

Reviews

Alastair Heron, ed., *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today* (St Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1982) 154pp. £4.00.

This recent volume, compiled by the Church of Scotland's Panel on Doctrine, is a brief, and generally interesting, series of articles and personal views on the Westminster Confession of Faith. Within a brief compass it endeavours to outline the historical origins of the Confession, the evolution in the life of the Church of Scotland, the theological structure and emphases, and to stimulate discussion over such questions as, "How sound is the general teaching and tone of the Confession?", "How far is it time-conditioned, and how far might it still be seen as a Confession for today?" The book will be of interest especially to those who are familiar with the continuing debate within the Church of Scotland concerning its relation to the Westminster Confession as its Subordinate Standard of Faith. It will also interest, however, a more general public as it is, in the main, a popular rather than academic study of the Confession and its teachings.

Leaving aside the personal views of the Confession, and the two brief but helpful articles on its historical origins and changing place in the life of the Church of Scotland over the centuries, the 'meat' of the book is found in the two chapters which discuss the teaching of the Confession. The first of these is a basically *descriptive* treatment of the teaching of the Confession by the Revd Dr S.B. Ferguson. The other chapter, and the one which will inevitably provoke the greatest discussion, is by the Revd Prof J.B. Torrance, entitled "strengths and weaknesses of the Westminster Theology". The title itself, however, is a little misleading. While the Confession's weaknesses are pliantly and fully discussed, its strengths are conspicuous by their absence!

This highlights a serious defect in the book, that it is less than it claims to be. If we place the 'personal views' of the Confession to one side (as most will do), Prof Torrance's article stands alone in giving a theological appraisal of Westminster Theology. This is not the fault of Prof Torrance. But the book would seem less an *apologia* for the removal of the Confession as the Church of Scotland's Subordinate Standard if it contained an essay as *pro* the Confession's theology as Prof Torrance's article is against it.

It is not possible within the confines of a review to discuss Prof Torrance's contentions that the Westminster Confession seriously departs from the theology of Calvin, and develops a theological structure out of step with Reformation theology. However, it is interesting to note that Prof J.H. Leith, possibly the greatest living authority on the Westminster Confession, makes the comment (in another section of the book) that those who argue that Westminster theology distorts the theology of Calvin

generally fail to note adequately the roots of seventeenth-century theology in Calvin's *Institute of the Christian Religion*, or to value properly the necessary rôle that Westminster illustrates in the development of doctrine or the remarkable achievement of the Westminster Confession in the kind of theological excellence to which both Borth and Tillich have paid tribute (p.99).

If we are to believe Prof Torrance, the theology of the Westminster Confession is very far from any kind of excellence, and certainly bears little if any resemblance to the theology of John Calvin.

Whom are we to believe? If the present review encourages those who read it to dig into the issue for themselves, and above all provokes them to examine first-hand the teaching of the Confession itself, then the reviewer at least is confident that Prof Leith's comments will bear the test of scrutiny. The same cannot be said for Prof Torrance's claim that Westminster distorts Calvin, seriously weakens our understanding of God, grace and the Holy Spirit (p.45), makes God's grace conditional (p.48), places law before grace (p.49), tends towards Sabellianism (p.50), sees the Old Testament merely as a set of legal precedents (p.51) and separates grace from Christ (p.52)! Such generalisations do not bear the scrutiny of theological enquiry. One brief example must suffice. To say that the 'Federal scheme' which the Westminster Confession adopts is built on the priority of law over grace (p.49) is seriously to misunderstand the Puritan conception of law. Simply to state, as Prof Torrance has done, that the federal scheme teaches that God made a covenant of works with Adam, and is him with all men, 'making eternal life conditional on keeping its terms', and not add that nearly all the Puritans concurred in the view that whatever good Adam would have received by his obedience was of *grace* is to misunderstand and misrepresent the roots of Westminster theology (cf. E. Kevan's *The Grace of Law*, especially pp.110ff.).

The book in general serves the purpose for which it was written. It is to be hoped that those who examine its contents will do so with both an open Bible and an open Confession before them!

Ian Hamilton, Newmilns