

THE CONFESSING CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION¹

Some of the saddest words in the Bible are those that describe the condition of the church in the days of the judges, “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). These words described a spiritual anarchy that was absolutely devastating. Our days are marked by the same anarchy, not only in the culture, but also in the church. Congregations and individuals are doing their own thing. One congregation excommunicates a man for immorality. He goes down the street to another congregation that not only receives him, but also makes him an officer. Or increasingly as “Christians” get unbiblical divorces, part of the divorce agreement determines which party stays in the local church and which one must attend another congregation.

A significant contributing factor to this anarchy and a product of it as well is the commonly heard confession, “No creed but the Bible, no confession but Jesus.” A great majority of Christians, as well as congregations, reject out-of-hand Creeds and Confessions. They do so because they believe that the Bible

“Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.” — 2 Timothy 1:13,14

alone is sufficient to guide us and that creeds are man-made additions to the Bible. In this essay, I will seek to demonstrate that the Bible commands the church to make and use creeds; to explain something of their purpose; and to show how we are to make our confession. I am basing my remarks on 2 Timothy 1:13,14.

First, though, I will give a definition, so that we may agree on what we are discussing. We derive the term “creed” from the Latin word, “Credo,” that means, “I believe.” Your personal “creed” states what you believe and what is important to you. Thus, in reality, the statement, “No creed but the Bible” is a personal creed. You are saying, “I believe neither I, nor the church, need a Creed. The Bible alone is sufficient to guide me.” As I shall demonstrate below no conflict exists between the doctrine of sufficiency of Scripture and the use of creeds.

Throughout history, the Church has used “Creeds” to summarize what she believed the Bible taught. Her creeds and confessions gave a precise summary of cardinal doctrines (The Apostles’ Creed) or a detailed refutation and articulation of a particular truth under attack (The Nicene Creed). R.L. Dabney defines a creed:

[I]t is a summary statement of what some religious teacher or teachers believe concerning the Christian system, stated in their own uninspired words. But they claim that these words fairly and briefly express the true sense of the inspired words. The church records several creeds of individual Christian teachers; but the creeds of the modern Protestant world are documents carefully constructed by some church courts of supreme authority in their several denominations, or by some learned committee appointed by them and then formally adopted by them as their doctrinal standard.²

Examples of creeds and confessions are *The Apostles’ Creed*, *The Nicene Creed*, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, *The Thirty-Nine Articles*, *The Augsburg Confession*. Although they differ in form (a creed usually consists of a series of brief, succinct statements expressed as

¹ The first part of this paper is taken from my chapter “Great Things He Hath Taught Us” in *Onward Christian Soldiers*, ed. by Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications), pp. 249-270.

² Robert L. Dabney, *The Doctrinal Content of the Confession: Its Fundamental and Regulative Ideas and the Necessity and Value of Creeds* (Greenville, SC: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1993), 13,14.

“I (we) believe”; a catechism uses questions and answers to teach the truth; a confession normally is a more detailed exposition of the truth). In the remainder of this chapter, I shall refer to creeds, catechisms, and confession by the general term “creeds.”

THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR CREEDS

Having defined what we mean by creeds, let us turn to answer the question, “Are they biblical?” In 2 Timothy 1:13,14, God commands the use of creeds. We find here a two-fold command: “Retain the standard of sound words,” and “Guard the treasure entrusted to you.” Many opponents of creeds argue that they detract from the sufficiency of Scripture. On the contrary, Scripture teaches us to make and use creeds.

In these two verses Paul gives Timothy a two-fold summary of his message. First, he refers to the “standard of sound words.” Sound words express the truths taught by Scripture. “Words” are the expression of truth that Timothy received from Paul who was taught directly by Christ. The term “sound” means true and accurate. We use the expression “He gave a sound diagnosis.” Thus, these are the doctrines that give life (1Tim. 1:10; 6:3; 2 Tim. 4:3; Tit. 2:7).³

Paul has communicated these to Timothy in a summary he calls “standard” or “form.” The word Paul uses is a compound form of the word which we translate “type” (*tupos*; *hupotuposis*). Paul uses *tupos* in Romans 6:17, “But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that *form of teaching to which you were committed*.” The content of the gospel was given to them in a summary statement, a form. In 1 Timothy 1:16 he uses *hupotuposis* to mean “example.” Paul says he is an “example” of one who received God’s mercy and patience. In non-biblical Greek, the term is used for the sketch of a painter or architect. In Moulton and Milligan’s lexicon, they give the meaning “sketch in outline, summary account.”⁴ Writing on verse 13, E.K. Simpson says,

We have had *hupotuposis* in I Tim. 1:16...Whatever may be its precise sense there, the signification of a *summary, outline*, which Galen assigns to the word, best tallies with this context. Sextus Empiricus repeatedly uses it in that acceptation. If so, it presents yet another sign that epitomes of the Christian faith were beginning to pass current. *Logoi* in the plural would naturally mean *propositions* in such a connection.⁵

Thus, Paul declares that he has given to Timothy a form or pattern of Apostolic doctrine. He is not referring to the entirety of his inspired corpus, but to the summary that he entrusted to Timothy.

This interpretation is reinforced in the parallel command in verse 14, when he speaks of the “entrusted treasure.” In other words, this form or pattern of sound doctrine is a treasure that Paul entrusts to the guardianship of Timothy. Paul refers to a specific summary that he has entrusted to Timothy. In 2 Tim. 2:2 he refers to this stewardship and he commands Timothy to entrust it to others, “And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”

Paul, therefore, refers to a summary of apostolic doctrine that he has given to Timothy. Paul describes this summary in other places as “the traditions”. 1 Cor. 11:2, “Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.” 2 Thess. 2:1, “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word *of mouth* or by letter from us.” Interestingly, we note here that the taught traditions were not simply those doctrines he revealed in the Epistles, but also those doctrines he taught them verbally (the summary of the

³ George W. Knight, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992) 89.

⁴ James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 661.

⁵ E.K. Simpson, *The Pastoral Epistles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1954), 127.

Apostolic message). See also 2 Thess. 3:6. These traditions differ from the traditions taught later by the Roman Catholic Church. Roman Catholic traditions are not summaries of biblical doctrine, but rather teachings added to the teaching of the Bible.

What Paul commands in 2 Tim. 2:13,14 is reinforced by the Bible's use of creeds. In Deut. 6:4 we find the great confession, repeated to this day in the synagogue: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!" Paul, himself, quotes two confessions. First, in 1 Tim. 3:16 "And by common confession great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, Was vindicated in the Spirit, Beheld by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory." The term translated in the NASB "common confession" literally means "confessedly," emphasizing that it was a common agreement or commitment.⁶ With respect to the statement itself, Dr. Knight argues that it appears to be a statement of the apostolic church either a hymn or a creed we cannot be certain.⁷ I believe it was a creed, but even if a hymn, Paul quotes it here as a credal summary, common to the church.

In 2 Tim.2:11-13, Paul gives one of his trustworthy statements: "For if we died with Him, we shall live with Him; If we endure, we shall also reign with Him; If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself." Dr. Knight suggests that it was a credal statement that originated in Rome:

We can only offer a probable answer to the question of the origin of the saying. Since 2 Timothy was written from Rome, then it is possible that the church in Rome developed the first line by reflection on Romans 6 and by utilizing Rom. 6:8 in a contracted form. This is probable not only because of this link but also because the idea of dying with Christ is more fully developed in Romans 6 than anywhere else in the NT. Since Romans 6 relates death with Christ to baptism, it would be appropriate to conjecture that the saying was used in connection with confession of faith at the time that the saying was used in connection with confession of faith at the time of baptism. The third line seems to reflect Jesus' words in Mt. 10:33 and Lk. 12:9, cast here into the mold of the other lines. No very close similarity exists between the second and fourth lines and other NT statements. Thus one can only say that two likely sources have had their impact on the saying, and that the other lines were added as necessary when converts were confessing their faith and receiving baptism.⁸

We recognize, therefore, the Bible teaches us to use creeds. We can add to the exegetical argument a number of other inferential reasons. Every Bible translation is to a degree what the translator believes the Bible teaches. By the nature of translation, no translation of the Hebrew and Greek text is neutral. Translation involves interpretation that involves faith commitments. R.L. Dabney wrote:

All Protestants believe that Holy Scripture should be translated into the vernacular tongues of the nations. Only the Greek and Hebrew are immediately inspired; the translators must be uninspired. Therefore these versions are uninspired human expositions of the divine originals. Wycliffe's version, Luther's, Tyndale's are but their human beliefs of what the Hebrew and Greek words are meant by the Holy Spirit to signify. These translators might have said with perfect truth, each one, 'These renderings into English or German are my *credo*.' The church which uses such a translation for the instruction of her people and the settlement of even her most cardinal doctrines is using a creed of human composition; and those whom exclaim, 'The Holy Scriptures themselves are our only and our sufficient creed,' put themselves in a ridiculous attitude whenever

⁶ Knight, *Commentary*, 182.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 182,183, cf. August Wiesner, *Biblical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistles to the Philippians, to Titus, the First to Timothy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1858), 420.

⁸ Knight, 408. For a detailed discussion see George W. Knight, *The Faithful Sayings in the Pastoral Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979). Dr. Knight suggests that these "faithful sayings" function also as summaries of Apostolic teaching.

they use a vernacular translation of the Scriptures, for that which they profess to hold as their creed is still but an uninspired human exposition.⁹

Furthermore, every sermon is the preacher's creed about what the text of the sermon means. The consistent consequence of "No creed but the Bible" is no preaching. Just read the Scripture. But the Bible commands us to preach (2 Tim. 4:2). Again quoting Dabney:

Beyond question, God has ordained, as a means of grace and indoctrination, the oral explanation and enforcement of divine truths by all preachers. Thus Ezra (Neh. 7:8) causes the priests to read in the book of the law distinctly, and give the sense, and cause them to understand the reading.' Paul commanded Timothy (2 Tim 4:2) to 'reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine.' He, as an apostle of Christ, not only permits but commands, each uninspired pastor and doctor to give his charge his human and uninspired expositions of what he believes to be divine truth, that is to say, his creed. If such human creeds, when composed by a single teacher and delivered orally, *extempore* [without elaborate preparation], are proper means of instruction for the church, by the stronger reason must those be proper and scriptural which are the careful, mature, and joint productions of learned and godly pastors, delivered with all the accuracy of written documents. He who would consistently banish creeds must silence all preaching and reduce the teaching of the church to the recital of the exact words of Holy Scripture without note or comment.¹⁰

I would add, that the Church's creed protects us from the tyranny of eccentric and heretical ideas of the individual, expressed in a sermon. Remember the safety found in many counselors (Prov.11:14).

Thus, rather than violate the sufficiency of Scripture, we see that Scripture requires the use of creeds. Creeds do not add to the Bible but are simply the summary of what the Church believes the Bible teaches. Thus they do not challenge the authority of the Bible. They simply are the summary form of what the Bible teaches. With respect to this point Samuel Miller declared:

A church creed professes to be, as was before observed merely an epitome, or summary exhibition of what the Scriptures teach. It professes to be deduced from the Scriptures, and to refer to the Scriptures for the whole of its authority. Of course, when any one subscribes it, he is so far from dishonoring the Bible, that he does public homage to it. He simply declares, by a solemn act, how he understands the Bible — in other words, what doctrines he considers it as containing.

...I beg the privilege of declaring, for myself, that, while I believe with all my heart that the Bible is the word of God, the only perfect rule of faith and manners, and the only ultimate test in all controversies...¹¹

THE PRACTICAL PURPOSE OF CREEDS

Having determined then the Biblical warrant for creeds, let us see what the Bible teaches about the use of creeds or their purpose. In 2 Tim.1:13,14 we learn that the creed is to serve as an apt summary of the orthodox faith for communion and understanding. The command to "retain"

⁹ Dabney, 16,17.

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹ Samuel Miller, *Doctrinal Integrity: The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions and Adherence to our Doctrinal Standards* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1989), 30.

means to “hold”, to keep as a special possession. When we hold it, it serves as our standard of communion and communication.

It serves as a standard for communion. One of the primary things a creed does for a church is to promote unity. Amos asks the question, “Do two men walk together unless that have made an appointment (agreement)?” We cannot walk together, unless we are agreed. Think how useful it is for the congregation and those who visit the congregation to know what the church believes and is going to teach and preach. For this reason, in the Dutch and German Reformed Churches, they refer to their confessional statements as The Three Forms of Unity. The Church is not adding to the Bible, but saying, we believe this is what the Bible teaches. If you are going to join with us you need to be aware of these things.

In all creedal churches, the office bearers express their unity by subscribing to the doctrines agreed on in the creed. This commitment guarantees doctrinal harmony. Dabney says, “if a church is to have any honest testimony, something else is needed as a test of harmony in beliefs, a candid explanation in other terms, which, though human, have not been misconstrued.”¹² Such churches do not declare that those who do not agree with us in all these doctrines are not churches as long as they agree on the commonly accepted doctrines of evangelical Christianity. Again quoting Dabney,

But we recognize as other denominations in the sacramental host all that teach the fundamental doctrines and uphold the morals of Christ’s gospel. We believe that the visible unity whereby God is to be glorified is to be found in the faithful recognition of each other’s sacraments, orders and church discipline (limited to admonition and spiritual penalties), by each denomination in the church catholic; and not in a confusion and amalgamation of all into one visible ecclesiastical body; a result only made feasible by one or the other criminal alternative: popery or broad churchism.¹³

Some object that the use of creeds to promote communion actually binds the conscience, by forcing people to conform. I would point out that in Presbyterian communions, individual members are not required to subscribe to a creed. They are received on the basis of a credible profession of faith. All who hold to the basic doctrines of the evangelical faith may be communicant members. But even here unity is protected, since they will be aware through the church’s creed what she confesses and teaches. They will agree to expose themselves to that teaching and in no way to oppose it in the fellowship.

Furthermore, the church is a voluntary organization. We do not live in a country where we may only belong to one church. None, therefore, are bound to submit to any particular creed, unless they unite with that church freely. Samuel Miller points out:

It will not, surely, be denied by anyone, that a body of Christians have a right, in every free country, to associate and walk together upon such principles as they may choose to agree upon, not inconsistent with public order... They have no right, indeed, to decide or to judge for others, nor can they compel any man to join them. But it is surely their privilege to judge for themselves, to agree upon the plan of their own association, to determine upon what principles they will receive other members into their brotherhood, and to form a set of rules which will exclude from their body those with whom they cannot walk in harmony.¹⁴

The creed also aids the church in the communication of the truth. This use involves both interpretation and instruction. Because they summarize the teaching of the Bible, creeds are a great tool to use in the interpretation of Scripture. Evangelical Christians believe that Scripture interprets Scripture and that the Bible does not contradict itself. Creeds, confessions and catechisms give a consensus on the major truths of the Bible. As people learn the catechism, for example, it gives them a grid by which to interpret the Bible. Westcott said, with respect to the Apostles’ Creed:

¹² Ibid., 20.

¹³ Ibid., 1,16.

¹⁴ Miller, 3.

Such a summary as the Apostles' Creed serves as a clue in reading the Bible. It presents to us the salient features in the revelation which earlier experience has proved to be turning points of spiritual knowledge. It offers centres, so to speak, round which we may group our thoughts, and to which we may refer the lessons laid open to us. It keeps us from wandering in by-paths aimlessly or at our will, not by fixing arbitrary limits to inquiry but by making the great lines along which believers have moved from the first.¹⁵

For example, we read in 1 Samuel 1:11 that God regretted making Saul king. The immediate impression is that God had changed his mind. But the young child instructed in the Shorter Catechism definition of God knows that God is unchangeable and that his decree is irrevocable.¹⁶ So, while not yet grasping the exact meaning of the language, even the young reader, trained in the catechism, will avoid false interpretation.

Closely connected to interpretation is instruction. What more efficient way to give young Christians a compendium of the faith than by teaching them the Catechism and Confessions of the church. In the Act approving the Westminster Larger Catechism, The General Assembly of the Scottish Presbyterian Church in 1648 commended this catechism as "a rich treasure for increasing knowledge among the people of God."¹⁷ Warfield points out the educational value of the Catechism in a story about D.L. Moody. When Moody was visiting a friend in London, a young man called on Moody to ask a number of questions. One had to do with prayer. He said "What is prayer?, I can't tell what you mean by it!" While Moody was talking with the young man, the nine or ten year old daughter of Moody's host was coming down the stairs. Her father called her and said, "Tell this gentleman 'What is prayer.'" I will let the narrator of the story tell what happened:

Jenny did not know what had been going on, but she quite understood that she was now called upon to say her Catechism. So she drew herself up, and folded her hands in front of her, like a good little girl who was going to 'say her questions,' and she said in her clear childish voice: 'Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.' "Ah! That's the Catechism!" Moody said, 'thank God for that Catechism.'¹⁸

In addition to serving as an apt summary of the orthodox faith for communion and communication, creeds serve as an instrument for defending the faith. Paul commends this use in verse 14, "Guard." This is a militant term. Jude commands us to contend for the faith (Jude 3). The faith is under attack and the church is entrusted with the responsibility to defend it. Paul says, in 1 Tim.3:14,15, "I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth." Part of the responsibility entailed in being a pillar and support is the defense of the truth.

Many of you have experienced a visit from a Mormon or Jehovah's Witness cultist, who, when asked "Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?" answered, "Yes." Thus you must clarify your question. "Do you mean he is eternally God, equal with the God the Father? Do you deny that he was created?" Throughout the history of the Church creeds have served this purpose. Originally, the church developed creeds to guard against error. They continue to serve this purpose. What better way to expose the error of a Mormon or Jehovah's Witness than using the question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "Who is the Redeemer of God's elect? The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus

¹⁵ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Historic Faith: Short Lectures on the Apostles' Creed* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1893), 22,23.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, questions 4,7.

¹⁷ *The Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1985), 128.

¹⁸ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, Vol. I (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976), 382,382

Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, for ever.”¹⁹

We must guard the truth and guard the church, because false teachers will arise, “speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:30).

THE SPIRITUAL USE OF CREEDS

Some object to the use of Creeds because at times their adherents hold to them in an arrogant, browbeating manner. In 2 Tim. 1:13,14, Paul teaches us how to use our Creeds. He commands us in verse 13 to hold the form “in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.” Note there should be no dichotomy between vital faith in Christ and creedal orthodoxy. If our creed is biblical, it will point us to Jesus Christ as the savior of sinners. We will hold to our creed and express its truth in a way that acknowledges that sincere Christians will not agree with us on every point. We will contend for the truth with love for God and our neighbor. Moreover, our creeds will direct our attention to the beauty and glory of the triune God. The grand purpose of doctrine is that we might know and serve God. Thus, the church will make her confession with praise and adoration. Thus, we hold to our creeds and confessions evangelically. The doctrines summarized in our creeds are unto this end and we should use them accordingly.

Moreover, as we learn in verse 14, we are to hold to and guard the truth spiritually, “Guard, through the Holy Spirit.” Here we learn that our creeds are not clubs by which we cudgel others to accept our position. We are to guard the good deposit in dependence upon the Holy Spirit. He alone will cause men and women to understand and embrace the truth we love. Paul reminds us in 2 Tim.2:2 to teach the truth patiently, “And the Lord’s bond servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.

The Psalmist says in Psalm 33:16,17, that victory does not come through the flesh, “The king is not saved by a mighty army; A warrior is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a false hope of victory; Nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength.” He then reminds us that God alone is our help, “Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, On those who hope for his lovingkindness, to deliver their soul from death, And to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the Lord; He is our help and our shield” (18-20).

Therefore, we have seen that God teaches the church to use creeds from an experimental commitment to and defense of the faith. Creeds are rich treasure entrusted to us. They give us a basis for communion and communication of the truth of the Bible. They serve as a litmus test to protect the church and the truth entrusted to her. Rather than displace Scripture they are scriptural in origin and content. I count myself blessed to be a member of a confessing church that adheres to a thorough creed.

¹⁹ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, question 21.

SUBSCRIPTION TO THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS

In this section I will define full subscription, to show the necessity of full subscription for the protection of the Church, and to offer some proposals for unity.

THE DEFINITION OF FULL SUBSCRIPTION

Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, Presbyterian Churches in Britain and America have sought to protect orthodoxy through subscription vows. In the Presbyterian Church in America we have differing opinions as to the extent of the vows. In particular, we differ on how one approaches the second ordination vow and how the second vow relates to the first.

The first vow reads:

Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as originally given, to be the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?

The second vow reads:

Do you sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and the *Catechisms* of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures; and do you further promise that if at any time you find yourself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system of doctrine, you will on your own initiative, make known to your Presbytery the change which has taken place in your views since the assumption of this ordination vow?

Currently, in our denomination there are two approaches to the officer's relation to the Westminster Standards: full subscription and system subscription. I prefer these terms to strict, loose, or honest. System subscription maintains that the officer vows to uphold the essentials of the system and that each presbytery has the authority to determine what the essentials are.

Full subscription maintains that the second ordination vow requires the adoption of the *Confession* and the *Catechisms*, not just the system of truth in them. Dr. Smith writes, "It holds that the ordinand is subscribing to nothing more nor less than the entirety of the Confession and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures."²⁰ Notice that in the first clause of the vow the ordinand commits himself to "receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and the *Catechisms of this Church*." The second phrase, "as containing the system of doctrine..." describes the basis of our reception and adoption, by demonstrating what we believe these documents contain; namely, the system of truth taught in the Scripture. George Knight comments:

These words give the justification for such a solemn vow and indicate why the church may request such a vow of subscription to the confessional standards and also why the candidate may take such a vow. It is because both church and candidate agree that the confessional standards contain 'the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.' The 'as containing' is presented as a statement of fact and a conviction.²¹

Dr. Morton Smith delineates a number of important concepts to keep in mind with regard to full subscription. First, full subscription does not mean that all the doctrines in the Westminster Standards are of equal importance. As in the Bible, some doctrines are of more foundational importance than others, but

²⁰ Morton H. Smith, "The Case for Full Subscription," in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*. ed. David W. Hall (Lanham (MD): University Press of America, Inc., 1995), p. 185.

²¹ George W. Knight, III, "Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms," in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, p. 127.

still the one taking the vow “is subscribing to all the doctrines in the Confession and Catechisms; they are all part of the system of doctrine.”²²

Second, the vow does not obligate the subscriber to adopt every word or expression in the Standards.²³ George Knight relates this to the adopting act of 1729:

The Adopting Act takes no action to disallow ‘scruples’ against ‘Expressions.’ Thus ‘Expressions’ in the confessional standards apparently refer to modes of expression of the various doctrines, which would be the point of reference to the ‘extra-essential and not-necessary points of Doctrine’ with which one can differ or have a scruple as long as one adopts the article and its doctrine.²⁴

Samuel Miller advocates this position:

Let the candidate for admission unfold to the Presbytery before which he presents himself, all his doubts and scruples, with perfect frankness; opening his whole heart, as if on oath; and neither softening nor concealing anything. Let him cause them distinctly to understand, that if he subscribe to the Confession of Faith, he must be understood to do it in consistency with the exceptions and explanations which he specifies. If the Presbytery, after this fair understanding, should be of the opinion, that the excepted points *were of little or no importance, and interfered with no article of faith*, and should be willing to receive his subscription in the usual way, he may proceed.²⁵

The third principle Smith draws out is that full subscription does not make the Standards equal with the Bible.

This is often the caricature that is made of the full subscriptionist, but I know of no one who ever contemplated the Westminster Standards as equal to the Bible. The full subscriptionist, however, does hold that the reason we make the Confession and Catechisms the confession of our faith is because we believe that what they say is true to the Bible. The Church has no right to ask men to subscribe to the Confession and Catechisms unless it believes they contain the doctrines of Scripture.²⁶

When one rightly understands this point, there is no tension between the first and second ordination vows. The relationship between the two is clearly spelled out by the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A in 1896:

Along with this insistence upon the unique supremacy of the Holy Scriptures there is in the Standards the *acknowledgement of human fallibility*... This admission of liability to error, however, is not to be used as if *it lessened the authority of the doctrinal and governmental Standards* of the Church over those who have voluntarily accepted them. Far otherwise! It is simply the declaration by the Church of its dependence upon the divine Author of the Scriptures, for the guidance of his Spirit in the interpretation of his word and in the formulation and application of its Standards. This Church holds not only to the Word of God as the supreme and infallible rule of faith and practice, but further, that its *Confession of Faith contains the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures*...

²² Smith p. 185.

²³ Ibid., p. 185.

²⁴ Knight, p. 126.

²⁵ Samuel Miller, *Doctrinal Integrity: On the Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions and Adherence to Our Doctrinal Standards* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1984), pp. 61,52 (emphasis mine). I believe this distinction harmonizes Hodge’s position in 1839 and that expressed in 1858. See Knight, pp. 133,134.

²⁶ Smith, p. 186.

*Resolved, 2, That this Assembly draws the attention of the judicatories and members of the Church to the declarations of the Standards above quoted, which set forth in explicit terms the belief of the Church, that all the Standards are founded upon and in accordance with the Holy Scriptures.*²⁷

For the full subscriptionist there is no conflict between the Bible and the Standards. His personal confession is that the Standards summarize what the Bible teaches. Thornwell shows the relationship of the Bible and the Standards:

If a thing is proved to be wrong directly from the Bible, our Confession of Faith requires us to condemn it. That accepts the whole Word of God as the absolute, authoritative rule of faith and practice. If a thing is shown to be wrong from our Standards, we, as Presbyterians, have declared that it is so taught in the Sacred Scriptures. To us the propositions are identical: Whatever the Bible condemns our Confession of Faith condemns, and whatever the Confession of Faith condemns the Bible condemns. They are the same authority; the Confession is nothing except as the Bible speaks in it and through it; and in adopting it, we have averred it to be an honest and faithful interpretation of God's teachings. If the Bible and the Confession were independent of each other, or were inconsistent with each other, then difficulty might arise. But as long as their relation is that of original and translation, of cipher and interpretation, it is a matter of no moment to which a man immediately appeals.²⁸

The *Rules of Discipline* (29-1) of the PCA take this same position when establishing the role of the Standards in matters of discipline:

An offense, the proper object of judicial process, is anything in the doctrines or practice of a Church member professing faith in Christ which is contrary to the Word of God. The *Confession of Faith* and the *Larger* and *Shorter Catechisms* of the Westminster Assembly, together with the formularies of government, discipline, and worship are accepted by the Presbyterian Church in America as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice.²⁹

In taking the second ordination vow, one confesses that he believes the Westminster Standards are a faithful interpretation of what the Bible teaches. If he later comes to the conclusion that Scripture teaches otherwise, he may and should write exegetical and theological papers advocating the necessary changes in the Standards. He may circulate such papers among fellow presbyters, but he ought not to teach or write publicly on his position. If the exegesis is persuasive, the Church will amend her Standards. If the exegesis is not persuasive, he ought to submit or align with a denomination that accepts his views.

Full subscription is the historical position of Scottish and American Presbyterianism. The Scottish position is well documented by Ian Hamilton.³⁰ It has been the official position of the Old School Assembly, both the Northern and Southern Presbyterian churches, and the reunified Northern Assembly.³¹ Dr. Knight summarizes the historical position:

In conclusion, a basic unanimity exists in the concept of subscription as expressed by these great past leaders from earlier American Presbyterianism. Each

²⁷ Quoted by Knight, p. 130.

²⁸ James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings*, ed. John B. Adger and John L. Girardeau, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 313.

²⁹ *The Book of Church Order, PCA* (Atlanta: Office of Stated Clerk, 1999), 29-1. The *Minutes of the Tenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (1982)* make the same point that the doctrines of the Standards are "the very doctrines of the Word," pp. 221 and 103.

³⁰ Ian Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy: Seceders and Subscription in Scottish Presbyterianism* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990). See also J. Ligon Duncan, III "Owning the Confession: Subscription in the Scottish Presbyterian Tradition" in Hall, pp.77-91.

³¹ See in Hall, articles by Knight, Smith, Hodge, and Hall.

insisted that every officer of the church, to use now the words of Hodge, ‘assents to the whole concatenated statement of doctrines contained in the Confession.’ Each agreed that insisting on assent to all the doctrines contained in the Confession was appropriate simply because they believed that those doctrines, or the system of doctrine, are ‘taught in the Holy scriptures,’ as the words of the second ordination vow put it. Their consensus served to lend support to the position which the church had held officially from 1729 to the late 1800s.³²

THE NECESSITY OF FULL SUBSCRIPTION

The historical arguments in favor of the full subscription interpretation of the Adopting Act are well spelled out by Knight, Smith, and Hall. Conservatives have always resisted system subscription. For example, consider “The Act and Testimony,” penned by Robert J. Breckenridge and signed by 2,075 ruling and teaching elders at the 1834 General Assembly:

We do bear our solemn testimony agents the right claimed by many of interpreting the doctrines of our standards in a sense different from the general sense of the church for years past . . . We testify against the unchristian subterfuge to which some have recourse when they avow a general adherence to our standards *as a system*, while they deny doctrines essential to the system . . . We testify against the conduct of those who while they profess to approve and adopt our doctrines and order, do nevertheless speak and publish, in terms, or by necessary implication, that which is derogatory to both, and which tends to bring both into disrepute.³³

The argument for a full subscription interpretation of the Adopting Act is bolstered when one considers the fact that when the various denominations changed their views with respect to the doctrines contained in the Westminster Standards, they changed the second ordination vow to accommodate the new views. I want to take another approach to prove the necessity of full subscription; namely, system subscription has invariably led to liberalism and subjectivism in the church. In other words, system subscription is in effect no subscription.

This line of argument is clearly illustrated in the changes to the second ordination vow in the Scottish Churches to accommodate “new light” and the subsequent decline in those Churches.³⁴ In 1804 the General Associate Synod (Antiburgher) attached a *Narrative and Testimony* to the Confession that weakened the nature of subscription. According to Duncan, “It declared that by adherence to the *Confession* ‘we are not precluded from embracing, upon due consideration, any further light which may afterward arise from the word of God, about any article of divine truth.’”³⁵ Duncan comments: “The ‘New Lights’ of the General Associate Synod became the first Scottish Presbyterian Church that did not require *simplex* subscription to the *Confession*. Though this did not at first, affect the Church’s adherence to the Calvinistic core of the theology of the *Confession*, it set in motion a trend which would ultimately bring the whole of the *Confession* under cross-examination.³⁶ In a mere sixteen years, the General Associate Synod in uniting with the Associate Synod to form the United Secession Church would change the ordination vow:

Do you acknowledge the Westminster Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as the confession of your faith, expressive of the sense in which you understand the Scriptures...?³⁷

³² Knight, p. 141.

³³ Quoted in Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South, vol. 1: 1607-1861* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963) p.378.

³⁴ See Duncan and Hamilton.

³⁵ Duncan, p. 83.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83. For full documentation see Hamilton pp. 1-33.

³⁷ Hamilton, p. 16.

At the same Synod, three ministers went unchallenged as they openly criticized the church's adherence to the standards. Hamilton concludes,

[T]he very fact that the phrase (the new ordination vow) was considered ambiguous, to say the least, by some, and was prominent at a time when young ministers were openly criticising the scope of the Church's attachment to the Confession, gave it a notoriety that kindled the firsts of theological debate... The chief significance of the whole controversy lies perhaps in the complete absence of criticism from the Synod regarding the document submitted by Brown, Balmer, and Harper. At least in this something of a precedent had been set: ministers of a major Scottish Presbyterian Church had expressed publicly reservation over the nature of its attachment to the Confession of Faith, and the Synod concurred with their criticism.³⁸

By 1847, in a further union they changed the ordination vow: Do you acknowledge the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms as an exhibition of the sense in which you understand the Holy Scriptures...?³⁹

Meanwhile the same things were going on in the Free Church. The Free Church and the United Church united in 1900. They furthered watered down their commitment to the Standards. The Church of Scotland accomplished the same thing so that United Free Church and the Church of Scotland united in 1929 with the modified formula: "I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the Confession of Faith."⁴⁰

The same patterned occurred in the Northern Presbyterian Church in the 1910s and 1920s and the Southern Presbyterian Church in 1934 and 39. Both the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches paved the way for theological downgrade by applying the principle of system subscription to the Adopting Act. In 1910, citing the Adopting Act as basis for allowing a candidate to take exceptions to articles in the Confession that were not essential or necessary doctrines, The Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. left it to the Presbytery or Synod to decide what was essential and necessary. The Assembly enunciated the five fundamentals:

Accordingly the General Assembly does also make a declaration with regard to certain essential necessary Articles of Faith, to-wit:

1. The inerrancy of Scripture.
2. The virgin birth of Christ.
3. The doctrine of the atonement, namely, That Christ offered himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and to reconcile us to God.
4. The bodily resurrection of Christ.
5. That Christ did perform miracles.

Resolved, that, reaffirming the advice of the Adopting Act of 1729, all the Presbyteries within our bounds shall always take care not to admit any candidate for the ministry into the exercise of the sacred function unless he declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of the Confession.⁴¹

In yet further erosion, the Northern Church in 1927 gave to the presbyteries the power to determine what confessional doctrines were "essential and necessary." Moreover the five fundamentals were not binding on the presbyteries.⁴² We note that system subscription is what paved the way for General Assembly to remove any Calvinism from the fundamental doctrines of the Westminster Standards. The

³⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

⁴⁰ Duncan, p. 85.

⁴¹ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 1910*, pp. 272ff.

⁴² Ibid., p. 141.

Southern Assembly followed suit in 1939, “declaring certain fundamentals ‘as being involved in the ordination vows to which we subscribe.’”⁴³ The subsequent doctrinal deviation, leading to the changing of the second vow in these churches needs no documentation.

There is a warning for us. System subscription historically has always led to liberalism. George Knight concludes:

[T]he system of doctrine which is the whole body of truth contained in the Confession and Catechism must not be reduced to a number of ‘fundamentals’ no matter how basic, evangelical, and scriptural. To do so is to indicate immediately that everything else in the confessional standards is not necessarily binding. It is in effect to amend the force of the confessional standards without following the prescribed approval of two Assemblies and a requisite percentage of the presbyteries.⁴⁴

Learn as well that when the decisions of essential doctrines are left to the presbyteries, subjectivism reigns in the church. George Knight points out:

Consistently the previous Synods and Assemblies had understood the vow to involve an acceptance of all the doctrines of all the articles of the confessional standards. When the Assembly of 1927 gave to the individual presbytery the right to determine which articles or doctrines the presbytery would consider as part of the system of doctrine of the confessional standards the Assembly abandoned the past history of American Presbyterianism... This decision of the 1927 Assembly did two things simultaneously. It set the presbytery free of the Assembly with reference to the binding character of the doctrinal standards, and it allowed the presbytery to interpret or apply the confessional standards however loosely it desired.⁴⁵

This subjectivism is at work in the Presbyterian Church of America. For example, one Presbytery might declare that the Confessional doctrine of the Sabbath to be essential and necessary while another says it is not. System subscription leaves us with no objective standard. Thus, in reality, we are left with no objective confession of our faith.

FIVE PROPOSALS FOR UNITY

On the basis of this brief discussion I suggest that in reality without full subscription you have no subscription. If I am correct, given our current state of affairs, how do we remedy the problem? I offer the following proposals.

First, every candidate for the eldership, licensure and ordination should be required to subscribe to all the articles of doctrine in the Westminster Standards. Scruples may be taken over particular propositions or expressions as long as they are not contrary to any doctrine. Let us take for example two serious issues. With respect to the Sabbath no exception is allowable with respect to the doctrine that the first day of the week is to be spent in public and private worship except deeds of necessity and mercy. An acceptable scruple might be allowing for some private, family recreation on Sunday afternoon. But for a Presbyterian to profess to hold to a “continental” view of the Sabbath is not acceptable. The careful observance of the Lord’s Day is part of our covenantal piety. With respect to creation, a man must subscribe to the eight fiat acts of Genesis 1 as immediate, direct, creative acts of God and deny any progressive creation or theistic evolution.⁴⁶ An allowable scruple might be taken with respect to the length of the days.

Second, all office-bearers already ordained who do not fully subscribe to the Standards would be “grandfathered,” but not allowed to teach against any doctrine of the Standards.

⁴³ Knight, p. 141.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 142. See also Hamilton.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 142.

⁴⁶ *Minutes of the Twenty-Seventh General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1999*, pp.179f.

Third, no congregation, denominational committee, nor approved seminaries shall be allowed to teach or practice anything contrary to any article of doctrine in the Westminster Standards, apart from allowable scruples. For example, even though a pastor might think recreation is permissible on the Lord's Day, since the Standards prohibit it, churches should not sponsor organized recreation on Sunday afternoons or nights. No approved seminary should teach anything contrary to the doctrines of the Standards, apart from allowable scruples.

Fourth, a minister with exegetical concerns about any doctrine in the Standards may present study papers to Presbyteries and colleagues, though he may not publicly teach contrary to the Standards. If he convinces the Church, she will alter the Standards. If he fails, he must abide by her ruling or align with a denomination that accepts his view.

Fifth, those office-bearers that cannot abide by these principles should be allowed to leave the denomination as members in good standing, as long as the process of discipline has not been begun against them or they are not under discipline.

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