences of men.

In all Protestant countries this principle is so far respected, that the right of dissent from the creeds of churches established by law, though it may entail certain disadvantages, yet remains undisputed. But where the binding authority of a creed is founded wholly on assent to its doctrines, the chief occasion for the fierce controversies of an hundred years ago has passed away, and we may hope there has also passed with it much of the prejudice against creeds and confessions to which those controversies gave rise.

Nevertheless, there are always those who are disposed to decry the use of these accepted formulas of the faith, as disparaging to the Scriptures, the ready instruments of ecclesiastical tyranny, restrictive of free inquiry, and inimical to theological progress.

The subject assigned for this paper will lead us, therefore, to consider—

- I. The necessity and uses of Creeds; and
- II. The nature and extent of the obligation incurred by subscription to them.

As against their necessity, the formal principle of Protestantism itself, the sufficiency of the Bible as the rule of faith and umpire of controversy, has been strenuously urged. It is argued that whilst asserting the right of private judgment against the pretensions of

Romanism, we are conceding to these human compositions all that Romanism claims: that we are in fact, though not formally, giving them a co-ordinate authority with Scripture, if, indeed, we do not sometimes twist and torture Scripture to bring it into conformity with our creeds.

But this objection, like most others, is based upon an entire misapprehension of the design and use of creeds, as they are regarded from a Protestant standpoint.

We are all agreed that the Scriptures are an infallible guide, an ultimate appeal, and that every man is bound to imitate the noble Bereans, and to the extent of his ability "search the Scriptures," in settling his convictions of truth. But then it happens, that we are not all agreed as to what the Scriptures do actually teach. What then? Two alternatives are before us. We may fall back upon a so-called infallible church, and, in the face of palpable contradictions, and festering corruptions, accept her decrees as the articulate voice of God; or, we may consent that every man shall be "*fully persuaded in his own mind,*" and so far as men so persuaded are agreed, we may consent that they should also "*walk together by the same rule,*" fully expecting that, in the progressive development of truth, God will bring them into nearer accord, if not by removing all grounds of difference, yet by reducing them to those matters concerning which men may differ, and yet maintain "the unity of the Spirit, in the bonds of peace."

This is precisely the difference between Romanism and the principle of Protestantism. The one imposes a creed, with the appended sanction of "Anathema." The other proposes a creed as a summary statement of the teachings of God's word, and invites investigation. With the former the Church, as a hierarchy, is the final arbiter, and dissent is damnation. With the latter the Scriptures are the ultimate appeal, and whilst the controversy proceeds, each one may be true to his own convictions, with kindness and charity towards all who may differ from him.

Which of these alternatives is most consonant with the spirit and letter of the gospel it is not difficult to determine.

2. But now, the objection takes another form, and creeds and confessions are held to be an implied disparagement of Scripture. Can man write in words more intelligible than those which the Holy Spirit has indited? Can we improve upon the perspicuity of God's own word? Certainly not, and no such presumptuous idea has ever entered the mind of any framers of systems or makers of creeds. But since it has pleased God to reveal his truth in concrete forms, it certainly is permitted to analyze and arrange it in systematic order. Can man equal the exquisite productions of nature, when the earth, draped in the beauty of spring, rejoices in the exuberance of blossoms and flowers? But is it therefore an imputation upon the wisdom or works of God, that he has left it to human study and skill to classify and arrange these voiceless, yet articulate, expressions of his goodness,

according to their properties and uses? It is conceded on all hands, that there can be no progress in any science without those generalizations which embody and embalm the fruits of protracted and toilsome investigation.

Is theology an exception to this universal law? Is Scripture to be interpreted by intuition and without comparison and induction? The ample fields of nature contain no truths so profound as those which revelation has disclosed. Nor in the multitude of its varied forms is there a greater necessity for systematic arrangement and settled definitions, than in the many-sided teachings of the Bible.

A recent writer has urged that "we have no detailed and formal creed in the Scriptures." So neither have we any elaborated or defined science in nature. Because God intended that in every department of truth we should arrive at knowledge by the use of those faculties with which he has endowed us as an essential element of that "image of God" in which we were created. Hence, from the beginning truth has been revealed in forms which oftentimes concealed more than was disclosed; not because it was intended that the unexpressed should remain unknown, but become known the more clearly, and be felt the more deeply, because wrought out by the laws of our mental activity in the mind itself. Thus, the simple record of a fact may involve the deepest mysteries of the faith. The most practical of all teachings may be grounded upon doctrines the most profound.

By the opponents of creeds, for example, the Sermon on the Mount is often set over against the doctrinal teachings of the epistles. But no lips ever uttered truth in more sententious and comprehensive forms than may be found in that inimitable discourse. Its opening sentence is an epitome of the gospel, not otherwise to be understood than in the light of those doctrinal teachings with which it is contrasted. For aside from other Scriptures, who can define that poverty of spirit which entitles to the first beatitude, or that "Kingdom of Heaven" which is its portion?

Dispense with those compact statements, in which scattered truth is gathered into compendious forms, and the whole work of analysis and synthesis must be done over again by each individual for himself. But because unable to do that work, the word of God must remain a sealed book, comparatively, to the great mass of mankind. Then, too, the Church, unfaithful to her trust, must forego one of her most important functions, as keeper and witness of the truth. For if the Church has no right to give definite form to ascertained doctrines in the symbols of her faith, neither has she the right to proclaim those doctrines by any authorized expositions of Scripture. What then becomes of her teaching function, and how are the utterances of the pulpit to be distinguished from the out-givings of any self-constituted guide who chooses to put forth his vagaries for gospel? In one word, the Church, as an organization, could have no existence without some defined standards of doctrine.

3. But a third form of the objection to creeds is based upon their alleged abuses.

Even those who admit their necessity as declarations of "those things most surely believed among us," yet insist that they shall be nothing more than mere historical records of the then present faith of the Church, or council, from which they emanate. But, it is said, once attach to them in any respect or degree, the notion of authority as the expression of ascertained truth, and forthwith they become chains to shackle the understanding and repress inquiry. As if the Church of God, with the promise of the Holy Spirit to guide her into all truth, never yet has been able to ascertain anything, with sufficient certainty, to write it down as fundamental!

It is even urged that the Church cannot put forth any creed as the expression of her faith, without thereby exerting an influence unfriendly to research, and restrictive of mental freedom. As if mental freedom was conditioned upon absolute ignorance, for else thought must be governed by knowledge already acquired! It is only where nothing is known, that speculation is absolutely free. The moment a single fact or doctrine is recognized as true, it becomes a factor in the problem, and thought must conform itself to this new condition, or else our thinking is nothing better than a waking dream.

Substantially the same reasoning will apply to the objection that creeds are inimical to theological progress. There are few forms of modern cant more common, or more convenient as a cover to all sorts of theological vagaries, than the current phrase, a "*progressive theology*." It is a phrase that carries such an air of life and activity. It sounds so broad and liberal, too, especially when put in antithesis with "*a cast-iron creed*" and "*a petrified orthodoxy*," that it may easily become the text for many a pungent paragraph in defence of heresy. But, like some other sayings which lie along the borders between truth and error, this also, by its ambiguity, may be appropriated by opposite parties. In one sense, it may be the intended expression of that necessary progress, which is the fruit of the increasing knowledge and ripening experience of the Church, as the divine word unfolds its treasures in its adaptation to the wants of each successive age. In another sense, it may be the accepted apology for that destructive criticism, which would overturn the very foundations of the faith, by making human reason to be the judge and measure of truth, and demanding a readjustment of the "oracles of God," that they may accord with whatever philosophy may happen to prevail.

Progress in theology is indeed a desirable and necessary movement. It indicates the life of the Church in the closer study and clearer apprehension of her charter. It would be a disparagement of Scripture to suppose that it contained nothing so definite and fixed as to be beyond the vicissitudes of human affairs, and the fluctuations of human opinion. But as there have been accretions to the Canon of Scripture, as God's purposes were unfolded, so there may be to the sum of Christian theology, by the unfolding of new relations of truth, under the providence of God. But these accretions must be, by using all previous acquisitions as stepping-stones, to higher and

broader apprehensions of the one complete and perfect system. It is only within the limitations of this view that we can recognize the notion of a "Progressive Theology." But to such progress creeds and confessions are not hindrances but helps.

4. But the question is asked, and with an air which implies that its answer must conclude against all creeds, "Who shall be our creed-makers?" To this we reply in one word, *creeds are not made—they grow*. The manufactured article betrays its origin by a lack of vitality, and being "of the earth, earthy" it soon passes away. Every creed which has been accepted as a symbol of a historical Church will be found to have been taken up into the faith of that Church, long before it was formulated in specific articles. And this because creeds are not framed to create a belief, but to express it; and this, most commonly, from the necessity for explicit statements arising out of the exigencies of controversy. This fact is suggestive as bearing upon the somewhat pronounced modern demand for creed revisions. There can be no yielding to such a demand until a Church has already fallen away from its accepted symbols, or new questions have arisen of such vital importance that an explicit deliverance on them can no longer be avoided.

II. But a more difficult question remains to be considered. Many who accept creeds as necessary expositions of doctrine, yet differ widely as to the nature and extent of the obligation incurred, by subscription. The question, how far a man is bound to conformity by subscription to the creed of his Church, is one of every-day practical importance.

It is sufficiently obvious that on this question extremes are to be avoided. But the discovery and adjustment of the golden mean is not so easy. It is against the whole Spirit of our Protestantism and would be ruinous to any Church to insist upon unqualified assent to every sentence and clause of an extended confession; but it is no less contrary to good faith and honest dealing to profess acceptance of a creed or confession, and yet hold one's self at liberty to reject and contradict whatever in it does not accord with one's own opinions. Where then shall the line be drawn at which liberty becomes license? What is the criterion by which to distinguish an honest subscription from a disingenuous evasion? Who is to decide what may or may not be excepted from the obligation of an *ex-animo* conformity?

For meeting the difficulties thus suggested, two methods have been proposed.

First, to simplify the creed, until it shall express only the essentials of the Christian life. Second, so to modify the form of subscription, that it shall involve no obligation of conformity to details, or explanations of doctrine.

The first method is, in effect, a giving up of the whole controversy, by reducing the creed to such narrow limits and general terms, as to defeat all the purposes for which creeds exist.

The second method would equally destroy the value of subscription,

as a test of doctrine, or a protection against error. The formula of subscription "*for substance of doctrine*" may be a relief to a scrupulous conscience, or it may also be a convenient refuge from the unwelcome pressure of an orthodox creed. The phrase itself is too indefinite and ambiguous to fix a man's theological status, or the position of a Church in which such a form of subscription prevails.

It is not, then, by reducing creeds to the brevity of a few undefined general articles, nor yet by modifying the terms of subscription so as to destroy all the significance and value of the act, that we are to avoid the extreme of a too rigid enforcement of the obligations of an accepted creed. In point of fact, that extreme is seldom reached, and in these days the danger in that direction is rather a theoretical possibility, than a matter of actual apprehension. Ecclesiastical martyrdom now lies oftener in the path of those who insist upon the obligations of an honest subscription.

The truth is, that where creeds are not imposed but accepted, the practical difficulties of subscription recede almost to the vanishing point. A man is not obliged to confess in the words of a creed which does not express the faith that is in him. But to whatever creed he does confess, thereto he is bound until lawfully discharged from that obligation. Moreover he is bound to that confession not with indefinite reservations, but *ex-animo*, and in the historical and commonly received meaning of its articles, as held by the Church whose creed it is. If he has scruples or doubts concerning this or that paragraph, or proposition, it is for the authority requiring the confession to decide whether these excepted propositions are necessary to the integrity of the creed, as a system of doctrines. An honest man will make these scruples known *in limine*, and he will always find provision made for their due consideration. He will find, too, that their treatment is liberal and generous: more generous sometimes to the individual than just to the denomination represented.

The REV. TALBOT W. CHAMBERS, D. D., of New York, read the following paper on

#### BIBLE REVISION.

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|-----------------------|------------------|
| 1. It is Needed.      | 7. Conservative. |
| 2. Has Improved Text. | 8. Uniform.      |
| 3. A Proper Origin.   | 9. Deliberate.   |
| 4. Unsectarian.       | 10. Reverential. |
| 5. International.     | 11. Optional.    |
| 6. Unhampered.        | 12. Conclusion.  |

The authorized version was first printed in 1611, and in the course of a single generation succeeded in displacing all its rivals and in becoming the acknowledged English representative of the original Scriptures. This position it has maintained until the present time. Yet during the last two centuries many attempts have been made to alter or to