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The Discretionary Power of the Church

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[NOTE: Extracted from *Sermons by John L. Girardeau*, Ed. Rev. George A. Blackburn (Columbia SC: The State Company, 1907). The editor of these sermons says, "This is not the most eloquent, but it is the most valuable and the most timely sermon in this volume. It was preached before the General Assembly, at St. Louis, May 20, 1875. The author called it a testimony." Text with slight modification, taken from the Naphtali Press edition, *An Anthology of Presbyterian & Reformed Literature*, volume 3 #4. Copyright © 1990 Chris Coldwell.]

There are certain utterances which, though brief, are comprehensive and regulative. They enhance principles, or inculcate duties, which involve all minor and dependent ones, and stamp a molding influence upon thought and action. Such are those contained in the text. So far as any words of the Lord Jesus can derive a peculiar interest from the impressiveness of the circumstances in which they were spoken, these possess that quality. They constitute a part of what is usually termed the great commission — that last brief, but affecting and momentous charge which Jesus delivered to the apostles and, through them, to the church, while ten thousand of His holy ones waited to escort Him to the gates of glory and the mediatorial throne. An apostate or declining church may be insensible to their power, but they burn like fire in the consciousness of one which is vitalized by the breath of the Holy Ghost. They speak to us this day with the same freshness and emphasis with which they fell from the lips of a triumphant Savior upon the listening ears of the apostles of His extraordinary call.

There are two supreme obligations which this final charge of the Lord Jesus lays upon the heart of the church. The first is the transcendent duty of universal evangelization. The second is the inculcation and

maintenance of the truth which Christ, the prophet of the church, has enjoined. The call of the gospel is to be addressed to all the sons of men, and when they accept it, and are gathered into the fold of the church, she is to teach them all things whatsoever Christ has commanded. There are obviously a positive and a negative aspect of this charge to the church — positive, in that she is directed to teach all that Christ has commanded; negative, in that she is implicitly prohibited from teaching anything which He has not commanded. The negative duty is a necessary inference from the command which enforces the positive. Here, then, we have the principle tinctured with the blood of our Puritan, Covenanter and Huguenot forefathers — that which is not commanded, either explicitly or implicitly in the Scriptures, is prohibited to the church. She can utter no new doctrine, make no new laws, ordain no new forms of government, and invent no new modes of worship. This is but a statement of a fundamental principle of Protestantism, contra-distinguishing it from Rationalism on the one hand and Romanism on the other — that the Scriptures, as the word of Christ, are the complete and ultimate rule of faith and duty. They are complete, since they furnish as perfect a provision for the spiritual, as does nature for the physical, wants of man, and therefore, exclude every other rule as unnecessary and superfluous. They are ultimate because, being the word of God, they must pronounce infallibly and supremely upon all questions relating to religious faith and practice. The duty of the church, consequently, to conform herself strictly to the divine word, and her guilt and danger in departing from it would seem to be transparently evident. But the clearest principles, through the blindness, fallibility, and perverseness of the human mind, frequently prove inoperative in actual experience;

and the history of the church furnishes lamentable proof that the great, regulative truth of the completeness and supremacy of the Scriptures constitutes no exception to this remark. Because we are Protestants, and Presbyterian Protestants, because the doctrine of the perfection and ultimate authority of the word lies at the root of our system and is embodied in our standards, we are not, therefore, free from the peril attending the failure of the church to conform herself in all things to the revealed will of Christ, and her tendency to rely upon her own folly instead of His wisdom.

It is designed, in these remarks, to direct attention to the subject of the discretionary power of the church; and in the discussion of that question, logical fitness requires that the great Protestant principle of the completeness and supremacy of the Scriptures be premised. That being admitted, the Rationalist hypothesis of the final authority of reason in matters of religious faith and duty, and the Romanist, which affirms the ultimate rule to be the Scriptures and tradition, as expounded by an infallible human head of the church, are effectually discharged. To establish this fundamental assumption, recourse need be had but to a single short but conclusive argument. Those who appeal to the Scriptures as possessing any authority at all must admit them to be true. They are a veracious witness. But they affirm themselves to be inspired: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God;" and as inspired they farther assert that they are a complete standard of faith and directory of practice. They claim to be "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." Either we must deny their truthfulness in this instance, or admit it. If we deny it, then their character for veracity breaks down in all respects, in accordance with the maxim: "false in one point, false in all." They are suited to be no rule at all. If we admit their truthfulness, then, as they declare themselves to be complete, we must believe that they are; and so every other rule is excluded, and they stand alone, without a rival, either as a co-ordinate or a supplementary standard of faith and duty.

But, although the Scriptures are the supreme rule, they are not alone the supreme judge of faith and practice. The question being as to the final judge whose expositions of the rule are ultimate, the answer is given with equal sublimity and accuracy in the Westminster Confession of Faith: "The supreme Judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined,

and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture." From the nature of the case, the only competent judge of a divine rule is a divine judge. Let us pause a moment that we may estimate the force of this mighty collocation. The grand principle of Protestantism is not that the supreme judge is the word alone, nor that it is the Spirit alone; but that it is — the Word and the Spirit. This little coupling and, which brings together and indissolubly unites the two great terms — the Word, the Spirit, effects the junction with a thundering clang which should ring in the ear of the church, and penetrate into her innermost heart. The copulative here has a significance akin to that which expresses the substantial unity of the three distinct subsistences in the adorable Trinity — the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, one God over all blessed forever. It is like that between justification, sanctification, and their personal experience of both — not the water only, not the blood only; but the Spirit and the water and the blood, one in the unity of the Word, and one in the concrete unity of the believer's experience. God, all-wise, has put together these two terms of the grandest of all Protestant canons — the Word and the Spirit, the supreme judge of controversies; and what God hath joined together let not man put asunder! Their divorce is sure to result in slavery to the letter on the one hand, and on the other, in wild hypotheses as to human rights and needless schisms which rend the unity of the church in pieces.

Neither, then, is the conscience of the individual, nor that of the church in her organic capacity, possessed of ultimate authority in matters of faith and duty. Both, in the noble language of Luther, himself the intrepid defender of the right of private judgment, in his final reply at the Diet of Worms, both are "bound captive by the Scriptures." And, as the Word is interpreted by the illumination of the Holy Ghost, human wisdom is to be guided by that infallible authority. In the grand words of the same distinguished reformer: "Obedience is to be preferred to the gift of miracles, even if we possessed that gift." Yes; the paramount duty of the church is absolute conformity to the written Word as it is expounded to faith by the divine Spirit.

Attention is now invited to a consideration of the theory of the discretionary power of the church. Has she any such power? If so, what is it? and how is it limited?

It is obvious that the root of these questions must be sought in an antecedent one, in reference to the very nature of the church herself. She is fundamentally discriminated from all other institutes in this respect — that they are natural, and she is supernatural. The state

has its origin in the facts and relations of nature, and “is designed,” as a profound thinker has remarked, “to realize the idea of justice.” Philanthropic societies have a like foundation and aim to realize the idea of benevolence. The church is grounded in the supernatural facts and relations of redemption, and is intended to “realize the idea of grace.” Her very existence is created by the redeeming mission of Christ. She is not, therefore, a society of human beings, as such, but of human beings as redeemed. As strictly a redemptive institute she must be supernatural. Her origin is supernatural as lying in the mediatorial work of Christ; her existence as historically developed is supernatural, as springing from the call of the Holy Ghost; her members are men presumed at least to be supernaturally regenerated; and her end is supernatural, as designed to illustrate the grace of a redeeming God. It would, consequently, violate all the analogies of the case to suppose that she is left to the guidance of a rule of faith and duty which is natural — which is dictated by the wisdom of the human intelligence. Like herself, her fundamental rule must be supernatural — it must be a revelation from Him who, as He has redeemed her by His blood and called her by His Spirit, alone possesses the authority to give her constitution and the power to enforce it. It is barely conceivable that as a regenerated nature is imparted by grace to her members, and the promise of illumination is furnished them, she might have been left to the guidance of sanctified reason under the direction of the Holy Spirit, without the formal instructions of an objective rule of faith and duty — supernaturally imparted wisdom might have been able to frame rules adequate to the wants even of a supernatural society. It might be supposed that, as God originally stamped the articles of natural religion upon the reason of man and engraved His law upon his conscience, He might have pursued the same course in regard to the religion of grace. But this antecedent probability is vacated of force by the consideration that while we are, if regenerate, endowed with a reason and conscience supernaturally illuminated, we are also still under the partial influence of sinful principles; and in the collision between these two antagonistic elements which would emerge upon the presentation of the concrete cases of experience, confusion would necessarily characterize our ultimate judgments, and utter uncertainty attach to the resulting rule. But the question is settled by fact. God has furnished to the church a supernaturally revealed, an external and authoritative rule of faith and duty; and allusion has only been made to the antecedent presumption indicated in order to evince the necessity for such a standard. As infinite wisdom appointed the

external objects of nature, the sun, moon, and stars in the heavens above and the visible phenomena of the earth below, fixed realities by which the aberrations of perception and the illusions of sense may be corrected, so has He set in the supernatural firmament of His Word the great facts and doctrines of redemption as unchanging and permanent data, in accordance with which all the deductions of reason and all the decisions of conscience, in the domain of religion, are to be tested and regulated.

Now, as it has pleased God to communicate to the church a supernatural revelation of His will, which He intended and has declared to be a complete and supreme rule of faith and life, it would seem to be intuitively obvious that her duty is to conform herself implicitly and absolutely to it in all things, that she has no discretion but to teach and observe all that Christ has commanded, and to teach and observe nothing else. The maxim of Bacon, in regard to the relation which man holds to nature as a minister and interpreter, would appear to apply with enhanced emphasis to that which the church sustains to the Scriptures. They disclose a new world of supersensible and transcendent realities — a supernatural universe. In their light even the common obligations and duties of “the law moral” in respect to which the natural reason and conscience are, in some measure, competent to speak, are brought under the molding influence of supernatural relations, enforced by supernatural motives and impressed by supernatural sanctions. Granting that the church, as renewed and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, is enabled to study and apprehend these revealed mysteries, we are compelled to confess that she must ever be the learner and servant, and not the lawgiver and master. Faith, or what is the same thing, reason born again, the supernaturally-imparted organ of perception which adapts her to this system of redemptive phenomena, is a confession of her inability to originate anything in such a sphere. It can only report what it observes. The church, therefore, can have no opinions and frame no laws of her own. The facts, the doctrines which expound the relations of those facts, and the practical rules which enforce the duties arising from those relations, are all divinely given. Her whole duty lies in believing and obeying. She can create nothing. There is no necessity for it even if she could. All that she requires is already provided for her by the wisdom and mercy of her head. She is completely equipped for all the exigencies of her life, and for all the ends which her Lord has designed for her to achieve. The extent of her power is thus easily defined — it consists in first knowing, and then applying, the rule of faith and duty which expresses to her the will of Christ.

These conclusions are so fair and obvious that one reasoning abstractly could scarcely imagine how they may be disputed; and yet the history of the church has, to a great extent, been a record of perpetual contradictions of them. How is the amazing fact to be accounted for? Apart from that general cause, the corruption of the human heart, which ever tends to mar by its touch every perfect work of God, a special explanation is to be found in the assumption that the church is invested with a discretionary power which may be legitimately exercised alike in the sphere of **doctrine**, of **government**, and of **worship**. Here we lay our finger upon the main secret of the church's tendency to degeneracy in these vital concerns. The theory of discretionary power constitutes her formal justification of her practical departures from the Word. It appears, in the main, to be founded on one or the other, or on a combination of both, of these suppositions — namely, that the statements of doctrine in the Scriptures are in the form of concise and comprehensive enunciations of principles, which need to be expanded and developed by additional deliverances; and that the rules laid down for government and worship are regulative, not constitutive — general provisions without the specification of particular modes and minute details; and their application to the varying circumstances and multiplied exigencies of the church demand from her supplementary legislation in a more specific shape. The church is endowed with wisdom for the discharge of these important offices; and so long as she does not positively contradict the Word, her exercise of this discretionary power is legitimate. She is not to be tied to the letter of Scripture — that would be bondage inconsistent with the liberty wherewith Christ has made her free. She is in some sort His confidential agent, and as such she is entitled to use her own judgment. Where the Scriptures are silent she may speak, and whatever measure they do not prohibit, and is, to her mind, consistent with their general scope and spirit, she is not precluded from adopting. To require her to produce a divine warrant for all that she does, is to fetter her freedom and cripple her energies.

[Doctrine]

Let us contemplate the operation of this theory of discretionary power in the sphere of doctrine. Let us see how, under its influence, the potent key is wielded by the church which admits her into this grand department of Christ's kingdom. It is in the way of what is termed development of doctrine. The idea which is embodied in this high-sounding phraseology is somewhat vague and indefinite, as every one must have felt who has made the attempt to seize it. The meaning of the term must, if

possible be settled in order that we may attain some clear apprehension of the question before us. Development may be understood to signify the express eliciting from anything that which is implicitly contained in it; and that either by a process of self-evolution, or by the agency of extraneous forces acting upon it; or, it may be taken to mean the unfolding of a series or system by substantive addition and accretion to what previously existed, in accordance with an intelligent plan. In this latter case there is no self-evolution; the development is effected by successive interpositions of a creative power. There is no education of what was latent in a thing already existing, but the creation of new things related to those going before, not by inherent affinity, but by the unity of an intelligent scheme. This sort of development is simply the orderly procedure of intelligence accomplishing results in pursuance of a definite plan. It is the development of a scheme, not of the individual things embraced under it. When, for example, a certain class of scientific men content that the Creator brings into being new species of vegetables or animals, different from, but related to, those previously existing, He only develops His plan; there is no evolution of species into species, but a clear addition at each step in the creative process to the numeric sum of distinct beings.

Let it be observed now that the question is not whether there has been a divine development of doctrine by the instrumentality of inspired prophets and apostles. Of course there has been. As each dispensation of religion succeeded another, there was an addition of new facts, and a fresh development of doctrine. The Jewish economy was an advance upon the Patriarchal, and the Christian upon the Jewish; and this progress of doctrine went on under the immediate agency of inspiration until the canon of Scripture was closed. The question is not, whether God developed doctrine — that is conceded; but it is, whether the canon of Scripture having been closed, the church is clothed with power to continue the development.

In order to clear our way still farther, let us note the patent distinction which has been pressed by orthodox Protestants, and candidly and explicitly stated by rationalist theologians themselves — the distinction between a subjective and an objective development of doctrine. The former is simply the growth and expansion in the mind itself of its knowledge of the doctrines externally given in the Scriptures. It is not a development from Scripture, but a development, as Dr. Rainy as said, up to Scripture, as the ultimate standard. It is what every well-instructed Christian understands — the leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ and going on onto

perfection. In the case of the church as an organized society living on from age to age, it is the progress which she has made in the knowledge of Scriptural truth in consequence of her conflicts with error, and the discipline she has undergone. The latter — the alleged objective development of doctrine — is the numerical increase of the objects of faith, the addition of others to those already given in the Scriptures; it is the expansion and enlargement of the doctrinal system by substantive accretions to the complement of doctrine revealed in the written word. It is this latter view which constitutes the very core of the theory of development of doctrine.

Now, in regard to this theory it deserves, in the first place, to be remarked that its most prominent advocates are logically guilty in confounding the members of the distinction which has just been signalized. At one time they argue for what no one denies — the development of the knowledge of doctrine, and at another for a very different kind of development — that of the doctrinal system of the Scriptures. The confusion is damaging to the success of the theory. Let us have one thing or the other. The amalgamation of rationalist and evangelical views in the same line of argument is too glaring an incongruity to be overlooked.

In the second place, the theory involves the inconsistent mixture of the two sorts of development to which in the foregoing remarks attention has already been directed — the one, by a process of self-evolution by virtue of inherent tendencies, and the other, by positive additions effected by creative power. A patient endeavor to detect the real merits of the theory has led us to the opinion that it finds some plausible ground in the following assumptions: First, the doctrines of Scripture may be regarded as seminal principles — germ-truths, which were not intended to be complete, but to expand into other and related doctrines by virtue of certain tendencies inherent in them; in some such manner as the germ-cells of vegetable or animal organisms are developed by a process of growth, or as the rudimentary truths of the human mind are unfolded through the process of intelligence to maturity. Secondly, there may be assumed to be a genius or spirit which pervades and characterizes the doctrinal system of the Scriptures — a sort of typical, controlling idea, in accordance with which the mind of the church, reflectively acting upon the process of evolution as it brings the germinal principles of the divine Word into contact with her changing circumstances and her diversified necessities, is enabled to register the results of the development in the shape of formulated statements. Substantial additions are thus made to the doctrines of

Scripture, but the church does not create them. Her intelligence is indeed in contact with the developing truth, but only as a concurring and conditioning force. As one species of animals, it is said, evolved into a new and distinct species, so one truth, or group of truths, is evolved into a new truth or group of truths. The church simply watches the course of this wonderful self-development of doctrine, marks the results and reduces them to formal record. Thus the body of doctrine is continually enlarging.

Did our limits permit, we think it might be shown that these germ-principles of Scripture are hypothetical. The fundamental doctrines of the word are developed in it far more fully and systematically than is commonly supposed. The great cardinal truths of justification and sanctification, for example, are very elaborately and completely expounded with their affiliated doctrines in the epistle to the Romans, and that of the priesthood of Christ in the epistle to the Hebrews. As to this genius of Christianity which is substituted for the Holy Ghost, what we have to say is, that it usually turns out to be but the dominating conception by some individual or party of the contents of Scripture, to which they are bent to serve a purpose. We, of all men, have reason to know what this genius of the gospel can accomplish, when it holds its light for humanitarian and higher-law developers of the Bible.

But the case, as it has just been stated, is not the case as put by the Romanist defenders of this theory themselves. They admit that all the results of this self-evolution are not to be retained; and they cover up the difficulties in which such a view of the process involves them under the cloudy phrase — historical development. They assume an infallible developing authority which sifts out all that is undesirable and formulates only what is suitable. The admission is fatal. It concedes the fact that the alleged development does not proceed by its own law, but is arbitrarily managed and regulated by the church. We have, then, after all, not a development by legitimate evolution of comprehensive principles, but one implying the continuous growth of a system by the interventions of creative power. The church is the creator; she makes the substantive additions to the original doctrines of the Scriptures, and she does it by the process of construction in accordance with a scheme of her own. The hypothesis is weighed down by the difficulties with which a searching historical criticism had embarrassed that of tradition, for which it was intended to be a philosophical substitute. They both postulate an infallible developing authority. That being granted, it is virtually admitted that the church has creative power,

and actually makes new doctrines in addition to those of the Scriptures. This theory of development, then, stands chargeable with bringing together and confounding incongruous hypotheses.

In the third place, the theory, in the hands of the Romanist, effectually breaks down at the point at which it assumes the continuance of inspiration. Were it true that the church is inspired and, therefore, gifted with infallibility for the development of doctrine, it would follow that there is a continuous supernatural revelation of God's will. The development in the way of addition would be legitimate, since it would be divine. But the fundamental assumption of the theory — the existence of an infallible developing authority — is unsupported by evidence. The miraculous credentials of inspiration are absent. Let the Pope raise the dead and we will consider his claim to be inspired.

The theory as held by the Rationalists, while substantially identical with that of the Romanist, differs from it in several respects — he denies the Scriptures to be a supernaturally inspired revelation; he makes reason, instead of an infallible church, the ultimate developing authority; and he asserts its competency to abridge, as well as enlarge, the doctrinal contents of the Word. Our main issue with the Rationalist is not in regard to the power to develop the Scriptures, but in reference to their inspiration. But holding, as we do, the fact of their inspiration, the argument against the power of reason to develop their doctrines either by addition to, or subtraction from, them is a short one. The developing authority cannot be of a lower degree than that which originally communicated the doctrines. To remit the dicta of an inspired revelation to the fallible judgment of reason is to bring God to the bar of man.

We meet this whole theory of development of doctrine, which involves positive additions to the Scriptures, by whomsoever held, on the simple ground of the perfection and supremacy of the written Word. We accept its own testimony that it thoroughly furnishes the man of God for all good works, and maintain that the church, as a society of men of God, finds in its provisions ample furniture for all her needs. It is absurd to talk of substantially developing a complete rule; it is wicked to say that the Scriptures are not complete. The church has no such discretionary power as is implied in this theory of development of doctrine by which Rationalist and Romanist — Herod and Pontius Pilate — take counsel together against the Lord and against his anointed.

Still the question presses, whether the church has any power to develop doctrine. Is there such a thing as its legitimate development? It is necessary that we look again to the signification of our terms. There are certain writers, as, for instance, Dr. Rainy in his recent able lectures on the Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine, who employ the term doctrine in a subjective sense, to signify the conception which the mind has of the teaching of Scripture, and which it reduces to formal shape. It is the doctrine of the Bible as apprehended by the understanding, and, perchance, modified by it in the process of assimilation. Hence it is inferred that a real development of doctrine is warrantable. Now, it is perfectly evident that if a doctrine precisely as it is enunciated in the Scriptures is received by the mind, there is no more development admissible in the one case than in the other. If a doctrine be the very same on the pages of the Word and on the tablets of the human mind, what is predictable of it in the one place is predictable of it in the other. And if, as written by the Spirit of God in the sacred oracles, it is not susceptible of substantial development, neither is it capable of such development when inscribed by the same Spirit upon the human soul. The same thing is true of the doctrine as registered by the church in her formularies of faith and duty. If the doctrines of these symbols exactly coincide with those delivered in the Scriptures, it is impossible to see how they can receive any other development than that to which Scripture itself may be subjected. The ground may, therefore, be boldly and safely taken, that the doctrine of Scripture, if rightly apprehended by the individual mind, or rightly expressed in a church-creed, admits of no substantial development. It is a completed product of divine intelligence. What is true of any particular doctrine is also true of a system of doctrine, whether held by an individual or by the church. If in either case the scheme of Scripture doctrine is accurately reproduced, nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. We do not hesitate, therefore, to maintain that in so far as a creed faithfully conforms to Scripture, it is no more susceptible of development than Scripture itself. What is it, in that case, but Scripture?

If, on the other hand, doctrines are held by the mind which are not those of Scripture, what is the development which is needed? What can it be but abandonment of them and the substitution of the true doctrines? If destruction can be termed development, then may such doctrines be developed. If those held are but imperfectly conformed to the scriptural standard, the developing process is simply one of correction by that standard. It is somewhat curious that there should be any perplexity about this matter. Manifestly, the development

which is possible and legitimate in such cases is that not of doctrine, but of doctrinal knowledge. It is the mind's stock of knowledge which is developed by substantial additions; and the very staple of these additions ought to be the unchanging doctrines of God's Word. And precisely so it is with the knowledge of the church in her organic capacity, as that knowledge is formulated in her creeds. The fixed, the invariable, the undeveloping quantity is the doctrines of the Scriptures; the variable and developing is the church's knowledge. If a creed is imperfect, let the church develop it into closer conformity with the Scriptures; or, in other words, let her adjust the formal statements of her knowledge to the nature and extent of that knowledge. This she not only may do, but ought to do; but in that case it is not Scripture doctrine which is developed, it is the theology of the church, by being brought into closer approximation to the changeless and everlasting Word. The distinction which has been illustrated is as clear as it is simple, and the wonder is that it is not always observed.

What becomes, then, of that development of doctrine by inference, which the Westminster Confession appears to sanction? If by development be meant the unfolding, the bringing out the latent and unexpressed meaning of a proposition, then it is admitted that to deduce from Scripture propositions by good and necessary consequence is a legitimate development of Scripture. But let it be observed that the development, in that case, proceeds not by substantive addition. It is simply the explicit evolution from the doctrinal propositions of the Word of what is implicitly contained in them — the inference is part of the original enunciation. And it must be borne in mind that it is not a discretionary power which entitles the church to make such a development of doctrine as this: the rules of logic necessitate it. The only discretionary power which the church is apt to employ in the case is to attempt a development by ill and unnecessary consequence. She has no commission to reason badly. The sort of evolution of doctrine we are considering is only justifiable when it proceeds by logical inference, and logical inferences are not speculative opinions. Let the church confine herself to the deduction of good and necessary consequences from the doctrines of Scripture, and she will not develop doctrines and commandments of men.

There is a specious and dangerous form of this theory of development of doctrine which threatens, at the present day, to invade the supremacy of the written Word. The ground is not openly taken that the doctrinal

system of the Scriptures may be developed, but it is maintained that the creeds and confessions in which the church has logically arranged that system cannot bind the conscience or shackle the thought. It is contended that they are human compositions — fruits of the human brain, and that they are consequently collections of the unauthoritative dogmas of men. To forbid the development of doctrine beyond their limits is represented as tyranny, and tyranny in its worst form, as inflicted upon the intellect itself. The precious and inalienable right of private judgment, consecrated to the Protestant heart by the struggles of the Reformation, is retrenched, and the dogmatic despotism of man again enthroned in the sacred domain of conscience. The free, progressive, advanced thought of the age must not be strapped down by old dogmas which have gone to sleep with the conflicts which gave them birth. Like the weapons of ancient warfare, they did good service in their time, but they must give way to the improved arms of the present. Theological schools are not to be repositories of these now useless engines. The demand of the times is for untrammelled development. The young, vigorous, exultant intellect of this era will be satisfied with nothing less; and if the church insists on clinging to antiquated dogmas and repressing this temper of development, she must consent to be left behind by the grand army of progress in its onward and triumphant march. This is eloquent. All that it needs to make it effective is — truth. Had it possessed that simple quality it would, ere this, have fired and roused the heart of the church.

If the preceding argument is worth anything, it has shown that in whatever way the doctrines of the divine Word may be expressed, they are characterized by completeness and ultimate authority, and are, therefore, incapable of substantial development. Whether enunciated in the Scriptures, or written on the tablets of the human mind, or inscribed upon the pages of a church-formulary, they are possessed of the same immutable characteristics. The question, then, is simply one of fact — do church-creeds faithfully reproduce the doctrines of the Scriptures? The question to us as a church is, Do our standards accurately state those doctrines? If they do not, the development required is to expunge the dogmas which do not express the mind of Christ in the written Word, and incorporate those that do. If they do, as they utter the word of Christ, they are clothed with Christ's authority. The delivery of Christ's doctrines and commandments by men does not make them the doctrines and commandments of men. The fact being settled that the doctrines of these standards are the very doctrines of Scripture, we meet the fundamental

premise in which the opposition to them is grounded with a denial. They are not human compositions, except in so far as their form and arrangement are concerned — they are for substance the composition of the divine Spirit; they coincide with the inspired writings. Their dogmas are not man's they are God's dogmas. The cry for liberty to develop theological thought beyond their doctrines is the demand for license to develop it beyond God's doctrines. This is the real secret of revolt against the binding authority of confessions. When men cry, Down with creeds! they mean, Down with the Bible! When they shout, We will not be tied down by confessions of faith! they mean, We will not submit to God's authority — the human intelligence is too gloriously free to be led captive by God Himself! These are not Christian views; they are the children of rationalism brought to the font of the church and baptized under the attractive names of Broad-Churchism, Liberal Christianity, and Progressive Thought — the fair daughters of men with whom, when the sons of God consort, they generate the giant leaders of defection and apostasy.

And in the name of reason we would ask, Why should confessions of faith be rejected because they are old? What is there in age to invalidate truth? She is as old as God and as immortal as He. Is not the Bible old? Has age made it worthless? Is it not now, as it ever has been, the impregnable tower into which the righteous runneth when pressed by the legions of the pit? Has age made it decrepit? Is it not now taking wings like the Apocalyptic angel, to fly in mid-heaven and blow the trump of jubilee to the slaves of sin and death? Is not nature old? And are her laws inoperative because they began to work from the foundation of the world? Are her ordinances worn out because they are old? Shine not the heavenly host with the same lustre with which they beamed upon the plains of Uz, when Job sang of the bands of Orion and the sweet influences of Pleides? And are the grand facts and doctrines of redemption effete because they date back to the promise which, springing like a bow from the abyss of the fall, has spanned the arch of time? Is the panoply of God of no further service because for ages the darts of the Devil have been driven in a fiery storm against it? And is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, now useless and to be discarded because in the conflicts of centuries it has rung against the armor of error and the mail of hell? No; the difficulty with these confessions — these battle-torn standards of the church — is not that they are antiquated; it is that they are as young and vigorous as ever. The light of immortal youth which rests upon the divine Word kindles upon them. Their crime is that they too faithfully represent

God's authority — that they restrain the license of speculation, call the students of truth into the school of Christ, and bind His yoke upon their necks.

To develop her knowledge of Scripture doctrine as its meaning is elicited by fresh conflicts with error, and new evolutions of providence, and, as developed, to give it formal and permanent expression in her symbols and in this way to develop them — this is conceded to be the privilege and the duty of the church; but so far as this has been done and her standards coincident with the Scriptures, she is debarred from any substantive development of their doctrines as she is precluded from such development of the complete and ultimate rule of faith and duty. She ought to add Scripture doctrines to her standards when they are wanting; she has no power to add to Scripture doctrines in her standards.

[Church Government]

The next aspect of this subject which claims our notice is the extent of the discretionary power possessed by the church in the sphere of government.

Reverting to the great principle of the completeness of the Scriptures as a rule of faith and duty, we would expect to find in them ample directions in respect to the government of the church as an organized society; we would reasonably look for an adequate constitution for this supernatural kingdom from Him who is at once its Savior, its head and its sovereign — the giver of life, the source of power and the administrator of rule. To take any other view would be to impugn the perfection of the Scriptures, or to suppose that they were designed to be a guide to individuals only, and not to the church as an organic whole. To adopt this supposition is to impeach the wisdom of Christ, since in that case He would have failed to guard His church against the corruptions into which she has been plunged by this very hypothesis, that He has given her no definite form of government, but left her in that matter to the guidance of her own wisdom. But our expectation that He would provide for all the requirements of His church is not disappointed. He has revealed to her His will in this solemn concern of her polity.

It is usual to draw a sharp distinction between doctrine and government. In a certain sense, it is admissible — the sense in which the gospel as a doctrine differs from church-government as a law. It would, however, seem to be more accurate to take the distinction between the doctrine touching the way in which individuals are to be saved, and the doctrine touching the way in which the church is to be governed — in a word, the doctrine of salvation, and the doctrine

of church-government. Both are matters of revelation; the government of the church is a revealed doctrine as well as the salvation of the soul. In both cases, therefore, our obligation is alike to believe and obey — to accept the doctrine and to perform the inculcated duties. If the individual embraces the gospel by faith, by faith likewise does the church receive the teachings of her Lord in reference to the government and order of His house. If this position be correct, it follows that the church has no more discretionary power to develop the doctrine of government by substantive addition or diminution than she possesses in regard to the doctrine of salvation. This, however, is denied. It is contended that there is no definite form of church-government revealed in the Scriptures; only the essential principles are given. If the language conveys any meaning, it implies that government in general is instituted, but no form of government in particular.

It may, without arrogance, be suggested that it is difficult, to extract any clear and precise notion from this position. We can understand the proposition that Christ appointed no government for His church, but left it to the enlightened wisdom of his followers to devise one for themselves; but that is not what is affirmed. We can perceive, in the abstract the logical distinction between the generic notion of government and the different species which may be contained under it; but it passes our ability to comprehend how, in the concrete, an organized society can be under government in the general, but under no particular sort of government. If, for example, it be said that a given political economy is under government, the question at once arises, What government? Is it monarchical, or aristocratic, or democratic? If it be replied that it is neither under any one of these, nor under one composed of the elements of some or all of them, then we beg to know what conceivable idea of government remains. It is like thinking away all the distinctive marks which characterize a thing and then attempting to form a notion of the thing itself. There is a government, but there is no constitution which embodies it, and nobody to administer it. The truth is, that the effort to realize the abstract idea of government in the concrete necessitates the designation of some particular features, and however few may be the elements enumerated; their specification defines a certain kind of government which is distinguishable from others. If, therefore, Christ has, in His Word, ordained any government at all for His church, it must be one which is capable of being realized in a definite form. Has He done this? Has He revealed a government for His church? Is this among the all things which He commanded the apostles and which they were

to teach the church to observe? This question will be settled by another. Has He revealed those component elements of a government the existence of which determines the existence of the government itself? The essential elements which enter into the composition of a government are laws, officers and courts. Each of these elements is revealed in the New Testament — itself embodies the laws, the officers are given under definite titles and with prescribed functions, and the courts are described. Presbyterians are sure that they find a particular sort of officers, courts peculiarly composed, and a specific principle which distinguishes the mode of administering the government from every other — the principle of government by Presbyters in representative assemblies, discriminating this polity from Prelacy on the one hand and Independency on the other. We have, then — so we firmly believe — a divinely-revealed polity of definite form. The King of the church has not left it to her to frame a government upon principles of expediency commending themselves to human wisdom; He has supernaturally communicated to her as a supernatural organism her constitution, office-bearers and courts. It is no more permissible to the church to devise her government than to think out her gospel. Reason, no doubt, would, were it left to her, do better in the one department than in the other. That is not the question. The task of doing neither has been assigned to it. Polity is given as well as salvation, and in regard to it the church has no power but to conform herself strictly to the requirements of her complete and infallible rule.

There is a respect in which the church has discretionary power in this department, but it is one which does not in the slightest degree affect the nature and organization of her government. It lies not in the sphere of the supernatural, but altogether in that of the natural. The Westminster Confession very precisely defines the extent of this discretion. It is restricted to “some circumstances concerning the government of the church common to human actions and societies.” It is designed to speak more particularly of this “doctrine of circumstances” under the topic still remaining — that of worship — and it is here dismissed with a single remark. It is clear that circumstances which are common to human actions cannot be anything which is peculiar to church actions, and those which are common to human societies cannot be anything distinctive of the church as a certain kind of society. They are circumstances belonging to the temporal sphere — time, place, decorum, and the natural methods of discharging business which are necessities to all societies. They do not appertain to the kind of government which the

church ought to have, not the mode in which it is to be disposed.

This, then, is the extent of the discretionary power of the church in the sphere of government: She is to add nothing to, to take nothing from, what Christ has commanded in the Scriptures. All her needs are there provided for. She must have a divine warrant for every element of her polity and every distinctive function of government. Her laws are given; her officers are given; and the mode in which those laws shall be administered, and those officers shall act, is given. She can, consequently, make no laws — her power is limited to declaring and applying Christ's laws; she can create no offices — her power is expressed in electing the persons to fill those that Christ has appointed; she can institute no new mode of government — her sole power lies in employing that which Christ has ordained. Her power and her duty alike are summed up in absolute conformity to the Written Word.

[Worship]

The same general line of argument is applicable to the extent of discretionary power possessed by the church in the domain of public worship — public worship, we say, for that belongs to the church, as such, and all that is predicable of it, is not predicable of that of the family and the social circle.

Dr. Breckinridge has well urged that the supernatural element runs through, pervades and controls all the departments of doctrine, government and worship. We cannot afford ever to lose sight of this great principle. It has a commanding value. Especially ought we to challenge our attention to it in the matter of public worship, because there is no divine institution in regard to which natural wisdom and natural taste are so apt to arrogate discretion as this. It involves to a large extent the aesthetical element of our nature, and the imagination and the sensibilities as well as the reason plead for a share in its control. A cultivated carnality begs, clamors, storms for some license here. Here it is, emphatically, that human wisdom asserts its liberty to exercise its own inventive power, and to refuse conformity to divine appointments whether in the establishment of modes of worship, or in their alteration as positive institutes. But let it never be forgotten that will-worship has been under every dispensation of religion a special object of divine denunciation and wrath. God has always manifested a peculiar jealousy for the appointed worship of His house; and no marvel, for in the worship of the solemn assembly, religion finds it highest and most formal expression, the human heart is most immediately

conscious of the divine presence, and the will of the creature brought into the closest relation to that of God. The divine majesty is directly before us, the glory of it blazes in our very eyes, the place is holy ground, and an act which elsewhere might be indifferent takes on the complexion of profanity. The sentences of Christ's displeasure against the invasions of His prerogative are not as summarily enforced under the New Dispensation as under the old, but their fearfulness is not diminished by the fact that their execution is suspended. The Apostle Paul, in the third chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, furnishes a picture which should enstamp itself upon the minds of every Christian teacher. He represents one who has, with doctrinal correctness, laid the true and only foundation, which is Jesus Christ, and yet has built upon it a superstructure of wood, hay and stubble. Behold him, as the ordeal of the last day tries his work of what sort it is! Every false doctrine, every unscriptural element of government, every invention of will-worship perishes one after another in the fiery circle which narrows around him; his very vestments are swept from him by its consuming breath; and he stands naked and alone — himself saved, but the results of his life-long labor reduced to ashes in the final conflagration. Verily, it becomes the teachers of religion, as they would not be found at last to have spent their strength for naught, not only to lay aright the doctrinal foundation, but to attend to the sort of superstructure which they rear upon it! The standard of building is in their hands — the judgment which will be laid for a line, the righteousness which will be applied as a plummet, are given in the inspired word. "To the law, and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."

The only question is, Has Christ revealed the worship of His house? Has he included it among the things which He has commanded, and which He has enjoined the Church to observe? If He has, nothing is left her but to obey His voice.

The public worship of the church, in a wide sense, includes the reading of the Scriptures, preaching, prayer, the singing of praise, the administration of the sacraments, contribution of our substance to the service of God, and the pronouncement of the benediction. In a stricter sense, its elements are prayer and singing. It will not be disputed that these modes of worship are revealed by Christ in His Word. If so, the church has no discretionary power to introduce any others or to change in any respect those which Christ has warranted. The theory that whatsoever is not expressly forbidden in the Word the church may do, involves the monstrous

assumption, that in matters of positive institution uninspired wisdom is of co-ordinate authority with the revealed will of God. The power that adds to or abridges them, that changes or modifies them, must either be equal to the original appointing power, or be shown to be delegated from it. Neither of these positions rests upon a shadow of proof from the Scriptures. But whatever others may think on this subject, our doctrine is definitely settled. The Westminster Confession distinctly enounces the principle that whatsoever, in connection with church-worship, is not commanded, either expressly or implicitly, is forbidden. Its language is: "The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures." This is the doctrine of our own Constitution, our accepted exposition of the Written Word — that only what Christ has commanded can the church enforce or permit; that what He has not commanded is not allowable; that the only sphere in which the church possesses discretionary power is that of commanded things, within which she may act, beyond which she is not at liberty to go one inch.

But, in this sphere of commanded things, what is the extent of her discretionary power? This is a question which is to us, as a church, one of present, practical import. It is one of the points at which we are in especial danger of being caught off our guard — this is a gate through which the Trojan horse is sought to be introduced into our holy city. It is a real, living issue, What power has the church within the sacred, the divinely-scored circle of commanded things — of revealed duties? This being the question, the answer, for us, is most precisely given in our Confession of Faith. After stating the mighty principle of the limitation of power within the things prescribed in Scripture, it proceeds to say: "There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and the government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed." Since then, by her Constitution, the charter which defines her rights, limits her powers and prescribes her duties, the discretion of our church is astricted to "some circumstances concerning the worship of God common to human actions and societies," it is a question of the utmost consequence, What is the nature of these circumstances? Dr. Thornwell puts the case so clearly,

and yet so concisely, that we quote a portion of his words in answer to this very question: "Circumstances are those concomitants of an action without which it either cannot be done at all, or cannot be done with decency and decorum. Public worship, for example, requires public assemblies, and in public assemblies people must appear in some costume and assume some posture Public assemblies, moreover, cannot be held without fixing the time and place of meeting: these are circumstances which the church is at liberty to regulate We must distinguish between those circumstances which attend actions as actions — that is, without which the actions cannot be — and those circumstances which, though not essential, are added as appendages. These last do not fall within the jurisdiction of the church. She has no right to appoint them. They are circumstances in the sense that they do not belong to the substance of the act. They are not circumstances in the sense that they so surround it that they cannot be separated from it. A liturgy is a circumstance of this kind In public worship, indeed in all commanded external actions, there are two elements — a fixed and a variable. The fixed element, involving the essence of the thing, is beyond the discretion of the church. The variable, involving only the circumstances of the action, its separable accidents, may be changed, modified or altered, according to the exigencies of the case." Such is the doctrine of one who was a profound and philosophical thinker, a man deeply taught of the Spirit, and a master of the Presbyterian system, the doctrine of Calvin and Owen, of Cunningham and Breckinridge, the doctrine of the Reformed Church of France, of the Puritans of England, and of the Church of Scotland, the doctrine to which, by the grace of God, the practice of the Free Church of Scotland and of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, in an age of growing laxity, still continues to be conformed [Girardeau is writing in 1875).

There are three criteria by which the kind of circumstances attending worship which fall under the discretionary power of the church may be determined: first, they are not qualities or modes of the acts of worship; they are extraneous to them as a certain kind of actions; secondly, they are common to the acts of all societies, and, therefore, not peculiar to the acts of the church as a particular sort of society — they are not characteristic and distinctive of her acts and predicable of them alone; and thirdly, they are conditions necessary to the performance of the acts of worship — without them the acts of this society could not be done, as without them the acts of no society could be done.

Let us now bring a liturgy to the test of these criteria; and it is instanced because it is an appendage to one of the acts in which worship is, in the strictest sense, rendered to God — prayer. It cannot abide the first, because it qualifies and modifies the act of prayer itself — it is a kind of prayer, a mode in which it is offered. It cannot abide the second, because it is not common to human actions and societies — all societies, political, scientific, agricultural, mechanical and others surely do not, as such, use liturgies. It cannot abide the third, because a liturgy is not a condition necessary to the performance of the act of prayer. Its necessity could only be pleaded on one of two grounds: either that without it the act of prayer cannot be performed at all, and that is out of the question; or, that without it the act cannot be performed decently and in order, and to take that ground is to impeach the office of the Holy Ghost, who is specially promised to teach us how to pray and what things to pray for, to depreciate the capacities of the sanctified intelligence of man, and to pass a derogatory criticism upon some of the purest churches that have ever flourished, and some of the noblest saints who have ever edified the people of God by their ministrations.

The other strict and proper act of worship is the singing of praise. Let it be observed that it is not praise, but the singing of praise. The distinction is not captious — it is precisely made by the New Testament and our Standards. They both prescribe the act of singing, and they both recognize the element of praise as not peculiar to that act. The Confession of Faith says: prayer with thanksgiving is one special part of religious worship; and the Directory for Worship designates giving thanks as an element in the prayer before sermon in public services. Praise has, therefore, a generic character, and sustains a two-fold relation — to prayer and to singing. The specific element, then, in the part of worship we are considering is singing. Now it is pleaded that the church has discretionary power to employ instrumental music, as one of the circumstances allowed by our Standards. Let us submit it to the test of the criteria by which these circumstances are determined. First, they are not parts of the acts of worship by which they are modified; but this circumstance is a part of the act of singing praise by which it is performed. Secondly, these circumstances are common to the acts of human societies, not peculiar to, and distinctive of, those of the church. It is very certain that instrumental music is not such a circumstance. It will hardly be said that all societies play on instruments as well as the church. Thirdly, these circumstances are conditions necessary to the performance of the acts of worship, without which they either cannot be done at all, or not done decently and in order. That the singing of

praise cannot be performed at all without instrumental music will be affirmed by none. But it may be affirmed that it cannot without it be performed decently and in order. Let it be noticed that the question is not whether it may be performed in an indecent and disorderly manner. Granted; but so may instrumental music. The question is, whether it cannot be done decently and in order without instrumental accompaniment. The question can only be determined by reference of the practice to a permanent and universal standard of propriety and decorum. And to say that the simple singing of God's praise in His house is indecent and disorderly is to say, that for twelve centuries the church of Christ was guilty of this impropriety; for it is a matter of history that for that period not even the Church of Rome knew anything of instruments in her worship. To say that the simple singing of God's praise violates the standard of decency and order of this age is to censure the glorious Free Church of Scotland and the Irish Presbyterian Church for an indecent and disorderly conduct of this part of divine worship. The ground, therefore, that instrumental music in public worship is one of those circumstances required by the rule that all things be done decently and in order cannot be maintained without a spirit of arrogance and censoriousness which would itself violate the higher principle of Christian charity.

It is submitted, with all modesty, that this line of argument ought to be conclusive with Presbyterians, at least, against ranking instrumental music in public worship as one of the circumstances common to human actions and societies which fall under the discretion of the church. Consequently, to justify it, it must be proved to be one of those directly commanded things which the apostles taught the church to observe. To take that ground is to contradict the unbroken evidence of history from the apostolic age until the middle of the thirteenth century. The force of this consideration lies here: there having been a tendency in the church from the earliest age to depart from the simple institutions of the Gospel, it is utterly unaccountable that she should have become more simple in her worship after the apostles fell asleep than she was under their personal teaching. It is clear as day, the human heart being what it is, that if the apostolic churches had been accustomed to this mode of worship it never would have been eradicated. The natural tastes of men all forbid the supposition. The elimination of instrumental music from the worship of Christ's house by the best churches of the Reformation, by the English Puritans and the Church of Scotland, was the result of an effort to purify the church and to restore her to what they conceived to be the simplicity of apostolic

practice. In this matter, we have relapsed from their reformed position. But if the use of instrumental music in the New Testament Church be not either directly commanded in Scripture, or indirectly as one of the circumstances common to human actions and societies and lying within the sphere of commanded things, it only remains to consider it a clear, substantive addition to the divinely revealed rule of faith and duty in the Written Word; and then it is prohibited. The issue is: Either we must prove that it is one of the things expressly or implicitly commanded by Christ, or admit that it is forbidden. The latter alternative is the doctrine of our Standards; and, if so, the inference as to what our practice ought to be is too apparent to be pressed.

What has been said upon this last point has not been dictated by a spirit of captiousness or arrogance. A natural wish to conform to the usages of one's time, a desire for popular esteem in order to usefulness, a regard to what may be deemed the demands of courtesy and earthly propriety, a respectful deference to the opinions of others, and the indisposition to stand on what it is usual to characterize as a minor and indifferent question, though minor and indifferent it cannot be if it involve a grand, fundamental principle — all these considerations conspired to restrain the utterance. Only a solemn conviction of the duty of the church and of her danger in departing in any respect from the Word have urged it. The argument may have merely the significance of a protest. For its truth, appeal is humbly taken to our Constitution; for the purity of the motive that prompted it, to Him who knows the secrets of the heart. It has been spoken as unto wise men; let them judge what has been said.

[Conclusion]

Finally, In these remarks the ground has been assumed that the doctrine, the polity and the worship of the church are all divinely given in the Word, and that she has no right in any of these departments which is not a divine right. This is not to advocate bigotry and exclusiveness. We abjure High-churchism as much as we do No-churchism. It is perfectly clear that the more closely the church is conformed to the word, the more nearly would she approximate the spirit of its divine author. She would be no broader and no narrower than He. She would be strict only where He is strict, and breathe the same charity with Him. She would, in that case, be exactly adapted, like the Word itself, to show forth the glory of Christ. In consequence of such a conformity to the pattern shown in the Mount, she would indeed be pure and beautiful; but the eyes of men would not be attracted to her. She would stand a crystal

palace transmitting the glory of the Savior who reigns within her, transparently revealing His cross and His crown to all who seek Him for salvation and are willing to bow to His rule. Her language would emphatically be: "God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ!" High-churchism makes extravagant claims to discretionary power, depreciates the necessity of conformity to the Word, especially in government and worship, yet asserts the exclusive validity of its order and its sacraments, and unchurches all bodies of professed disciples of Jesus which subscribe not to its pretensions. To say that a church which grounds her every right in a warrant from the Scriptures, and repudiates the license of human wisdom and discretion of human authority; which admits to her communion all who are regenerated by the Spirit and justified by faith in Christ; which unchurches no body of men that preaches a true gospel and administers its ordinances in their essential purity — to say that such a church is chargeable with High-church exclusiveness is simply preposterous. It is to make white black. It is to say that the Scriptures are a digest of High-church canons, and that Christ and His apostles were the exponents of intolerance. It is a powerful presumption in favor of the genuineness of a church when her inherent and distinctive principles, carried out to their legitimate results, conduct her by a logical necessity to that broad, loving catholicity which pulsates in the Scriptures, as it beat in the heart of a dying Savior. It is not conformity to the Word, it is the want of it, which produces the temper of exclusiveness. We make the distinction between a true church more perfectly conformed, and a true church less perfectly conformed, to the supreme rule; as we make a distinction between the true Christian more completely, and a true Christian less completely, obedient to the same great standard.

Nor does it follow that because it is of the very last importance that a church adhere to the doctrine of salvation, it is, therefore, of little consequence whether she be careful to adjust her government and her worship to the standard of the Word. Difference in degree of importance between the several contents of the ultimate rule has no influence upon the duty to receive and obey whatever is revealed. Christ has spoken; His authority clothes every word with importance. And it should never be forgotten that the efficacious grace of the gospel ordinarily acts through an apparatus of divinely-appointed ordinances, and that to neglect them is to turn aside from the channels in which it is intended to flow — the types and molds in which it is designed to operate. There is as exquisite an adaptation of the organism of the church to the supernatural energies of grace as there is of the fabric of the external world to the

unseen forces of nature; or as there is of the structure of the human body to the vital power of the immaterial soul.

There is, moreover, such a divinely adjusted relation between the different departments of the church — between the doctrine and government and worship; there is so nice and delicate an inter-action among them, that one cannot be injuriously affected without involving the suffering of others. All history teaches this lesson. The contagion begun in one sphere is sure to spread by sympathy to the others, as the consumption of one organ of the body fatally implicates all the rest. A corpse anywhere in the church infests her whole atmosphere. A dead doctrine tends to paralyze a living polity and a living worship, and a dead worship infuses a poisoning virus into a living doctrine and a living polity.

Nor can we be indifferent to the fact illuminated by the experience of the church that false doctrine always tends to affiliate with a false polity and a false worship. In the struggles of the Church of Scotland, as Hetherington, her eloquent historian, graphically points out, Armenianism was almost always associated with Prelacy and a cumbrous ritual, and Calvinism with Presbytery and a simple worship. Introduce an unscriptural element into any department, and if unchecked it stamps, in the course of time, its depraving genius upon all the rest. Let us see to it that we guard the towers of government and worship on our outer walls, assured that if one of them be carried, the path is opened up before an irruptive and triumphant foe to the citadel of doctrine and the seat of life.

We are apt to have our eye diverted from the importance of these views by the absorbing interests of our missionary enterprises and the intense activities they evoke. The great command, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” is summoning the church as with the trump of an angel and the shout of the Lord to the evangelization of the race. Evangelism is the pervading spirit of the age, aggressiveness is dominant policy, and onward to the ends of the earth! its thrilling and inspiring battle-cry. This is the honor and glory of our times — it throws us back across the desert to mediæval indifference into sympathy with the sublime genius of the apostolic age. The zeal of Paul is reproduced and incarnated in the burning heralds of the Cross. But the church is not only the divinely-commissioned publisher, she is also the divinely-commanded conservator, of the truth. Christianity, in her development beyond the circumscribed limits of Judaism, did not throw off, she took up and absorbed, the conservatism of the old dispensation, while she

girded her loins under the new for its distinctive and glorious office of universal evangelization. Conservatism and aggression are twin duties, complimentary to each other. It is just as important to maintain the truth as it is to propagate it. The danger is that the church will neglect the former duty in discharging the latter — that she will be more solicitous to preach the gospel in some form to the world than to guard the particular type of it which she impresses on the forming and infantile churches of converted heathen men. As surely as the mother imparts her features and habits to the daughter, so surely will the parent churches at home stamp their cast of doctrine, polity and worship upon their children on heathen soil. In her onward march the church cannot afford to neglect her base-line. As we value the vital interests or our own organizations as well as of those established abroad, we must see to it, with sedulous [persevering] and unremitting vigilance, that we keep ourselves conformed in all things to the will of Christ as revealed in the sacred word.

We are not without peril. The law of degeneracy, the baleful results of which we are only relieved by sudden and wonderful interpositions of reviving grace at critical epochs in the church's history, is written upon all the past. Shall we fondly dream that we shall be free from its scope? Look abroad upon the field of the church and the world with the patient eye of a careful induction, scrutinize contemporaneous facts, collect the signs of the times, and do we not reach the alarming generalization that there is in the best churches of Protestantism a growing latitudinarianism which spurns the restraints of a complete and ultimate rule of faith and duty? We are now more than three hundred years away from the glorious Reformation of the sixteenth century, almost as far from it as was Augustine from the apostolic age when the Pelagian heresy threatened to engulf the church. Shall the American church escape the universal law of corruptibility? And shall she prove the solitary exception in history to the law of conflict and suffering? She has not yet been called to seal her testimony to truth in the fire, although well-nigh every other Protestant church has received her baptism of blood. Depend upon it, there are defections and there are struggles before us. The prophetic warnings of Scripture, the confirming lessons of history and the corroborating indications of the period admonish us that in the latter days perilous times shall come, that men shall heap to themselves teachers, that evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived; that as the hopes of the church sunk into the grave of Jesus just before the ascending glories of the apostolic Reformation, and as they again descended into the sepulchre just before the

resurrection light of the Protestant Reformation, so they will again decline into the gloom and blood of a widespread apostasy and mighty tribulation, just before the Morning Star of the Millennial Reformation shall beam amidst the rifted clouds of an ecclesiastical night. Protestantism itself will need to be reformed.

What, then, is the course which our own beloved church is called by her Head to pursue? What, fathers and brethren, what? What, youthful students and thinkers, into whose hands, under God the destinies of this church — her type of faith, thought and action, of doctrine, polity and worship, are to be entrusted when the actors in her early organization shall have mouldered into dust? What, ye ruling elders, responsible and honored guardians of each little flock as it rests in its own particular fold? What is the great, paramount vocation of this church? While yet in the body of her mother she struggled, as conscious even then of a separate individuality, against the Esau of discretionary power, and the first breath of her independent historic existence was expended in protest against error and testimony for the truth. Conformity to the Word was the reason of her separate being; let conformity to the Word be the law of its development — conformity to the Word, close, implicit, undeviating in doctrine, government and worship. The opportunity furnished us is inexpressively grand. Freed from the conflict of antagonistic ideas, almost a unit ourselves, we have the molding and fashioning church in our hands. What will we do with her? Let us rise to the greatness of the occasion. Let us endeavor, by grace, to make this church as perfect a specimen of Scriptural truth, order and worship as the imperfection of the present state will permit. Let us take her by the hand and lead her to the Word alone. Let us pass the Reformers, let us pass the Fathers, uncovering our heads to them in token of our profound appreciation of their labors for truth, and heartily receiving from them all they speak in accordance with the Word; but let us pass on and pause not, until with our sacred charge we reach the Oracles of God, and with her bow at the Master's feet, and listen to the Master's voice. Let obedience to the word of Christ in all things be the law of her life; so that when the day of review shall come, and section after section of the universal church shall halt for judgment before the great Inspector Himself, although, no doubt, there will be much of unfaithfulness of life that will draw on His forgiveness, His eye may detect no departure from His Word in her principles, her order and her worship. He cannot discredit His own commands; and that church will receive His chief encomiums which has most closely conformed to His Word. Let us strive for that glory!•

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Clark's *Three Types of Religious Philosophy*

Reviewed by W. Gary Crampton

Sadly, many people, including many Christians, are not interested in the study of philosophy. I say “sadly” because the study of philosophy is important. It has to do with “the love of wisdom” (the word “philosophy” means “the love of wisdom”). The fact is that all persons are philosophers whether they know it or admit it or not. That is to say, all persons have a worldview, a way or means by which they view all of life. This is inescapable. The only question is whether a man’s philosophy is correct or not.

The apostle Paul speaks of the importance and significance of philosophy in Colossians 2:8. First, the apostle strongly warns his readers against falling prey to unbiblical philosophies, i.e., those which are “according to the traditions of men.” Implicit in this admonition is the recognition that one must study philosophy in order not to be led astray by such false worldviews. Second, Paul enjoins the church to study a philosophy “according to Christ.” The study of philosophy, then, is not an option for the Christian. It is a biblical mandate for every true believer to love and learn the wisdom of Christ.

Even within the church of Christ, however, there is much confusion as to what kind of philosophy is a biblical philosophy. Basically, there are three types of non-Christian philosophies (which even some Christians have adopted): rationalism, empiricism, and irrationalism. In his *Three Types of Religious Philosophy*,¹ which is an excellent introduction to religious philosophy, Gordon Clark adroitly demonstrates why the non-Christian worldviews are erroneous, and presents a genuine biblical philosophy which he calls “dogmatism.”

In Chapter I Clark introduces the subject matter. He defines the worldviews under discussion, leaving a more detailed analysis for subsequent chapters. Rationalism “is the theory that all knowledge, and therefore, all religious knowledge, can be deduced from

logic alone, i.e., logic apart from both revelation and sensory experience” (10). Empiricism, on the other hand, in its strictest and most consistent form, “bases all knowledge on sensation alone” (24). Finally, irrationalism is the philosophy which (at least implicitly) denies that knowledge is objective; knowledge, if it can be achieved at all, is subjective. The irrationalist repudiates logic, opting for “logical paradox.”

Then, writes the author, there is dogmatism. From a Christian perspective, “the term dogmatism designates that method of procedure which tries to systematize beliefs concerning God, science, immortality, etc., on the basis of information divinely revealed in the sacred writings” of the Word of God (8). The dogmatist denies that there is truth to be obtained outside of Scripture (this side of the final state). The Bible has a monopoly on truth. Hence, “dogmatism does not conflict with truth from other sources because there are no other sources” (9).

The dogmatist and the rationalist have one important thing in common: “their respect for and detailed use of logic” (15). The significant difference being that whereas in pure rationalism knowledge comes “from” reason alone, in dogmatism knowledge comes “through” reason as one deduces truth from the propositional statements of Scripture. In the words of Clark, the dogmatist “takes his premises from Scripture and deduces conclusions....Dogmatism applies logic to premises given in revelation” (16,17). The dogmatist’s position is admirably set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith (I:6): “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.”

By the end of Chapter I, one thing has become very apparent: “Philosophies must be evaluated on the ground of what they begin with. The starting point

¹ Gordon H. Clark, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy* (The Trinity Foundation, 1973, 1989). The chapter numbering and pagination used in this review are from Clark’s book.

determines all that follows” (25). The crux of the matter is that of epistemology (the theory of knowledge). The question to be asked is this: “how can we know anything?” The answer to this question controls all subject matter.

Chapter II is on Rationalism. Well known rationalists include Plato, Hegel, Anselm, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. The pure rationalist, it will be remembered, is one who believes that all knowledge can be deduced from logic alone; whereas Christian rationalists (biblical dogmatists), like Augustine, Calvin, and Clark, aver that all knowledge is to be logically deduced from Scripture. Even the existence of the God of Scripture can be deduced from logic, say Anselm and Descartes, in their Ontological Argument for the existence of God. This argument, reduced to the form of a syllogism, states that “God, by definition, is the being who possesses all perfections; existence is a perfection; therefore God exists” (35).

As Dr. Clark teaches in this book (and elsewhere²), however, there are problems endemic to pure rationalism. First, as rationalists admit, fallen man can and does err in his reasoning. Formal errors in logic are just one example. Second, there is the issue of a starting point. Where does one start in pure rationalism? The six “well known” rationalists listed above, for example, had different starting points.

Third, how can reasoning apart from revelation determine what kind of God controls the world? Is the world controlled by an omnipotent, good God, who has revealed to us that two plus two equals four, or an omnipotent demon, who has all along deceived us into believing that two plus two equals four when it really equals five? As Clark points out, the question, then, is not whether or not God exists (as with Anselm and Descartes). All things exist, because “the predicate existence can be attached to everything real or imaginary without exception: dreams exist, mirages exist, the square root of minus one exists” (44). But these statements tell us nothing about dreams, mirages, or the square root of minus one. Similarly, the Ontological Argument for God’s existence tells us nothing about God. The question that needs to be asked about God is not whether or not he exists, but what is he? This is why the Shorter Catechism (Q 4), when it begins its study of God, does not ask if God exists, but asks “What is God?” and then goes on to define the God of Scripture.

And finally, in pure rationalism, it is difficult to avoid solipsism, which is the incorporation or merging of the world into the “ego” or “self,” wherein the world becomes nothing more than the projection of one’s own consciousness. Without a divine universal mind in which all persons and objects participate, it is not possible for the individual thinker to escape his own mind.

In Chapter III, Dr. Clark examines empiricism,³ which maintains that all knowledge originates in the senses. Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and David Hume are three of the main thinkers in this system of epistemology. Empiricism elevates the scientific method of investigation in order to attain knowledge. It is based on observation: the idea being that if some phenomenon can be observed it must be certain. Repetitive observation, of course, increases certainty.

The logic used in empiricism is called “inductive.” One scientifically collects information and draws inferences and conclusions. This knowledge is *aposteriori*, i.e., it comes after and through experience. One must be able to smell, taste, feel, hear, or see something in order to know it. Once something is experienced, then the mind, which is a *tabula rasa* (“blank tablet”) prior to experience, can somehow combine, transpose, categorize, and formulate the sensory information into knowledge.

There are numerous problems with empiricism. First, all inductive arguments are logical fallacies. It is not possible to collect enough information on any subject to have certainty. Just because this system depends on the collection of details for its conclusions, it can never be sure that some new bit of information will not completely change its previous conclusions. Thus, empiricism can never deal with certainty, only probability. For example, one may examine 999 crows and find them all to be black. But what happens when crow number 1000 turns out to be an albino? The past knowledge about crows would have to be revised. That which the scientists considered certain would be rendered uncertain.

Second, the senses can and frequently do deceive us. Anyone who has ever shoved a “straight” stick into a body of water and noticed that it appears to “bend” can attest to this. Third, writes Clark, “no object is ever experienced in isolation; but its surroundings change its appearances; therefore we can never know what the object itself is like” (75). Fourth, one can never have the

² See Gordon H. Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (The Trinity Foundation, 1986), 50-68.

³ See also Gordon H. Clark, “How Does Man Know God?” *The Trinity Review* (July/August, 1989), and Clark’s *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, 54-58.

same experience twice. The ancient philosopher Heraclitus pointed this out centuries ago when he stated that no one ever stands in the same river twice. Finite things continue to change, even as the water in the river continues to flow. In such a system, verification is not possible. In fact, the basic axiom of empiricism, namely that truth can only be attained by means of verification or falsification by scientific investigation, itself cannot be verified. Thus, empiricism is founded on a fallacious starting point.

Fifth, empiricism, at best, is only able to tell us what is; it can never tell us what ought to be. That is, “oughtness” can never be derived from “is-ness.” Sensation might inform us that doors have two sides, but it cannot teach us that all doors must have two sides. No experience can disprove the idea that some doors might have one side. The universal proposition defining “door” can never be substantiated by sensory perception. Empiricism is restricted to “particular” things.

Sixth, empiricism cannot tell us how the senses alone give us conceptions. If the “knower” is not already equipped with conceptual elements or ideas (i.e., innate knowledge), how can he ever conceptualize the object sensed? Whereas rationalism, with its universal ideas, gives us an explanation for categories and similarities, empiricism does not. And without these rational discourse would not be possible (17-20).

Seventh, solipsism is inescapable in an empiricist epistemology. My sensations are just that: my sensations. No one else can experience them. But this being the case, how can I know that there is anything more than my experiences?

Finally, how do the senses give us ideas such as “parallel,” “equal,” or “justification?” They do not! These ideas can never be found in any experience. In reality, for instance, no two things that we experience are perfectly equal. So, says the author, as David Hume asserted over two centuries ago, if one takes his epistemological stand upon sensation, he can never know anything (64-70).

In Chapter III we come to Clark’s evaluation of irrationalism.⁴ Irrationalism, fostered by such men as Soren Kierkegaard, Immanuel Kant, and neo-orthodox theologians, is a form of skepticism. It is anti-rational and anti-intellectual. Actual truth, say the skeptics, can never be attained; rational attempts to explain the world, especially the noumenal realm (Kant), leave us in despair.

Reality cannot be communicated academically, it must be grasped “personally and passionately” (Kierkegaard); truth must be sought in inward experiences, i.e., subjectively.

Even though one may never know if there is a god who gives purpose and significance to life, say the irrationalists, he must nevertheless take a “leap of faith” (Kierkegaard). He must live life as if there is a god, a higher being, a meaningful universe, etc., because not to do so would be worse (Kant).

Irrationalism manifests itself in theological circles in the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. For Barth and Brunner, truth is purely subjective. There is a “repudiation of logic” (106). Logic is anathematized; “faith” must curb “logic.” Further, God’s logic is said to be different than “mere human logic.” Neo-orthodoxy elevates the paradoxical and virtually demands a crucifixion of the intellect. In this “theology of paradox,” as Brunner claims, “God can speak his Word to man even in false propositions” (111). God can even teach us through contradictory statements.

Nowhere, of course, does the Bible call upon us to take a leap of faith. Nowhere does the Scripture tell us that faith must curb logic. Nowhere does the Word of God elevate the paradoxical. And nowhere does God tell us that truth is subjective. Rather, Scripture tells us that God is truth itself (Psalm 31:5; John 14:6; 1 John 5:6). Truth is objective and logical, and it is found in and restricted to the sixty-six books of the Bible. Says Jesus, who is the Logic of God incarnate (John 1:1; the English word “logic” comes from the Greek *logos*): “Your Word is truth” (John 17:17).

The problem here is that when one divorces logic from epistemology, he is left with skepticism. And skepticism is self-contradictory, for it asserts with certainty that nothing can be known for certain. For example, if the law of contradiction (A is not non-A) is invalid, then all statements are invalid. The words of God and Satan mean the same thing. Rational discourse is impossible. Neither God nor the world can be known, leaving us in a state of uncertainty. To quote Clark: “Logic is fixed, universal, necessary, and irreplaceable. Irrationality contradicts the biblical teaching from beginning to end....God is a rational being, the architecture of whose mind is logic.”⁵

Finally, in Chapter V we come to “Dogmatism.” Herein we have a Christian epistemology, a Christian

⁴ See also Clark’s “How Does Man Know God?” *The Trinity Review* (July/August, 1989), and *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, 69-87.

⁵ Gordon H. Clark, “God and Logic,” *The Trinity Review* (November/December, 1980), 4.

philosophy, a Christian worldview set before us. First, Dr. Clark would have us know that “the God of dogmatism is a sovereign Deity who determines all his creatures and all their actions” (116). But this is not the starting point.

Every epistemological system must have its starting point, which is axiomatic, i.e., it cannot be proved; it is indemonstrable (if it were provable or demonstrable, then it would not be a starting point). In the author’s own words: “There must be first principles. A system cannot start unless it starts. The start is first....Any system ends its regress in its first principle” (120,135). And the first principle or starting point or axiom in Christian dogmatism is the Word of God, biblical revelation. The Bible has a monopoly on truth. We cannot even know who God is without biblical revelation. Scripture defines God for us.

The Bible claims to be the Word of God (confirm John 10:35; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20,21), and it should be believed because there is no higher source than God’s own self-disclosure. As the author of Hebrews writes: “because [God] could swear by no one greater, he swore by himself” (6:13). God cannot be deduced from any superior principle. As stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith (I:4): “The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God.”

And as we have seen above, in the words of the Confession (I:6): “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” And as Paul teaches in 2 Timothy 3:16,17: the infallible, inerrant Word of God (and nothing else) thoroughly equips [us] for every good work. In the Scripture we have the solutions to all of our problems, the answer to all of our questions, regarding all aspects of life. We need not, we must not, seek truth from any other source. There is no other source of truth.

In conclusion, this review turns to the “Foreword” of *Three Types of Religious Philosophy*. In it John Robbins, as an example of how we should evaluate “truth claims,” assesses the avowal made by the Roman Catholic Church (and some allegedly Protestant thinkers) regarding the shroud of Turin. Deftly, Robbins shows that neither the empiricist nor the rationalist nor the irrationalist is able to answer the assertion that the shroud is actually that of

the resurrected Christ. The dogmatist, however, depending solely on the Word of God as his source of truth, is able to point out the absurdity of Rome’s claim. Indeed, the religious philosophies of empiricism, rationalism, and irrationalism are all nothing more than a “tissue of logical fallacies” (xiii). They can never give us truth. The Bible and the Bible alone is the Word of God; it has a monopoly on truth. •

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