

The Creeds And Doctrinal Advance

Lecture by J. Gresham Machen from the book *God Transcendent*

Editors note: In last month's issue of this newsletter we discussed a recently released document that promotes unity between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. We evaluated that document, called Evangelicals and Catholics Together, as a shameful compromise of the Christian faith and a repudiation of the great truths of the Protestant Reformation.

Fifty years ago the eminent Presbyterian theologian, J. Gresham Machen, was fighting the attitude of apostasy and compromise that was even then infiltrating the Presbyterian Churches. The following lecture by Professor Machen, originally presented as a radio address, warns against the dangers inherent in theological compromise. Here he outlines the foundations for real doctrinal advancement, and by implication, for genuine ecumenicity in the true church of Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday afternoon, in the first of our talks of this winter, I spoke to you in a summary sort of way about the progress of Christian doctrine in the church. I showed how the church advanced from the very meagre statement which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, on through the great early ecumenical creeds, setting forth the doctrines of the Trinity and the Person of Christ, and through Augustine, with his presentation of the doctrine of sin and divine grace, to the Reformation and to Calvin. I showed how that type of doctrine which follows on the path in which Calvin moved is called the Reformed faith.

The Reformed Faith has found expression in a number of great creeds which all exhibit the same general type. One of these creeds is the Heidelberg Catechism. That is the official doctrinal standard of certain American churches whose members came originally from the continent of Europe. These churches are called 'Reformed' churches. Another of the great creeds setting for the Reformed Faith is the one that consists of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. They are official doctrinal standards of certain American churches whose members originally came chiefly from Scotland and Ireland. These are called 'Presbyterian' churches. It is these doctrinal standards to which I have frequently referred in these little talks that I have been giving on Sunday afternoons during the past two winters.

Perhaps one question was in the minds of some of you as I reviewed the progress of Christian doctrine last Sunday afternoon. Why should the progress be thought to have been brought to a close in the seventeenth century, when the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms were produced? Why should there not be still further doctrinal advance? If the church advanced in doctrine up to the time of the Westminster Standards, why should it now not proceed still further on its onward march?

Well, there is no essential reason why it should not do so. However before it attempts to do so, it is very important for it to understand precisely what Christian doctrine is. It should understand very clearly that Christian doctrine is just a setting forth of what the Bible teaches. At the foundation of Christian doctrine is the acceptance of the full truthfulness of the Bible as the Word of God.

That is often forgotten by those who today undertake to write confessional statements. Let us give expression to our Christian experience, they say, in the forms better suited to the times in which we are living than are the older creeds of the church. So they sit down and concoct various forms of words, which they represent as being on a plane with the great creed of Christendom.

When they do that, they are simply forgetting what the creeds of Christendom are. The creeds of Christendom are not expressions of Christian experience. They are summary statements of what God has told us in His Word. Far from the subject matter of the creeds being derived from Christian experience, it is Christian experience which is based upon the truth contained in the creeds; and the truth contained in the creeds is derived from the Bible, which is the Word of God. Groups of people that undertake to write a

creed without believing in the full truthfulness of the Bible, and without taking the subject matter of their creed from the inspired Word of God, are not at all taking an additional step on the pathway on which the great Christian creeds moved; rather, they are moving in an exactly opposite direction. What they are doing has nothing whatever to do with that grand progress of Christian doctrine of which I spoke last Sunday. Far from continuing the advance of Christian doctrine they are starting something entirely different, and that something different, we may add, is doomed to failure from the start.

The first prerequisite, then, for any advance in the Christian doctrine is that those who would engage in it should believe in the full truthfulness of the Bible and should endeavour to make their doctrine simply a presentation of what the Bible teaches.

There are other principles also that must be observed if there is to be real doctrinal advance. For one thing all real doctrinal advance proceeds in the direction of greater precision and fulness of doctrinal statement. Just run over in your minds again the history of the great creeds of the church. How meagre was the so-called Apostles' Creed, first formulated in the second century! How far more precise and full were the creeds of the great early councils, beginning with the Nicene creed in A.D. 325! How much more precise and how vastly richer still were the Reformation creeds and especially our Westminster Confession of Faith!

This increasing precision and this increasing richness of doctrinal statement were arrived at particularly by way of refutation of errors as they successively arose. At first the church's convictions about some points of doctrine were implicit rather than explicit. They were not carefully defined. They were assumed rather than expressly stated. Then some new teaching arose. The church reflected on the matter, comparing the new teaching with the Bible. It found the new teaching to be contrary to the Bible. As over against the new teaching, it set forth precisely what the true Biblical teaching on the point is. So a great doctrine was clearly stated in some great Christian creed.

That method of doctrinal advance is, of course, in accord with the fundamental laws of the mind. You cannot set forth clearly what a thing is without placing it in contrast with what it is not. All definition proceeds by way of exclusion. How utterly shallow, then, is the notion that the church ought to make its teaching positive and not negative -- the notion that controversy should be avoided and truth should be maintained without attack upon error! The simple fact is that truth cannot possibly be maintained in any such way. Truth can be maintained only when it is sharply differentiated from error. It is no wonder, then, that the great creeds of the church, as also the great revivals of religion in the church, were born in theological controversy. The increasing richness and the increasing precision of Christian doctrine were brought about very largely by the necessity of excluding one alien element after another from the teaching of the church.

In recent years the church has often entered upon an exactly opposite course of procedure. It has constructed what purport to be doctrinal statements, but these supposed doctrinal statements are constructed for a purpose which is just the opposite of the purpose that governed the formation of the great historic creeds.

The historic creeds were exclusive of error; they were intended to exclude error; they were intended to set forth the Biblical teaching in sharp contrast with what was opposed to the Biblical teaching, in order that the purity of the church might be preserved. These modern statements, on the contrary, are inclusive of error. They are designed to make room in the church for just as many people and for just as many types of thought as possible.

There are entirely too many denominations in this country, says the modern ecclesiastical efficiency expert. Obviously, many of them must be merged. But the trouble is, they have different creeds. Here is one church, for example, that has a clearly Calvinistic creed; here is another whose creed is just as clearly Arminian, let us say, and anti-Calvinistic. How in the world are we going to get the two together? Why, obviously, says the ecclesiastical efficiency expert, the thing to do is to tone down their Calvinistic creed; just smooth off its sharp angles, until Arminians will be able to accept it. Or else we can do

something better still. We can write an entirely new creed that will contain only what Arminianism and Calvinism have in common, so that it can serve as the basis for some proposed new 'United Church'.

Such are the methods of modern church-unionism. Those methods are carried even to much greater lengths today than in the hypothetical example that I have just mentioned. Calvinism and Arminianism, which I have mentioned in this example, though they differ very widely, are both of them types of evangelical Christian belief. But many of these modern statements are so worded as to gain the assent not only of men who hold different varieties of Christian belief, like Calvinism and Arminianism, but also of men who hold to no really Christian belief at all.

Take some of the great world-conferences on missions, for example. At those conferences are represented men who believe in the virgin birth of Christ, His substitutionary atonement, His bodily resurrection and other essential elements of the historic Christian faith, and also there are represented men who oppose these things or belittle them as entirely unimportant. There are many speeches -- some of them from men generally thought to be evangelical Christians, some of them from distinguished Modernists. After days of such speech-making, a common statement of belief is presented and is unanimously adopted.

What is the common statement like? Well, its outstanding characteristic is apt to be just what would be expected from the circumstances under which it was adopted. Its outstanding characteristic is apt to be a complete absence of character -- a complete and unrelieved vagueness. Really, when I read some of these statements, I am amazed at the amount of printer's ink which it is possible to use up without saying anything at all. Words and phrases are indeed used which formerly had a meaning, and which ought to have a meaning now; but these words have been explained away so long that in themselves they now afford no evidence whatever as to what the person who uses them really believes.

When such a vague statement is issued there are always found people who rejoice. Was it not great cause for rejoicing, they say, that our differences were all ironed out? We had been afraid, they say, lest some one would have objected to an evangelical statement like the statement of that missionary council; but our fears were groundless, and even those at the council who were accounted most radical consented to the statement like all the rest. Was not that perfectly splendid?

No, I say when people talk to me in that fashion, I do not think it was splendid at all. I think it was very sad. I should not have thought it to be splendid even if the statement of the council had been really evangelical instead of only apparently so. Is it splendid when men who are plainly out of accord with an evangelical statement acquiesce in the issuance of it and then go on exactly as before in their opposition to the things that the statement contains? I am bound to think that that is the reverse of splendid. But, as a matter of fact, the statement in most cases is not really evangelical at all, but utterly vague. It is so worded as to offend no one. At least, it is so worded as to offend no one except those old-fashioned souls who are hungry for the bread of life and are not satisfied with a type of Christian doctrine that is afraid of its own shadow. The statement is usually so worded that the Modernists can interpret its traditional phrases in their own fashion; and, on the other hand, it is so worded that persons who are evangelical, or think they are evangelical, can bring it back to their constituency as a great diplomatic triumph of orthodoxy. Its great object is to avoid offence. The consequence is that it is just about as far removed as possible from the gospel of Christ. For the gospel of Christ is always offensive in the extreme.

When we pass from these modern statements to the great creeds, what a difference we discover! Instead of wordiness we find conciseness; instead of an unwillingness to offend, clear delimitation of truth from error; instead of obscurity, clearness; instead of vagueness, the utmost definiteness and precision.

All these differences are rooted in a fundamental difference of purpose. These modern statements are intended to show how little of truth we can get along with and still be Christians, whereas the great creeds of the church are intended to show how much of truth God has revealed to us in His Word. Let us sink our differences, say the authors of these modern statements, and get back to a few bare essentials; let us open our Bible, say the authors of the great Christian creeds, and seek to unfold the full richness of truth that the Bible contains. Let us be careful, say the authors of these modern statements, not to discourage

any of the various tendencies of thought that find a lodgement in the church; let us give all diligence, say the authors of the great Christian creeds, to exclude deadly error from the official teaching of the church, in order that thus the church may be a faithful steward of the mysteries of God.

The differences of purpose is a fundamental difference indeed. But I am inclined to think that there is another difference that is more fundamental still. The most important difference of all is that the authors of these modern statements do not really believe firmly in the existence of truth at all. Since doctrine, they say, is merely the expression of Christian experience, doctrines change and yet the fundamental experience remains the same. One generation expresses its Christian experience in one doctrine, and then another generation may express the same Christian experience in an exactly opposite doctrine. So the Modernism of today becomes the orthodoxy of tomorrow, which in turn gives place to a new Modernism, and so on in an infinite series. No doctrine, according to that theory, can remain valid forever; doctrine must change as the forms of thought change from age to age.

When you ask a person of this way of thinking whether he accepts the great historic creeds of the church, he says to you: 'Oh yes, certainly I do. I accept them as expressions of the faith of the church. the Apostles' Creed expressed admirably the faith of men of the seventeenth century. But as for making these creeds the expression of my faith, of course I cannot possibly do that. I must express my faith in the terms that are suited to the people of the twentieth century. So I must construct a new and entirely different statement to be the creed of modern men.'

'Well, then,' I ask such a man, 'do you think your statement is more true than those historic creeds?'

'Not at all,' says he, if he really works out the logical conclusion of his conception of creeds; 'those creeds were true expressions of Christian experience, mine also is a true expression of essentially the same experience in the forms of thought that are suited to the present age, but my statement is not a bit more true than those ancient creeds; it, not a bit more than they, can lay claim to permanency; it is true in the present age, but that does not mean at all that it will remain true in the generations to come.'

What shall we say about this skeptical notion of what truth is -- this skeptical notion with regard to the nature of Christian doctrine? Well, we can say at least this about it: that it is entirely different from the notion that was cherished by those who gave us the great creeds of the church. Those who gave us the great creeds of the church, unlike the authors of these modern statements, believed that the creeds that they produced were true -- true in the plain man's sense of the word 'truth'. They believed that the truth they contained would remain true forever.

It is time now to get back to the question with which this talk began. Is it or is it not possible that there should be still further advance in Christian doctrine?

Yes, we answer, but only provided the necessary conditions for any real doctrinal advance be observed.

If there is to be any doctrinal advance, we must believe that doctrine is the setting forth of what is true, not a mere expression of religious experience in symbolic form; we must believe, in the second place, that doctrine is the setting forth of that particular truth that is contained in the Bible, which we must hold to be truly God's Word and altogether free from the errors found in other books; we must endeavour, in the third place, not to make doctrine as meagre and vague as possible in order that it shall make room for error, but as full and precise as possible in order that it shall exclude error and set forth the wonderful richness of what God has revealed. Ignore these conditions, and you have doctrinal retrogression or decadence; only if you observe them can you possibly have doctrinal advance.

Such doctrinal advance is certainly conceivable. It is perfectly conceivable that the church should examine the particular errors of the present day and should set forth over against them, even more clearly than is done in the existing creeds, the truth that is contained in God's Word. But I am bound to say that I think such doctrinal advance to be just now extremely unlikely. We are living at a time of widespread intellectual as well as moral decadence, and the visible church has unfortunately not kept free from this decadence. Christian education has been sadly neglected; learning has been despised; and real

meditation has become almost a lost art. For these reasons, and other still more important reasons, I think it is clear that ours is not a creed-making age. Intellectual and moral indolence like ours do not constitute the soil out of which great Christian creeds may be expected to grow.

But even if ours were a creed-making age, I doubt very much that the doctrinal advance which it or any future age might produce would be comparable to the advance which found expression in the great historic creeds. I think it may well turn out that Christian doctrine in its great outlines, as set forth, for example, in the Westminster Confession of Faith, is now essentially complete. There may be improvements in statements here and there, in the interests of greater precision, but hardly any such great advance as that which was made, for example, at the time of Augustine or at the Reformation. All the great central parts of the Biblical system of doctrine have already been studied by the church and set forth in great creeds.

We need not be too much surprised to discover that that is the case. The subject matter of Christian doctrine, it must be remembered, is fixed. It is found in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, to which nothing can be added.

Let no one say that the recognition of that fact brings with it a static condition of the human mind or is inimical to progress. On the contrary, it removes the shackles from the human mind and opens up untold avenues of progress.

The truth is, there can be no real progress unless there is something that is fixed. Archimedes said, 'Give me a place to stand, and I will move the world.' Well, Christian doctrine provides that place to stand. Unless there be such a place to stand, all progress is an illusion. The very idea of progress implies something fixed. There is no progress in a kaleidoscope. That is the trouble with the boasted progress of our modern age. The Bible at the start was given up. Nothing was to be regarded as fixed. All truth was regarded as relative. What has been the result? I will tell you. An unparalleled decadence -- liberty prostrate, slavery stalking almost unchecked through the earth, the achievements of centuries crumbling in the dust, sweetness and decency despised, all meaning regarded as having been taken away from human life. What is the remedy? I will tell you that too. A return to God's Word! We had science for the sake of science, and got the World War; we had art for art's sake, and got ugliness gone mad; we had man for the sake of man and got a world of robots -- men made into machines. Is it not time for us to come to ourselves, like the prodigal in a far country? Is it not time for us to seek real progress by a return to the living God?
