

CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

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Christianity and the Bible

THE relation between Christianity and the Bible has perhaps received its best confessional expression in the opening paragraph of the Westminster Confession of Faith. That paragraph reads as follows:

"Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation; therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare His will unto His Church; and afterwards, for the better preservation and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased."

According to the statement cited, it is a mistake to say that Christianity is dependent upon the Bible for its very existence. Christianity existed before the Bible—obviously before that portion of the Bible we call the New Testament—and conceivably God might have found a way of preserving and propagating it without having caused the Bible to be written. It is a relative not an absolute necessity that the Confession of Faith asserts concerning the Bible. What is absolutely necessary to the existence of Christianity in the thoughts and lives of men is "that knowledge of God and His will which is necessary unto salvation," however acquired. God, however, was not content to make known that knowledge of

His will which is necessary to salvation and leave the matter of its preservation and propagation to the ordinary workings of providence. He went further and made special provision for its preservation and propagation. He caused a written record of it to be made "for the better preservation and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church." The Bible is the instrument or vehicle that God employed to convey to men a saving knowledge of Himself and His will (Christianity), "those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased," but we should ever distinguish between the conveyance and the thing conveyed. The famous declaration of CHILLINGWORTH that "the Bible and the Bible only is the religion of Protestants" is true only in as far as it be taken to mean that the Bible is the sole authoritative source of a saving knowledge of God and His will.

It is one thing, however, to say that we

could have Christianity had we no Bible and quite another thing to say that we would have Christianity had we no Bible. Granted that God might have adopted some other method for the preservation and propagation of saving truth, the method He actually adopted was the method of committing it to writing. Granted, that conceivably we might have a saving knowledge of God and His will even if God had not committed this supernatural revelation to writing, yet actually and as a matter of fact it is to the Bible that we are indebted for such saving knowledge as we possess. Here we avail ourselves of the eloquent but exaggerated words of Warfield:

"We may say that without a Bible we might have had Christ and all He stands for to our souls. Let us not say that this might not have been possible. But neither let us forget that, in point of fact, it is to the Bible that we owe it that we know Christ and are found in Him. And may it not be fairly doubted whether you and I—however true it may have been with others—would have had Christ had there been no Bible? We must not at any rate forget those nineteen Christian centuries that stretch between us and Christ, whose Christian Light we would do much to blot out and sink in a dreadful darkness if we could blot out the Bible. Even with the Bible, and all that had come from the Bible to form Christian lives and inform a Christian literature, after a millennium and a half the darkness had grown so deep that a Reformation was necessary if Christian truth was to persist,—a Luther was necessary, raised up by God to rediscover the Bible and give it back to man. Suppose there had been no Bible for Luther to rediscover and on the lines of which to refound the church—and no Bible in the hearts of God's saints and in the pages of Christian literature, persisting through

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those dark ages to prepare a Luther to re-discover it? Though Christ had come into the world and had lived and died for us, might it not be to us . . . as though He had not been? Or, if some faint echo of a Son of God offering salvation to men could still be faintly heard even by such dull ears as ours, sounding down the ages, who would have ears to catch the fulness of the message of free grace which He brought into the world? Who could assure our doubting souls that it was not all a pleasant dream? Who could cleanse the message from the ever-gathering corruptions of the multiplying years? No: whatever might possibly have been had there been no Bible, it is actually to the Bible that you and I owe it that we have a Christ—a Christ to love, to trust and to follow, a Christ without us the ground of our salvation, a Christ within us the hope of glory" (Revelation and Inspiration, p. 72).

If it be conceivable that we could have Christianity even if we had no Bible, it goes without saying that the possession of an errorless Bible is not essential to the existence of Christianity. It is conceivable that God should have made such a revelation of Himself and His will as is "necessary unto salvation" but have left the matter of its record, and so of its preservation and propagation, to men without exerting any special superintendence over their efforts. Even if the writers of the Bible were no more trustworthy than ordinary historians, either in their report of the facts or the doctrines that constitute Christianity, their writings might yield us a saving knowledge of God and His will. What is indispensable, from this point of view, is not an infallible record but merely one that is historically credible and generally trustworthy. As a matter of fact there have been and are many genuine Christians who have held that that is the only kind of Bible we have. We are in entire agreement with what Dr. MACHEN has written relative to this point:

"It must be admitted that there are many Christians who do not accept the doctrine of plenary inspiration. That doctrine is denied not only by liberal opponents of Christianity, but also by many true Christian men. There are many Christian men in the modern Church who find in the origin of Christianity no mere product of evolution but a real entrance of the creative power of God, who depend for their salvation, not at all upon their own efforts to lead the Christ life, but upon the atoning blood of Christ—there are many men in the modern Church who thus accept the central message of the

Bible and yet believe that the message has come to us merely on the authority of trustworthy witnesses unaided in their literary work by any supernatural guidance of the Spirit of God. There are many who believe that the Bible is right at the central point, in its account of the redeeming work of Christ, and yet believe that it contains many errors. Such men are not really liberals, but Christians; because they have accepted as true the message upon which Christianity depends. A great gulf separates them from those who reject the supernatural act of God with which Christianity stands or falls" (Christianity and Liberalism, p. 75).

In admitting that we could have Christianity even if the Bible was only partially trustworthy in its statements we are not, after the manner of some, preparing the way for maintaining that that is the only kind of Bible we have. As a matter of fact we hold—on valid grounds—that the Bible is (not merely contains) the Word of God and as such is completely trustworthy whether as regards its factual, doctrinal or ethical representations. Moreover, we hold that Christianity, though not dependent upon such a view of the Bible for its being, is dependent upon it for its well-being. In the history of the Church low views of inspiration have ever been the precursor of increasingly erroneous conceptions of Christianity. What Dr. CHARLES HODGE said of the Rationalists in his discussion of the doctrine of justification admits of wide application.

"Those who admitted the divine origin of the Scriptures got rid of its distinctive doctrines by the adoption of a low theory of inspiration. . . . Inspiration was, in the first instance, confined to the religious teachings of the Bible, then to the ideas or truths, but not to the form in which they were presented. The fact that Christ saves men in some way was admitted, but not as a sacrifice nor as a ransom, nor by being a substitute for sinners. . . . In this way a wet sponge was passed over all the doctrines of redemption, and their outlines obliterated. This unnatural process could not be long continued, and, therefore, the majority of Rationalists soon threw off all regard to the normal authority of the Bible, and avowed their faith in nothing which did not commend itself to their own understanding as true, and for that reason alone" (Systematic Theology, Vol. 3, p. 195).

On the other hand, the times during which Christianity has flourished—enjoyed not only being but well-being—have ever been times in which the Bible has been recognized as the very Word of

God and as such an infallible rule of faith and practice. It may be added that only as the Bible is recognized as such a book does it speak directly to our souls as God's Word. This is the only view of the Bible whereby it brings the soul into immediate relation to God in the matter of truth. According to other views its human authors stand as more or less dependable intermediaries between us and God. The importance of this to Christian thought and life, especially to Christian assurance and Christian freedom, cannot be developed in this connection.

Certainly according to the Westminster Confession of Faith the Bible is completely trustworthy and divinely authoritative throughout. In the paragraph cited above, it is God Himself who is said to have committed that "knowledge of God and His will which is necessary unto salvation" unto writing. Since it was God and not merely man who is represented as doing this it follows as a matter of course that the Bible is thought of as free of error. That such was the judgment of the Westminster Divines is made certain by the fact that later they assert that the Biblical books have "God (who is truth itself)" for their "author" (sec. 4), that they are of "infallible truth and divine authority" (sec. 5), that they are so trustworthy that a "Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in them" (Chap. 14, sec. 2)—not to mention other declarations of like import.

In considering the relation between Christianity and the Bible the testimony of the Scriptures to their own trustworthiness is a matter of first importance. The representation is widely current that belief in the complete trustworthiness of the Bible is a view that men have sought to impose on the Bible, not one derived from the Bible itself. As a matter of fact it has been derived from the Scriptures themselves, more especially from the exegetically obtained fact that this was the view held by our LORD and His apostles. It is not too much to say that the fundamental claim of the Bible is the claim to be entirely trustworthy, because of divine origin and authority. On this claim it bases its demand that men believe and obey all its other teachings. There is a true sense, therefore, in which Christian faith and hope is bound up

with the view of the Bible we have commended. We are dependent on the Bible for our knowledge of all the distinctive facts and doctrines of Christianity. If we cannot trust it in what it tells us about itself, the question arises whether we are warranted in trusting it in what it tells us about the deity of CHRIST, redemption in His blood, justification by faith, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, the heavenly inheritance.

Perhaps we cannot conclude our all too meager discussion of this important subject more profitably to our readers than by citing the closing words of Dr. WARFIELD's book, "Revelation and Inspiration"—a book that cannot be too highly commended to Bible students. In the sentence immediately preceding he thanks God for having so loved us as not only to reveal His will but to give us a pure record of it—God-given in all its parts and infallible in all its statements—and adds:

"I am far from contending that without

such an inspiration there could be no Christianity. Without any inspiration we could have had Christianity; yea, and men could still have heard the truth, and through it been awakened, and justified, and sanctified and glorified. The verities of our faith would remain historically proven true to us, so bountiful has God been in His fostering care, even had we no Bible; and through those verities, salvation. But to what uncertainties and doubts would we be the prey!—to what errors, constantly begetting worse errors, exposed!—to what refuges, all of them refuges of lies, driven! Look but at those who have lost the knowledge of this infallible guide; see them evincing man's most pressing need by inventing for themselves an infallible church, or even an infallible Pope. Revelation is but half revelation unless it be infallibly communicated; it is but half communicated unless it be infallibly reported. The heathen in their blindness are our witnesses of what becomes of an unrecorded revelation. Let us bless God, then, for His inspired word! And may He grant that we may always cherish, love and venerate it, and conform all our life and thinking to it! So may we find safety for our feet, and peaceful security for our souls."

value if they contained a somewhat fuller record of the happenings at the Assembly. For example, they contain no record of lost motions. Thus it often comes about that the Minutes make no mention of matters that have sharply divided an Assembly. Consequently it is frequently impossible to obtain anything like an adequate knowledge of the proceedings of an Assembly merely by reading its official Minutes. In this respect the Minutes issued by the Scottish, Canadian and other Presbyterian Churches seem to us much better than our own. Moreover, the Minutes are sometimes compressed to such a degree as to fail to convey a true conception of what happened. For instance, all that is recorded of the election of the Moderator of the last Assembly is the statement that "The Rev. LEWIS SHERWOOD MUDGE, of the Presbytery of Philadelphia, was unanimously elected Moderator of the General Assembly." It is not false to say that Dr. MUDGE was "unanimously elected" Moderator of the last Assembly, inasmuch as after the result had been announced the rival candidate moved, and the Assembly approved, that the vote be made unanimous, but as it stands the record is fitted to convey the impression that Dr. MUDGE was unopposed as Moderator when, as a matter of fact, a change of 71 votes would have meant the election of Dr. BURRELL. There are plenty of precedents for this manner of recording the election of a Moderator—Dr. MUDGE has not recorded his own election differently than he recorded the election of his predecessors under similar circumstances—but that does not alter the fact it fails to advise the reader of what actually happened. More might be said. What has been said, however, is sufficient to indicate that with all their excellence the Minutes of our General Assemblies might be considerably improved.

Editorial Notes and Comments

Westminster Seminary

WE make no apology for devoting so much of our space in this issue to matters connected with Westminster Theological Seminary. While CHRISTIANITY-TODAY is not officially related to this institution, it is in full sympathy with its aims and purposes and desirous of doing everything possible to further its interests.

When two years ago Westminster Seminary was established "to carry on and perpetuate the policies and traditions of Princeton Theological Seminary as that institution existed prior to its reorganization," it was confidently predicted by many that it would prove to be but a "flash in the pan." Well-known Presbyterians expressed the opinion that its first year would be its last. These prophecies have not been justified by the event. That the institution is meeting a real need in the life of the Church is evidenced not only by the growth of its student body but by the facility with which its graduates have been absorbed by the Church. When its opening was first announced, prospective students were warned against enrolling on the ground that there would be no demand for the services of the graduates of such an "outlaw" institution. Here, too, however, the wish was father to the thought. As a matter of fact, the demand for its graduates has exceeded the supply. Events have shown that there are still many churches

who want Ministers who have been trained by real scholars who stand without equivocation or compromise for the Bible as the completely trustworthy and divinely authoritative Word of God.

The main problem that confronts Westminster Seminary is not the getting of students or the placing of its graduates, but the securing of funds with which to carry on its vitally important work. Westminster Seminary has practically no endowment. It is all but wholly dependent on the voluntary gifts of its friends. Its enlarged student body means enlarged, not reduced expenses. The manner in which its financial needs have been met thus far, despite the prevailing business depression, has been almost as amazing to its friends as to its enemies. Only as God continues to put it into the hearts of His people to contribute to its support—and they respond to His urging—can it hope to continue to exist and thrive. In our judgment the origin and growth of Westminster Seminary promises more for the future of the Presbyterian Church and evangelical Christianity than anything that has happened in many a day.

The Minutes of the 143rd Assembly

THE Minutes of the last Assembly maintain their usual excellence. It seems to us, however, that it would add much to their

The Reorganization of Western and Princeton Seminaries

BY the action of the last General Assembly (Minutes Pp. 112-128) the old Board of Directors of the Western Theological Seminary at Pittsburgh was dissolved and its functions vested in its Board of Trustees, enlarged to thirty members.

The editor of the *Presbyterian* obviously erred when he recently stated that the new Board of Control at Western is "made up of all the members of the two boards merged," inasmuch as the combined membership of the two old boards consisted of some fifty odd persons. What happened was that the members of the two old boards "unanimously selected" from their number the (thirty) men who should compose its single Board of Control. That apart, we do not share his belief that it would have been better if Princeton Seminary had been reorganized under a single board consisting