

# Reformed Presbyterian Church

EVANGELICAL SYNOD

May 31, 1980

Rev. Stephen E. Smallman  
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Dear Steve:

Enclosed is my work on the WCF and the Separation-Apostasy issue. I hope it may be helpful. I will be sending copies of it to the other members of the committee in the first part of next week, but wanted to get this off to you as early as possible.

In that mailing next week, I hope also to have another brief treatise, part or all of which might be acceptable for use in the final report. As it comes out, it may only represent my own minority opinion. You will have to be the judge, and since I have not thought it through yet myself, I am not sure where it will fit. It will relate to the general theme of Separation in the contemporary scene.

A principle point which I feel I must make in this statement is by way of objection to an interpretation which both you and Dr. Young are putting on Synod's 1978 Judicial Commission Report #4, which related to the Lookout Mountain V.B.S. matter. Your interpretation may be justified by the wording of the statement, and, if so, then I am also in disagreement with the J.C. report at that point. That should not be surprising since I voted against it at the time and have seen no reason to change my opinion. Yet, I am not even certain that the report says what you and Dr. Young are deriving from it.

Quoting the Commission's report in section 7 of your "Separatist Movement in Presbyterianism - 1922-1979", you state that Synod upheld Southern Presbytery and this cooperative venture with the PCUS congregation, on the basis of the FOG provision that such cooperatives are permissible in instances where the "particular churches (are) free from apostasy." My first question is whether a careful reading of the J.C. Report will justify such an interpretation. Granted they upheld Southern Presbytery, but was that the basis for their action. The Report does quote the FOG provision cited, but does so with a qualifying interpretation, pointing out that the expression "free from Apostasy" has to do both with "the character of the congregation at the local level and also the status of the denomination with which the local congregation is affiliated." It might be argued that the commission was drawing a



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"...for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ"--Rev. 1:9

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straight line between the FOG provision and their own conclusion to uphold Southern Presbytery, but I think that is somewhat in doubt from the language used.

If my first question is not sustained, I still must object to the use of this language from the F.O.G. as you and Dr. Young are using it. I think I am being very cautious when I say that there was serious question about applying the term "free from Apostasy" to the PCUS in 1978. It should not take much effort to demonstrate that the PCUS was at that time at least as worthy of the name "apostate" in 1978 as the old USA Presbyterian Church in 1934. Surely we strain credulity a bit far if in 1980 we continue to apply the expression "free from apostasy" to the church in which the Rev. Mansfield Kareman is a ministerial member in good standing, by virtue of the membership in the National Capitol Union Presbytery, a union Presbytery between PCUS and UPCUSA. If the J.C. did mean to use those words to describe the PCUS then, I am embarrassed by it and hope that you will not quote them reflecting either bad logic or poor discernment in the 1978 Synod.

I will share other thoughts with you later. I deeply appreciate the hard work and many hours you have put into this project. I agree with you in regarding it as a very important thing. The PCA thing makes it even more important since we need to carry this part of our heritage into any further relationships we may have with them.

Sincerely in Christ,

PHA/ko

Paul N. Alexander

## WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH AND THE APOSTASY - SEPARATION ISSUE

"Whereas, amongst the infinite blessings of Almighty God upon this nation, none is nor can be more dear unto us than the purity of our religion;..."<sup>1</sup> So begins the document which formally established the Westminster Assembly of Divines on June 12, 1643. It was concern for the "purity of our religion" which lay at the foundation of our Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. This purity could not be maintained without protest against impurity. This same document specifies further that the Westminster Assembly was convened in protest against "...that present church-government by archbishops, their chancellors, commissars, deans..." etc. because such a "hierarchy is evil, and justly offensive and burdensome to the kingdom, a great impediment to reformation and growth of religion..."<sup>2</sup>

Separation from an established church was a significant part of the historic matrix in which the Westminster Confession of Faith was conceived. In the minds of its authors, the WCF was part of a protest against a church which had become intolerably corrupt. The entire document is influenced by this fact, and parts of three chapters may be seen as having direct bearing on the related issues of apostasy and ecclesiastical separation.

### CHAPTER XX, Paragraph 2.

"God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his Word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience; and reason also." King Charles I of England, like so many other monarchs of his day, had been trying to force his subjects to yield to his will in "matters of faith or worship." The Westminster Divines were representative of those who were in revolt against Charles and against the church which he championed. To yield would have been to betray "true liberty of conscience;" yes, it would even destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also." The WCF and the entire Reformation, for that matter, were a protest against a concerted effort to bind

men's consciences contrary to scripture. For the Westminster Divines, separation was not only justified, it was required in order to maintain integrity of conscience before God.

CHAPTER XXV, paragraphs 4-6

"4. This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.

"5. The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth to worship God according to His will."

These paragraphs are concerned with the purity of the church. They recognize the impossibility of an absolutely pure church, and give no support to those who would separate from a church on trivial grounds. At the same time, it is noted that some churches "...have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan." Surely such a state of degeneracy within a church is grounds for separation. Though they do not formally declare it, we may assume that the Westminster Divines had judged that the Church of Charles I was just such a degenerate body, and that this was the reason for their writing a new confession and establishing a new church.

The most severe statement is reserved for paragraph 6. "There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ: nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense be head thereof." This is severe enough in itself, but represents a revision by deletion from the original version. The original version adds, concerning the pope, "but is that Anti-christ, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God." It is important to note that the authors of the WCF were willing to make such a judgement of the Roman Catholic Church and its head. Though the word "apostate" is not invoked here or elsewhere in the WCF, surely the language used is equivalent, implying that the

Roman Catholic Church is a "synagogue of Satan" and stating specifically that the pope is "that Antichrist." On the basis of such judgements, these men and those whom they represented separated from the established church.

CHAPTER XXIX, paragraphs 2, 6.

This section of the Confession signalizes one particularly offensive practice and doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, the mass with its teaching of transubstantiation. The WCF specifically contradicts these errors:

"2. In this sacrament Christ is not offered up to his Father, nor any real sacrifice made at all for remission of sins of the quick or dead, but only a commemoration of that one offering up of himself, by himself, upon the cross, once for all, and a spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God for the same, so that the Popish sacrifice of the mass, as they call it, is most abominably injurious to Christ's one only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of the elect.

"6. That doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of bread and wine, into the substance of Christ's body and blood (commonly called transubstantiation) by consecration of a priest, or by any other way, is repugnant, not to scripture alone, but even to common-sense and reason; overthroweth the nature of the sacrament; and hath been, and is the cause of manifold superstitions, yea of gross idolatries."

Here are concrete examples of the "doctrines and commandments of men" referred to in general terms in WCF XX, par. 2. Such error was "most abominably injurious" and "repugnant" both to scripture and "even to common-sense." There must be a protest against such dangerous teaching and practice, and the authors of the WCF willingly made this protest both in these words which they wrote and in the ecclesiastical separation which they made between themselves and the Roman Catholic Church.

Chapter XXX might also be added to the three sections cited above. Its treatment of CHURCH CENSURES may be seen as a preventive measure against the abuses noted above as well as against other evils which might invade the church. Separation may itself be seen as an act of church censure. It is one part of the body of Christ declaring that another part is guilty of grievous sin.

## APPLICATIONS

1) Our Recent Past. Machen might have quoted WCF, XX, par. 2, in support of his oft-quoted statement, "A Church that places the word of man above the Word of God and dethrones Jesus Christ is an apostate church." Pressures to bind his conscience were administered differently than those applied by the popes at the time of the Reformation, but those pressures were just as real. It was true that the "doctrines and commandments of men" were making serious inroads in the church to which he belonged. The supernatural itself was being questioned (Auburn Affirmationists), something that had never happened in the church of Charles I. Machen and those who followed him were guided by principles enunciated in the Confession of Faith. Our recent past is consistent with the principles taught in our Confession.

2) Our Present. If apostasy was evident to Machen more than 40 years ago, then it should be many times more clear to us today. Major church leaders have openly challenged such basic doctrines of God's Word as the trinity, the bodily resurrection of Christ, even the deity of Christ. Homosexual ministers of both sexes are ordained in several denominations and unbiblical edicts are enforced upon local churches (e.g. Overture L in the UPCUSA). All of this would have been unthinkable in Machen's day. We must continue to apply the principles of our Confession to these issues of our day.

To 17th Century England and Scotland, the WCF held out a clear alternative to the superstitions and corruptions of Medieval Roman Catholicism. Our age needs an equally clear alternative. To offer this alternative it will at times be necessary for ministers and congregations to separate from ecclesiastical alliances which compromise the Word of God.

It is important also to note the key role of conscience in this matter. Four times the word "conscience" is used in Chapter XX par. 2 of the WCF. It is the conscience that must be convinced that a church has declined so far that separation is the only suitable recourse. While we must stand firmly for what our own conscience may dictate, we must, at the same time, be patient with one whose conscience may not agree with ours.

When the Westminster Divines began their work, they were "...resolved...that such a government be settled in the church as may be most agreeable to God's holy Word, and most apt to procure and preserve the peace of the church..."<sup>3</sup> May God grant that our own motivations be in harmony with this high and holy resolve.

## FOOTNOTES

1. An Ordinance of the Lords and Commons assembled in Parliament, for the calling of an Assembly of learned and godly Divines, and others, to be consulted with by the Parliament, for the settling of the government and liturge of the Church of England; and for vindicating and clearing of the doctrine of the said Church from false aspersions and interpretations, June 12, 1643.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

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Apostasy and Separation Committee  
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