

Perspective on the Subscription Standards of the Presbyterian Church in America

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Ours is a Confessional church. Thus, when a man subscribes to our Confession before a presbytery in order to establish his ministerial credentials, he should in good faith declare his lack of accord with any proposition in our Confessional standards unless our church has clearly demonstrated its intent not to require accord with that particular. A presbytery should exercise its right to determine its membership by judging whether any declared difference with our standards is an exception, and whether the presbytery will allow or in any way limit the teaching of that exception. This “good-faith subscription” approach (that I believe is both historic and correct for our church) requires Presbyteries to make these judgments of Confessional accord by taking into account:

I. Authorial Intent

We first have a responsibility to discover what the authors of our Confession meant to convey. We do not have a right to impose our meanings on their words to determine their original intent. Instead we are to be strict constructionists, using the grammatical-historical methods we have well honed in our study of Scripture, to determine as precisely as possible the construction the Westminster divines intended for their own words.

The use of the grammatical-historical method will reveal that the intentions of the authors of our Confession were:

- A. To say what the Scriptures say (WLC #3; WCF I.10);
- B. To compromise where possible to maintain their unity around generic Calvinism (e.g., sacrament practices, application of Christ’s active righteousness, allowing both supra- or infralapsarian views to be made acceptable);
- C. To address specific historical concerns in the context of their culture
 - using words differently from our time (e.g. “passions,” “substance,” “recreation,” “usury”);
 - having concerns specific to their times (e.g. “oaths and vows” and “instantaneous creation” compared to our concerns for evangelism, race, abortion, and world mission);
- D. To acknowledge with humility their own susceptibility to error (WCF XXV.5; XXXI.3)
 - Evidenced in their requiring Scripture to be the only rule of faith and practice (WLC #3); and, prohibiting any human council from being the rule of faith (WCF XXXI.2,3);
 - Demonstrated in our present differences with them (e.g., Ecclesiastical Power of Civil Magistrate, Pope as Anti-Christ, “covenant of grace

Perspective on Subscription Standards

frequently ... testament,” contemporary application of Leviticus 18, “God is ‘a’ spirit”).

In order to judge whether a man is in accord with our standards. North American Presbyterians must also consider how our colonial forefathers intended to receive the Confession.

II. Our Forefathers’ Intent

The debates around the Adopting Act of 1729 indicate that the intentions of our forefathers were:

- A. To keep presbytery membership from individual discretion (and, thus, to have a Confessional standard by which to judge a man’s qualification for ministerial office); and,
- B. To keep the Confession from Scriptural status (especially where they now disagreed with it’s original form).

The 18 men present and voting for the Adopting Act ultimately said that they would “receive” the Westminster Confession and Catechism as their own confession of faith “excepting only some Clauses in ye 20. and 23. Chapters [sic]” relating to the power of the civil magistrate.

Immediate confusion ensued. Were the exceptions to be considered *examples* of the kinds of scruples a man could take, or *exhaustive* of all the scruples that a man could take? Our best scholars continue to debate this.

It is clear, however, that from our earliest American roots men were allowed to declare scruples at least to some degree – we all know that it is debatable among us to what degree that was.

So, what else must presbyteries consider in determining whether a man with scruples should be accepted into one of our presbyteries?

III. Our Founding Intent

Though we consider ourselves the continuation of orthodox Presbyterianism, this is only the 29th General Assembly of our church – not the 272nd Assembly of the church founded in 1729. We are a church that has its own standards and practices that signal how we intend to have men “receive and adopt” the Westminster Standards.

We no longer require accord with a number of the Westminster divines’ standards (e.g. Pope as anti-Christ, non-instrumental exclusive psalmody, ecclesiastical power for the civil magistrate). Are we, then, not a Confessional church? No, rather we are Confessional on our terms. We do not give every statement equal weight, and indicate how we intend to receive the Confessional standards in our official actions and in our founding practices.

A. Our official actions

The fathers of the PCA are not of one voice in declaring how it was their intent to receive the Confessional standards passed to us by our Colonial forefathers.

Perspective on Subscription Standards

Some declare with great vigor that their intent was to establish a “strict-” or “full-subscription” church. Depending upon the person defining these terms, strict-subscription either means that a man may take exception to nothing but “incidental” wording in our standards, or it means that exceptions to some non-essential statements may be taken but that such exceptions may not be taught. The presumption of both approaches is that the “system of doctrine” we vow “to receive and adopt” is composed of all its parts and, thus, allowing exception to any of its propositions jeopardizes the system as a whole.

Other fathers of the PCA declare just as vigorously that the subject of “strict subscription” was not even brought up at our founding, and that they had no intention of establishing such a church. These fathers say that it was their intention to establish an “historic,” “good-faith” (or “vital-to-the-system”) subscription standard that allows a man to express differences with particular propositions in the Confession so long as he did not take exceptions that “struck at the vitals of religion” nor were “inimical to our system of doctrine.” The wording of our second ordination vow (initially unique to the PCA in its form) says that elders declare when they are out of accord with the “fundamentals” of the system, not any proposition in the system. Further, these fathers say that it is necessary that we be able to take (and have the possibility of teaching) exceptions to our standards – subject to the approval of presbytery – lest we give unalterable Scriptural status to our human documents.

As a result of our differing understandings of our original intent, we have repeatedly sought to clarify our standards through various actions. For example, the 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th and 14th General Assemblies in various ways attempted to define “exceptions.” Issues related to what an exception is also have also been debated at many other Assemblies. To this day, however, our BCO does not anywhere specifically define what an exception is, nor its limits.

Efforts have also failed to define explicitly what are the “fundamentals of the system of doctrine” which, if a man should fail to embrace them, would allow a presbytery to decide if that man should be denied office in the PCA. Nowhere are the terms, “fundamentals” or “system of doctrine,” defined in our standards. We have actually said that it would be “unconstitutional” at the Assembly level to try to compose lists of “essential doctrines” apart from judicial processes (10th GA *Minutes*, p. 103), because to do so would be to create a Confession within a Confession.

It may seem intolerable that we do not have universal definitions to offer presbyteries about what makes an exception “tolerable” or “inimical” to what is “necessary and essential” in the “system of doctrine.” Most of us have a sense that the system essentials involve “the plan of salvation and the doctrine of grace” along with the biblical truths that are necessary to support them (even Hodge and Thornwell agreed on this; cf. full version of this paper). But what our history makes plain is that we have determined that granting presbyteries the right to judge what are allowable exceptions to our system of doctrine (subject to the review of GA) is the best instrument we have to maintain orthodoxy without giving our standards *de facto* Scriptural status, or conceding to our ministers private judgment of our church’s doctrine.

Perspective on Subscription Standards

B. Our founding practices

Without lists of essential doctrines or official definitions of the limits of our system of doctrine we should also consider the common practices that have existed in our church *since we adopted our standards* to help determine what our standards allow. I am not saying that we should simply accept what we are presently doing because it is expedient. On the contrary, precisely because we are not to make subjective judgments in resolving our disagreements over what the grammar of our standards specifies, we must look at the founding practices that explain what we meant. In essence, we must apply the historical-grammatical method to interpret our own specific intent (e.g. allowing liberty regarding historic Premillennialism with virtually no statement in our standards supporting this allowance).

Our history since our founding indicates that most presbyteries have allowed men to take and teach exceptions in their ordination exam practices. In what is still the early history of the PCA we can easily confirm this by looking around us at men who hold to, have preached on, and have written about, varying views regarding Sabbath, paedocommunion, the applicability of the civil law of Israel, the expression of charismatic gifts, the extent and nature of the power of the civil magistrate, the validity of the covenant of works, the grounds for divorce, creation, the nature of the Millennium, etc. We should readily acknowledge that there are those among us who think that such variation is wrong, but the fact remains that our church's practice has allowed such variation through most of our presbyteries.

But what if the conclusions reached by examination of our official actions and founding practices are wrong? What reference do we, then, have to solve our differences and correct ourselves in addition to authorial intent, forefather intent and our intent?

IV. Scripture's Intent

It is vital to remember that the Confessional standards and our BCO are not our only constitutional foundation. In the Preface to our Book of Church Order we state that our constitution consists of the doctrinal standards set forth in the Confession together with the catechisms, and the BCO. And, we further declare in the Preface that this constitution is "subject to and subordinate to" the Bible. With this preliminary principle we echo the Confession's imperative: "All synods or councils, since the Apostles' times ... may err; and many have erred. Therefore, they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both" (WCF XXXI.3). "The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience" (WLC #3). We ultimately interpret our Confession based upon our Constitution's foundational standard, the Bible (Eph. 2:20; Acts 17:11; 1 Cor. 2:5; Matt. 15:9).

If we must finally resort to Scripture, does this put us back into the position of allowing private judgment to determine presbytery membership? By no means. We do not allow for a man's private judgment to determine whether he should be a member of a presbytery. Rather a presbytery of elders exercising biblical prudence hears his difference with the Standards, then *corporately* determines if the matter is an "exception" and if it is inimical to our system of doctrine. The final authority that we use in making these corporate judgments is Scripture (Matt. 22: 29, 31; Acts 28:25; 1 John 4:1-6).

We are not allowed to say that we will not consider what Scripture says because we have our Confession. Historical debates over Confessional statements are important,

Perspective on Subscription Standards

but Scripture is more important. We must never even say (as some recently have) that we are unsure what the Scriptures teach, so we are going to require what the Confession says. To require Confessional adherence in the face of Scriptural contradiction *or* uncertainty is un-Confessional (WCF I.6, 10; XX.2; Rev. 22:18-19); and, a contradiction of our second ordination vow. Further, automatically prohibiting men from teaching any exception runs the risk of granting the Confession the status of Scripture. Thus, imposing teaching restrictions should be prudentially imposed only when the “peace and purity of the church” are demonstrably threatened (14th GA *Minutes*, p. 126).

Summary and Benefits of Good Faith Subscription

When a presbytery makes ordination decisions based upon our Standards’ authorial intent, our forefathers’ intent, our intent, and Scripture’s ultimate authority, then we should expect the following benefits will result:

1. We will keep qualification for ordination from private judgment.

A man must submit himself to the corporate judgment of a presbytery as to whether any lack of accord with our Standards is inimical to our system of doctrine.

2. We will keep our Standards from having unalterable Scriptural status.

Thornwell well explains the importance of this benefit: “A Protestant Church, with an unchangeable creed, is an anomaly. Its very name is a confession of its liability to err; and that no provision should be made for correcting its errors seems not a little extravagant...” (*Collected Writings*, Vol. IV, p. 422).

In my heart, this protection of the sacred status of Scripture alone, is the core issue – not whether we will have a strict- or full-, good-faith- or system-subscription standard. All of these terms ultimately are only debates about the degree of difference we will allow with our standards. And because a degree of difference cannot be settled with a doctrinal yardstick, the debates will be interminable. Temperament and personality, suspicion and trust, fear and vision have always been far more determinative of the degrees of difference we have allowed than any iron-clad logic. The core issue remains whether, at the most fundamental level, we want to be “legislatively controlled” or “Biblically compelled” in our judgments regarding our church’s mission. My conviction is that always we must let the Bible speak. Historical debates about human standards cannot be our only word on a subject if we cannot yet prove to ourselves that this is what the only infallible rule of faith and practice, the inerrant Word of God, says.

Our Creed is not *sola Confession*. The vision that will unite and compel us must be shaped by what we believe the Bible is calling *us* to do *today* in order to make Christ’s salvation known to all the world. God does not commit all of his wisdom to any one society, era, or branch of Christ’s church. We will always be a pilgrim people that needs more light from God’s Word. While we honor our Confession, we must be willing in biblical obedience and mission to learn where our standards have their limitations and to discern more fully what God’s Word requires us to proclaim until every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Perspective on Subscription Standards

3. We will guard against apostasy and promote the Kingdom of Christ.

No human standard will guarantee orthodoxy, but a system of examination that allows for good faith expression of reasonable differences under strict biblical constraint keeps men from the temptation to affirm what they do not believe, or to put private construction upon words they publicly vow.

We vow to each other that the system of doctrine contained in our Confession and Catechisms is our own belief. We *must* mean this, and we must allow ourselves to take the vow in such a way that we *can* mean it. As Charles Hodge wrote, “It is impossible that a body of several thousand ministers and elders should think alike on all the topics embraced in such an extended and minute formula of belief. . . . We do not expect that our ministers should adopt every proposition contained in our standards.”

Thus, we must allow for good faith expression of some differences from men whose consciences are ruled by Scripture. For despite our best attempts (even of the good men gathered here today), we will not discover a human system of scrutiny that will insulate us from apostasy or dead orthodoxy. Only the Holy Spirit can keep us faithful. What will unite us in his purposes is a deep understanding of our unique stewardship as a Reformed people. We are heralds as well as guardians of the Biblical truth of a sovereign and saving God. Only when we have become so entranced with the message of grace and so enchained to the Spirit’s vision that we not only love one another as ourselves, but even put one another’s interests ahead of our own – only, then, will we have a greater capacity to develop presbyteries which not only agree in doctrine, but increasingly share a common heart for Christ, his church, and a lost world. Only then will we be as concerned to draw one another closer to the purposes of Christ’s heart as to expose cracks in each other’s understanding of our Standards. Only in these bonds of love can we hope to interpret God’s Word of eternal truth with unswerving fidelity. Only in these bonds of love can we help one another to proclaim Christ’s hope for a dying world with undaunted commitment to the historic faith entrusted to us. To this Confessional faith we have vowed our allegiance. By walking in his Spirit subject to his Word we will maintain this faith to which we have committed our lives and our eternities.