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OLD LANDMARKS.

Some whose attention is drawn to the clearer light now shining on the word of God, fear as they say, to leave old landmarks. This is a false veneration, bred of fear, and it requires only a moments reflection to show this.

We asked such an objector, recently, how much he meant by old. Did he mean creeds formulated fifty years ago? Would he go further back to the Wesleyan movement? Even that is but recent. Perhaps he had better go further back to the "Presbyterian" movement, or to the "Lutheran" or "Episcopalian," to find old landmarks. Still there is the same difficulty. All of these are but comparatively recent landmarks, and if a really old creed is wanted, the Roman Catholic certainly should have the preference on the score of age.

He saw, finally, his mistake and acknowledged [R539 : page 4] that he had been looking at matters from a false standpoint, and that the only OLD LANDMARKS worthy of confidence, are the inspired teachings of our Lord and the Apostles – the very ones to which we always appeal as the only True Standards of the Church whose names are written in heaven.

In this connection we take occasion to make some extracts from a recent number of "The Scotsman" (published in Edinburgh, Scotland,) in which it reviews a lecture by Dr. A. F. Mitchell, Prof. of Ecclesiastical History. It serves well to show how the thinkers of even old, slow Scotland are awakening to the absurdity of some of the doctrines which have separated the children of God into sects and denominations, and have largely succeeded in substituting the creeds and traditions of men for the Word of God. The extracts are as follows:

"THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY; ITS HISTORY AND STANDARDS: BEING THE BAIRD LECTURES FOR 1882.

Readers will find in Dr. Mitchell's lectures an intelligent and exceedingly well informed account of the origin, purpose, history and results of the famous Westminster Assembly, by one who has made a special study of the subject.

The intrinsic importance of the Westminster Confession, and its position as a test for our University Theological Chairs, cause us just now to turn with more interest and curiosity to its origin and authorship. In June, 1643, an ordinance was issued by Parliament calling that Assembly which met to settle a pure faith for England and framed those Standards which were adopted in Scotland. The principle on which representative divines were chosen was, that two should be elected from each English county, each University, and the Channel Islands, one for each county in Wales, and four for the city of London; while Scottish Commissioners were only invited to be present. In all, about 160 divines and laymen were appointed, each member who attended receiving four shillings a day for expenses. Although in the list of those called we find a few names of reputation for learning and ability, it is impossible to say that they represented the best scholarship and most cultured views of the age. We miss in the roll several men, famous still for ripe learning, high theological attainments and grasp of intellect, who would have been fittest to join in this memorable Synod, though they would have opposed many of its decisions; while in the number are a host of estimable but utterly obscure men, whose support gives no weight and adds no value to one dogmatic conclusion of the meeting.

It is evident that the orthodox see nothing absurd, nothing humorous in the opinions of these men being binding on after generations of clergy and all future theological Professors in our universities, centuries after these respectable gentlemen themselves,

having quitted their fleshy tabernacles, have peradventure discovered, to their surprise, in another and better world, that they have been quite mistaken, and the General Assembly of the firstborn does not hold or enforce any Calvinistic creeds on its elect members. Even when they were deliberating on most weighty articles, the attendance was so small that the three committees were reduced to a quorum of six each; and we find in full Assembly only forty out of a hundred and fifty voting on a dogma, which has henceforth been imposed on the minds and consciences of millions of Presbyterians. Yet these worthy members confidently discover the hidden decrees of God and decide the fate of men, of angels, of devils and of infants: they interpret the most debatable parts of Scripture, and the most perplexing parts of Pauline dialects and simile; they formulate the most mysterious purposes of Providence.

It is marvelous to think that these decisions by men whose opinions on the simplest points of politics, agriculture and physics, we would not listen to, should be binding on the nineteenth century, though the whole tide of thought has left them dry behind. Criticism has shown that it supports conclusions on corrupt texts, and on misinterpreted passages. Science has proved that it makes assertions which are profoundly erroneous. Advancing civilizations and higher cultivation have shown that its views of the purpose of God can be contrary to the true humanity on which we base our elementary ideas of the nature of the Deity. If the Assembly, whose views were discarded by the English Church a few years after, had been held a hundred years earlier, it would have been Roman Catholic; if it had been held fifty years later it would have been Arminian; what, then, gives perpetual authority in Scotland to this Calvinistic parenthesis in ecclesiastical history and doctrine? It is difficult to see why the theological views of the seventeenth century should be taught in our university chairs any more than the scientific opinions of that age.

Suppose it had been laid down that every Professor of Medicine and Surgery [R540 : page 4] in future should conform to the standard of an association of doctors of 1643, we should find them now teaching the most ghastly methods of therapeutics, insisting on drugs which ruin the carnal constitution, and practicing phlebotomy, which drains the human being of his blood, increasing insanity by the means taken to cure it, and denouncing the circulation of the blood as a flagrant heresy. If, in our Chairs of science, the opinions of the Royal Society, founded in 1660, were still binding we should find in natural philosophy, in geology, in chemistry, opinions taught, as in Roman Catholic institutions, as purest science and undoubted facts, which research has exploded and sent long ago into the limbo of extinct notions and curiosities of by-gone credulity and ignorance. Why, then, should the notions, on far more difficult, obsolete points, by this Assembly, be held as sacred and imperative, and entitled to hold the minds of posterity under the fatal law of intellectual mortmain?

Still, must each Professor teach, under the yoke of their "dead hand," the inspiriting doctrine of total depravity, which holds that man is so corrupt that he can do no good thing, and yet that he will be damned if he does not do it; that he deserves eternal torments for sin; that millions are doomed for not accepting a gospel which they never heard; that it is the duty of the civil power to punish and extirpate heresy; that the world was made in six days, although the geological Professor in the same college will tell his students that the world was millions of years without a human being. That it is the "elect infants" only who are saved; that "God as a righteous judge doth blind and harden" the wicked. Such doctrines are denied by the vast majority of civilized people, and discarded by the highest, clearest minds and hearts in Christendom; yet still Professors of Theology are bound by these standards, are forced to shut their eyes and mouths to all that speculation, learning, science have taught for centuries, and are endowed by the State to teach the opinions of a

few estimable but erroneous gentlemen, who, after much prayer and contention, agreed upon them more than two hundred years ago.

Dr. Mitchell, whose views are interesting only as specimens of other admirers of the Confession of Faith, is not unconscious of some difficulties in maintaining some dogmas which are contrary to fact, science and humanity; and he has his "answers to objections," which he gives with an air of profound satisfaction and with complete success. The Confession says the creation of the world took place in six days, "which now almost all orthodox divines grant it did not." We therefore naturally conclude that these "orthodox divines," as regards the Confession, are heretics. Not at all, says Dr. Mitchell, who is in the same case; these words, he argues, are almost identical with those in Scripture, and therefore must be interpreted in the same non-literal, non-natural sense, as divines conveniently, but uncritically, put on those in Genesis. Now, can the lecturer deny that the Westminster Assembly meant them as six literal twenty-four hour days? Can the lecturer deny that these words are given as the statement of an historical fact, and are not a quotation which may be accepted as metaphorical or poetic, if we please? It is nothing to the point to show that some writers – Dean Colet or Philo – had previously regarded the "days" in a figurative sense; and it is ridiculous to say that the Assembly showed their intention not to exclude such a fanciful interpretation because they did not write "six natural or literal days."

If we are allowed to treat the standards when we choose as metaphorical, on the ground that the Scripture passages they paraphrase are figurative, we shall be led into a delightful chaos, and have a most comprehensive Church. The phrase, "Son of God" is figurative; "redemption" is a Pauline metaphor from Greek law; "adoption" a metaphor from Roman law; "everlasting" and "eternal" punishment have been interpreted in various ways in Scripture; may

we, therefore, explain them for ourselves with corresponding variety in the Confession? and if not, on Dr. Mitchell's theory, why not? What is allowed to the Calvinist may be allowed to the Universalist and the Unitarian.

But, in fact, the whole notion is absurd. The Standard is a formal, prosaic, legal document, to be interpreted by what it says. The lecturer, further, in argumentive despair maintains that when it is said, "elect infants dying in infancy are saved," it is not to be inferred from these words that there are any who are not elect! If so, we would have fancied these divines, so shrewd as not to say "literal days," would have been equally shrewd to omit "elect," in order to prevent a misconception, seeing that the opinion was so prevalent that there were infants non-elect, and therefore lost. Besides, this notion that all dying infants were humanely elected to life because they should die before they have power and time to sin, is contradictory of the article in the Confession, which says that when God elects to salvation it is without any foresight of good works,... or any other thing in the creature, as conditions or causes moving him thereto." We greatly fear that Dr. Mitchell should be looked after. If he had lived in the Puritan age, he would have been violently denounced as a heretic, denied Church privileges by the ministers he reveres so deeply, or put in jail by the civil magistrate whose authority he respects so highly, and reduced to be an "ambassador in bonds."

How is it that with so many disputable and denied doctrines in a Standard containing about 16,000 propositions, that in successive generations ministers accept and sign it without any hesitation, though ordinary men cannot agree together on twelve questions? It is a curious problem which we can only explain by supposing that perfect belief is required only when we swear to one or two articles, but that a reduction is allowed, as by grocers, on taking a quantity.

Dr. Mitchell has issued a useful work, proving the urgent necessity for the abolition of tests in our Universities if we desire to see freedom of thought, honesty of assertion, and progress of religious opinion and theological knowledge.
