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APOSTASY AND ECCLESIASTICAL SEPARATION

INTRODUCTION

The Fourteenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America adopted the following action directing the Stated Clerk to prepare a paper on the distinctive positions of the Presbyterian Church in America, using both the study paper of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, on "Apostasy and Separation", and the position papers adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America:

"Whereas, the Presbyterian Church in America, and before it the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, have conscientiously adhered to the Protestant principle of ecclesiastical separation when all other efforts to attain purity of the Church have failed, and

Whereas, the RPC,ES did a careful study of the matter and reported that study to the 158th General Synod (cf. *Acts of Synod*, pp. 75ff), and

Whereas, much has been written about the PCA history and convictions in the matter of ecclesiastical separation, and

Whereas, many who are entering the ministry of the PCA evidence little understanding or appreciation of this part of our heritage, and

Whereas, the issue of ecclesiastical separation needs to be presented to the larger Church;

Therefore be it resolved that the Fourteenth General Assembly direct the Stated Clerk to prepare for publication a document explaining the convictions and history of the PCA and the RPC,ES. The document shall be revised under the supervision of the Stated Clerk to include history pertinent to the formation of the PCA and a reflection of PCA governmental standards rather than those of the RPC,ES.

This document shall not represent an "official" position of the PCA but shall be available as information. Upon completion of the revision, the Committee on Christian Education and Publications shall publish the study when funds are available and make it available for sale." (Overture 5, 14-4, B, p. 44)

In accord with this directive, the first part of this paper is taken from the [study paper of the RPC,ES on Apostasy and Separation](#) (See *Documents of Synod*, p. 45, p. 65, and p. 75). The second part includes those position papers of the PCA, which give the grounds of its separate existence, and how it views its work. In addition, specific references are made to positions of the PCA has taken on various matters.

I. BACKGROUND STUDIES

A. Scripture

1. Biblical Studies

The God of Scripture is a God of truth. This teaching is set over against the theme of false teaching and false teachers throughout the

Scripture. While it would be pleasant to be able to dwell exclusively on the positive aspects of the Gospel, that cannot be done if one is to consider the whole counsel of God (Jude 3ff). What follows are brief studies in particular areas of concern and then a focus on what the committee felt was the heart of the issue -- the question of the Biblical teaching about discipline.

a. Apostasy

The Greek words from which "apostate" and "apostasy" are derived are *apostasia*, *apostates*, and *aphistemi*. They do not occur frequently in the New Testament. *Apostasia* is used but twice in the New Testament: in Acts 21:21, where Paul is accused of teaching Jews to "turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs"; and in II Thessalonians 2:3 where "the rebellion" is predicted, and the appearance of the man of lawlessness. In the New Testament no one is called an "apostate". However, other words may indicate that such a condition has occurred; e.g. *parapipto* (used only in Hebrews 6:6) and *arneomai* (as used in Matthew 10:33; I Timothy 5:8; II Peter 2:1; I John 2:22ff; Jude 4).

Twice *aphistemi* has a direct bearing on our study: in I Timothy 4:1 Paul predicted that some will "abandon the faith in later times;" and in Hebrews 3:12 the writer warns against "a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God." In the former case, the act consists of following devilish teachings such as forbidding to marry or to eat certain foods; in the latter case, it was a case of disobedience repeated many times during the desert wandering. As to LXX usage, Hatch and Redpath lists 41 Hebrew words translated by *aphistemi*. A study of those examples as well as the New Testament usage leads to the following conclusions: (1) apostasy is abandonment of a belief or practice once publicly held to, (2) a variety of acts may be called "apostate," (3) the term "apostasy" should be applied to public detectable acts only, and individuals and churches should be able to use the word in the Biblical sense, and to apply it to those who commit such acts.

b. False Teachers and False Teaching

False teaching is not tolerated in the Bible because of the affront which it is to God and evil results it will bring upon the congregation. Hence, warnings against it are always accompanied with a threat of judgment, and a warning of what false teaching will cause the people to do. False teaching takes different forms: it may be a call to follow other gods, or the teaching of another gospel, or the view that the resurrection has already taken place. False teaching is always dangerous because it works like leaven; it always affects people adversely, and cannot be cured except by drastic action. Conversely, sound doctrine

does not work like leaven, and it is furthered by clear teaching, godly living, and consistent discipline.

Because these things are so, false teachers must be dealt with by extreme measures. They are to be "cut off", "stoned" and an anathema is placed on them. In Deut. 13:12ff false teaching and apostasy are closely linked: the false prophet's message, "let us go after other gods," must be met with the death penalty. The penalty must be carried out against a member of one's family, or against a town which has been infected with the error. The purpose is: "Then all Israel will hear and be afraid" (v. 1a). It should be noted that this is one of the prime reasons for discipline, the effect false teaching will have on the people of God (v. 11). The Scriptures consistently stress this, for no one is immune to its effects. Frequently the Lord insists that if the people themselves do not cut off the offender, He Himself will do so.

At the same time it should be noted that the punishment for false teaching is no more severe than that for any other overt transgression of the commandments, even those dealing with ceremonies (cf. Gen. 17:14; Ex. 12:15, 19; 31:14; Lev. 7:20ff; 17:9, 10).

c. Heresy and Heretics

This group includes *haireisis*, *hairetikos*, *hairetizo*, and *haireomai*. These words mean "choose," "pick," "choices," (both good and bad), "schools," "factions," "dissensions," "opinions," "ways of thinking." These words became technical terms, usually, but not always, with negative connotations.

Our group is brought into focus by Titus 3:10 where *hairetikon* (NIV -- "a divisive person") is to be warned and then rejected; by Galatians 5:20 where *haireisis* (NIV -- "factions") are among the works of the flesh and "those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God:" by I Corinthians 11:19 where *haireisis* (NIV -- "differences") seems to be classed with *schismata*, and both are set over against *dokimoi* (NIV -- "those who 'have God's approval'"). Clearly, "heresies" and "heretics" have no place in the church. However, our group of words is so little used in the New Testament that a word-study per se is not very productive.

The New Testament mentions Diotrephes (11 John 9ff) who may have been a heretic, or an incipient heretic, who in any case comes under John's authority. John determined to confront him (publicly? privately?) regarding malicious gossip. Diotrephes was also guilty of imposing his will on the saints so as to require them to refuse to receive traveling (?) brethren and, if they did, of excommunicating them. Clearly Diotrephes was not teaching false doctrine, but he needed discipline. Marshall writes (NICNT, p. 91): "It is not Christian to refrain from

exercising legitimate authority where there is need to do so; the modern church is perhaps too chary in exercising brotherly admonition and even discipline when it is required."

It is important to keep Marshall's remarks in mind. The one causing division is not the one who institutes discipline, but the one who teaches and acts contrary to sound doctrine (cf. 1 Kings 18:18).

2 John 7ff speaks of "deceivers" with whom the recipients of John's letter must break fellowship: "do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work." Here we have an advance over 3 John. The coming of deceivers was predicted by Jesus (Matthew 24:5, 23ff), by Paul (Acts 20:28ff). They are now present in John's day. They do not "confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh." The participle is present indicating continuous action; He came in the flesh and is still in the flesh. To reject that truth is to be anti-Christ, and John is not loath to pass such a judgment. Even so, to say such a terrible thing about another human being is consistent with walking in love; it is the fact "keeping the commandments" (v. 6).

The presence of deceivers called for self-examination by believers because adopting their false teaching would mean great loss (v. 8). "Progressing beyond" the doctrine which Christ brought (or, the doctrine concerning Christ) is indication that one is godless (v. 9). Such a one should be rejected (perhaps a traveling preacher) and not even given a welcome. To do so would entail complicity in his evil deeds (v. 11).

Other discipline of false teachers was called for in order to protect believers from their error (Acts 20:28ff). Here it should be pointed out the "fellowship" with false teachers entails "fellowship" in their evil deeds.

d. Discipline

Introduction

The discussion as to whether a given church or denomination is apostate or heretical is simply too abstract. It is evident that "separation" cannot be studied and expounded in isolation from the rest of Scripture. Actually, "separation" is part of a process of *discipline*. Discipline, however, is a function of the *church*. The church is the creation of God who is holy and intends His church to be holy. There is and can be no holiness in a sinful world apart from the *grace* of Calvary and the power of the resurrection. Hence, much of the following study focuses on discipline as the holy God outlines it for His people.

From the beginning, God's purposes for His people has been holy living. His call to Abraham was "... be blameless" (Gen. 17:1). To Israel it was "Therefore be holy, because I am holy" (Lev. 11:4-5), a command repeated in the New Testament

(1 Peter 1:16). This holiness is not the product of sinful striving; it is the gift of grace and the human effort which produces holiness is an ability which comes from the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, the holiness God requires is the fruit of the Spirit. There is a series of divine activities which see to it that we are holy. We have been chosen for holiness (Eph. 1:4). Jesus died to make us holy (Eph. 5:27); we are called to holiness (1 Thess. 4:7; 2 Tim. 1:9); God disciplines us for holiness (Heb. 12:10).

But holiness is also a human activity, and it is here that discipline becomes a vital concern. Self-discipline is required for that obedience which produces holiness, and corporate discipline is required if the individual is to receive the support and admonition of the community. One does not become holy on a desert island but only within the church where members warn, rebuke, expel, one another as occasion demands (I Thess. 5:14; Rom. 15:14; I Tim. 5:20; II Tim. 4:2, I Cor. 5:13).

Holiness is also maintained by vigilance regarding outside influences. Paul not only warned the Ephesians against men who would arise "from your own number and distort the truth..." (Acts 20:30), he was also compelled to call for vigilance because "savage wolves will come in among you" (v. 29). The danger was real, and the figure Paul chose was not that of a puppy dog but of a marauding animal bent on destruction. Clearly, the holiness of the Ephesians could not be taken for granted.

The dual warning noted above, regarding wolves outside and false teachers within, was given to Israel at the time of Sinaitic covenant. Discipline is imbedded in Biblical revelation from start to finish. Israel was not to make a covenant with any other nation (although there was provision that individual members of other nations might join the covenant and congregating), and the nation was to deal strictly with covenant breakers from within.

(1) Old Testament Covenant Breakers

Purpose of the Command to Discipline (and Subsequent Value When Obeyed)

--It upholds God's righteousness - Lev. 19:2

--It keeps the congregation pure - Deut. 17:12; 29:28

--It makes the offender an example to the rest of the people -Deut. 19:16-21; 21:18

Although the punishment was severe in the Old Testament theocracy, it was never hasty or vengeful. The rights of the accused were strictly enforced, and cities of refuge were designated to provide for protection against vengeance.

A wide variety of sins was to be judged: sins against God (blasphemy, idolatry, etc), and sins against the neighbor (kidnapping, dishonoring parents, etc.). Also, the death penalty was to be carried out for offenses against the ceremonial law

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(worshipping while unclean), and against the civil law (showing contempt for a judge). We are reminded of James 2:10, "Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."

(2) Agents of Discipline

-- Congregation (represented by elders, priests) acting as God's agents

-- Individuals, sometimes when congregation did not, sometimes when individuals were witnesses

-- God, acting either initially or when congregation did not - Num. 11:1, 4ff; 12:1ff; 14:37; 16:1ff

What Happened If Discipline is Not Exercised

-- God will take over - Lev. 20:4ff; 26:1ff; Deut. 27:9ff; 28:15ff

-- The undisciplined will become root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood -- Deut. 29:18

The Old Testament records show that Israel did not discipline. But God did, and the record is terrible indeed. (Heb. 3:16-19 and 1 Cor. 10:6-10)

B. New Testament Discipline

When we come to the New Testament, there are a few principles which should guide our study. There is no longer corporal discipline: elders do not stone, whip, or use any other method of physical punishment. Nor is the church called upon to exercise the ban on sinful nations.

Yet it would be a mistake to infer from this that discipline is less important in the New Testament. God is still righteous; sin is still detestable; sinners must be reclaimed both by evangelism and discipline; the wrath of God will still come upon the ungodly.

Moreover, the Old Testament procedure for discipline prevails in the New Testament (e.g. Deut. 17:6 and 19:15 are quoted in Matt. 18:16; John 8:17; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19; Heb. 10:28). Jesus reinforces the restitution called for in Lev. 5:14ff as an essential part of the trespass offering, when He told His disciples, "First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:24).

In Hebrews there is an *a fortiori* argument which we must not ignore: "If the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore. ..." (2:2); also, "How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished. ..." (10:29). To which we should add, "But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment" (1 Cor. 11:31).

C. Purpose of the Command to Discipline (and Subsequent Value When Obeyed)

--It is an act of obedience - 2 Cor. 2:9; 7:12

--It should be done out of reverence for God - 2 Cor. 7:1

--It makes offender ashamed - 2 Thess. 3:14

--It restores the offender - 1 Cor. 5.5, 6; 1 Tim. 1:20

--Others will fear to sin - 1 Tim. 5:20

--You will not lose what you have worked for - 2 John 8

Consider particularly the impact of Matthew 18:17 - "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." This verse should be read in relation to Leviticus 19:17 and Luke 17:3. The Leviticus context is one of love to neighbor (v. 18): to love another is to rebuke him. Also, there is a certain self-interest in rebuke "so you will not share in his guilt." The point is that sin acts like yeast and quickly defiles the whole congregation. Therefore out of a sense of love for the offender, and of concern for one's self and the community -- call sin, sin. On the other hand, when one knows of a sin and does not rebuke the offender, the former shares in the latter's guilt. We have a similar thought in II John 11: "Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work." In legal parlance, one becomes an accessory after the fact when he fails to follow the procedures of discipline.

In the Luke passage Jesus stresses the continuing character of this discipline - a man might sin against you seven times in a day. As the offense persists, Jesus says, so should the rebuke, and so should the forgiveness.

In Matthew 18, Jesus is talking about scandals, or causes for sin. It is a terrible thing to cause someone else to sin (v. 6). It is a perilous matter when we allow any of our bodily parts to cause us to sin (v. 8,9). In this context, He speaks of rebuking a brother who sins against you. We are probably to understand the sin here as a scandal, something which might be a cause to sin.

The following passages should be consulted for aspects of discipline: Romans 16:17; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 11-13; Ephesians 5:3; Philippians 3:2; 2 Thess. 3:6; 14; 1 Tim. 1:18; 4:1-6; 5:20; 2 Tim. 2:16ff; 3:1ff; Titus 3:9ff; 2 Peter 2:1ff; 3:3; 2 John 17; 3 John 9; Jude 3, 22ff; Revelation 18:4.

D. Summary

- (1) We cannot avoid the conclusion that discipline is important. The references are many. They are found throughout Jesus' teaching and in almost every epistle; the churches to whom the instructions come are scattered over the whole world known at that time. It is evident that no church, no area, is exempt from the responsibility of continuing vigilance against the inroads of false teaching and false practice.
- (2) This injunction to so widely scattered churches was of course necessitated by the equally widespread opposition to the Gospel in the forms of false teaching, sexual abuse, idleness, etc. In this connection we should note the awareness of Satan's activity in most of the churches on the part of all writers of epistles.
- (3) It is clear that the New Testament has no one technical word of the practice of discipline which is parallel to the Old Testament "cut off." On the other hand, the richness of the vocabulary points to the manifold character of discipline. It entails constant

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vigilance, continual reminder, a hatred and even fear of any sin and its consequences, the importance of gentleness and of private admonition in the early stages, the necessity for sternness and public rebuke later on, and finally the step of isolation, separation.

- (4) While church leaders are involved in the more public process of discipline, it is evident that there must be total congregational commitment to the principle. The congregation must support and implement discipline at each level once the offense has reached the state where it must be known.

II. THE EARLY CHURCH

Apostasy and Ecclesiastical Separation in the Early Church

In the formative year of the church the question of apostasy was a pressing one. It was not uncommon for those who professed the Christian faith and were baptized into it to turn away and so return to their pagan religion or to Judaism. This apostasy was at first considered unforgivable and those guilty of such sin were not readmitted to the church. By the third century the severity of the persecutions caused large numbers to apostatize who then begged for readmittance and forgiveness for their lapse. The issue of whether or not to restore these "lapsi" became a cause of division within the church.

For purposes of this study it should be noted that:

- (1) Apostasy was considered to be the action of an individual who totally renounced the faith and would no longer even be called a Christian.
- (2) At that early date, apostasy was not difficult to discern in that one's confession about Christ was the essential focus of the persecutions.

With the gradual establishment of the church, apostasy was not discussed as much as the issue of heresy. Few desired to leave the church or renounce the name of Christ, but there was the difficult matter of deviant teaching among those who continued to call themselves Christian. In one sense apostasy was seen to differ from heresy only in that it was heresy carried to its ultimate deviance. In another sense apostasy could be said to be qualitatively different in that it meant consciously renouncing the name of Christ. Those guilty of heresy frequently formed new groups, but they would contain to claim the name Christian, which would not be true of those who were apostate.

Related to the issue of heresy was that of schism. The former involved doctrinal error and the latter ecclesiastical separation or dissent. Augustine said, "... you are a schismatic by your sacrilegious separation and heretic by your sacrilegious doctrine." (Cf. Calvin citation of Augustine in *Institutes*, Book IV, Ch. II, Sec. 5).

In practice, however, the two terms were used almost synonymously. Thus the division of the Eastern and Western churches beginning in 1052 is thought of as a schism, but both sides regard the other as heretics. With the coming of the Middle Ages and the preoccupation with ecclesiastical rather than doctrinal questions it could be observed that the most objectionable heresy was

schism. This would help explain why the apologetic of the Reformers in ecclesiastical issues constantly dealt with the question of whether or not they were schismatic. The Reformers, however, were eager to return to matters of doctrine rather than organizational unity as the basis for any discussion of schism. (Cf. *De Ecclesia* by John Hus; *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* by Martin Luther)

For purposes of this study it should be noted that:

- (1) Up to this point in the history of the church apostasy continued to be used exclusively of individuals who totally renounced even the name of Christ.
- (2) Heresy became the term used for those who claim to be Christian but teach false doctrine. A contemporary Catholic scholar, Karl Rahner, has raised the issue of whether or not in the Christian milieu of today it is possible or likely that anyone would be truly apostate ("On Heresy"). But even in terms of the classic understanding of the word, it seems entirely conceivable that a person (or a church) could become heretical to such a degree that it is for all practical purposes apostate.

(Cf. Article on "Apostasy" and "Heresy" in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967)

III. THE REFORMATION CHURCHES

Apostasy and Ecclesiastical Separation in the Reformation Era

During the Reformation one of the most vital areas of discussion was the nature of the visible church. The place of Scripture and the doctrines of salvation were reasserted, but they had been well established in antiquity. In ecclesiology, however, a new situation presented itself for solution. The body which could claim historical and perhaps even organizational continuity with the Apostolic church had not departed substantially from the faith it professed; at least so argued the Reformers. It became a question of who could call whom a heretic -- who was the true church. This was not a light matter for the Protestants regarding schism as gravely as did the Romanists (Calvin twice identifies as apostate those who leave the church for insufficient reasons [*Institutes*, Book IV, Ch. 1, Sec. 5, 10]).

The Protestant argumentation began from Scripture and soon revolved around what were called the "marks" of a true church. "He has moreover set off by plainer marks the knowledge of his very body to us, knowing how necessary it is to our salvation." (*Institutes*, Book IV, Ch. 1, Sec. 8). There was some variation as to just what these marks were, but it was agreed by all that the two principle "marks" were "the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution." (*Institutes*, Book IV, Ch. 1, Sec. 9) Luther in 1539 listed four others, but because his ecclesiology focused essentially on the invisible church he was reluctant to add the traditional third mark of the church, that of discipline. The Reformed churches were more concerned with defining the visible church and therefore insisted that discipline must accompany the first two marks so that the church could remain true. Calvin never listed this third mark because he felt it belonged to the proper administration of the church not its essence, but he did insist on its importance.

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Constant reference to the three marks are found in the Reformed creeds of the sixteenth century as the basis for distinguishing the true and false church.

"We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true church, since all sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the Church. [Then the three marks are listed.] As for the false church, she ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit herself to the yoke of Christ. These two churches are easily known and distinguished from each other." (Belgic Confession [1561], Article XXIX)

The issue of the nature of the true church as discussed during the Reformation has great significance for enlightening current discussions of this same issue. Many of the larger ecclesiastical bodies can claim historical and organizational continuity with the churches that came from the Reformation but they have departed from the faith they once professed. Those who consider separation are once again labelled schismatic. But in fact is the true church determined solely by organization? Is it schismatic to have a body that does not manifest the marks?

Special attention should be given to the careful presentation of John Calvin in chapters one and two of Book IV of his *Institutes*. These chapters represent the mature reflections of this reformer. Chapter 1 is titled "The True Church with which as Mother of all the Godly we must keep Unity. This chapter is a strong affirmation of the importance of the church, which he does not hesitate to call our mother as God is our Father. As noted above he twice refers to those who are indifferent to the unity of the church as apostates (the only time he speaks of apostasy in this discussion of the church). In this chapter he explains the importance of the marks and the necessity of staying within the church if they are present regardless of the "quality of the members." (Thus he disagrees with the Anabaptist view that the purity of the church is based on the sanctification of its members rather than the truth of its confession.) Chapter 2 is entitled "A Comparison of the False and the True Church." In this chapter, while reaffirming the importance of unity in the true church, he is clear that that betes the question of what happens when the church is no longer true. "But, as soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, surely the death of the church follows ... If the foundation of the church is the teaching of the prophets and apostles, which bids believers entrust their salvation to Christ alone -- then take away that teaching, and how will the building continue to stand? Therefore, the church must tumble down when that sum of religion dies which alone can sustain it. Again, if the true church is the pillar and foundation of truth (I Tim. 3:15), it is certain that no church can exist where lying and falsehood have gained sway." (*Institutes*, Book IV, CH. 11, Sec. 1) In the discussion of separation that follows, Calvin carefully shows that when the marks have disappeared the charge of schism cannot be made since it is no longer a church in any Biblical sense of that word. Section 10 has the title "Why we must separate from the corrupted church." In the concluding sections Calvin acknowledges that "vestiges" of the true, particularly baptism, remain and he ends the discussion with this remarkable paragraph:

"In them Christ lies hidden, half buried, the gospel overthrown, piety scattered, the worship of God nearly wiped out. In them, briefly, everything is so confused that there we see the face of Babylon rather than that of the Holy City of God. To sum up, I call them churches to the extent that the Lord wonderfully

preserves in them a remnant of his people, however woefully dispersed and scattered, and to the extent that some marks of the church remain -- especially those marks whose effectiveness neither the devil's wiles nor human depravity can destroy. But on the other hand, because in them those marks have been erased to which we should pay particular regard in this discourse, I say that every one of their congregations and their whole body lack the lawful form of the church." (*Institutes*, Book IV, Ch. II, Sec. 12)

It is interesting to note that the question of apostasy is not raised as a necessary prerequisite to legitimate separation. There can be little question that Calvin, in common with other Reformers, considered the Roman See to represent "nothing but, horrid apostasy" and the pope the Antichrist (*Institutes*, Book IV, Ch. VII, Sec. 24, 25). But the more easily identified "marks" were the actual criteria used in discussing separation. In the context of the contemporary issue it should at least raise the question of whether apostasy must be claimed or proved before separation can be justified to lay claim to faithfulness to our Reformed heritage.

IV. THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION

Westminster Confession of Faith

"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; ...". 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...". In undertaking their work the members of the Assembly 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 produce and preserve the peace of the church...".

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.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.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.

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 ground. 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 as well as the church of Rome was just such a degenerate body, and that this was the reason for their writing a new confession and establishing a new church.

There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ: not 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 judgment 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 Anti-Christ." On the basis of such judgments, these men and those whom they represented separated from the established church.

CHAPTER XXIX.2. In this sacrament [the mass] 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.

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 preventative 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 censures. It is one part of the body of Christ declaring that another part is guilty of grievous sin.

SUMMARY

To seventeenth-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.

V. THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Issue of Separation Among Scottish Presbyterians

The Covenanters and other groups in Scotland in their devotion to the Scriptural ideal of a pure church carefully stated reasons for breaking ties with unfaithful groups and organizing new ecclesiastical bodies. (An important source of this information is *A History of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church* by Ray A. King, published by the Board of Christian Education of the ARP Church, Charlotte, NC, 1966.) Though their problems differed from those of the twentieth century, we today can learn wisdom from their documents. The earliest official pronouncements of the Covenanters are printed in *Testimony-Bearing Exemplified* (Paisley, 1791, reprinted in New York, 1834).

Sections I and II note the difference "between a church in her infancy, and growing up into reformation, and an adult church, which hath arrived at a higher pitch of reformation: in the former many things may be tolerated, which may not in the latter."

This contrasts with the view that a church can tolerate much more serious defections from the faith in its maturity than it did at its organization.

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Section IV can be seen to be pertinent to our predicament in 1936. It reads in part, "We distinguish between a reformed church enjoying her privileges and judicatories and a reformed church denuded of [them. In the former people are to address themselves unto the church judicatories and not withdraw from their ministers, especially for ordinary scandals, without making prior application to these. But in the latter when ministers are really scandalous, though not juridically declared so, and duly censurable according to the word of God and their own church's constitutions ... people may do what is competent to them ... by withdrawing from such ministers even without the presbyterial sentence."

Still more strictly the document says, "We can join with none whose sin we may be interpreted to homologate ... or which might be so looked upon as ... a badge of our compliance with them, or sign of approbation of their sin, directly, or indirectly. For in our joining in worship or church communion, we must advert to what it may be interpreted ... in our own or others' consciences ... for to that we must also have special respect, lest we offend and stumble others ... We can join with none from whom a church duly constituted ... would enjoin us to withdraw."

Then finally in Section V the document says, "We judge we have sufficient ground to withdraw, not only from these who are actively and actually of the foresaid compliances ... but also from such ministers who take the defense and patrociny of these courses, who palliate and plaster them, and strengthen the hands and harden the hearts of these that are engaged in them."

There is ample evidence that the Reformed Presbyterian church continued to affirm its willingness to separate for principle. In the Reformation Principles Exhibited, of 1806, Ch. XXI:5 is stated: "When [in] any church ... the administration is corrupt, and attempts at its reformation have proved ineffectual, it is the duty of Christians to separate from it." (cf. *The History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod*, by George P. Hutchinson, chapters 2 and 3.) Thus in the Plan of Union with the Evangelical Presbyterian church in 1965 there was no hesitation on the part of the Reformed Presbyterians in agreeing to the statement about apostasy cited earlier.

VI. AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Issue of Apostasy in the Presbyterian Church in the Nineteenth Century

A very significant situation developed in the Presbyterian Church in the nineteenth century. (This is presented in detail as part of an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Dr. David Jones of Covenant Seminary entitled *The Doctrine of the Church in American Presbyterian Theology in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*.) In 1835 the General Assembly was asked by the Presbytery of Baltimore to rule on the status of the Roman Catholic Church. The ruling was as follows:

It is the deliberate and decided judgment of this Assembly, that the Roman Catholic Church has essentially apostatized from the religion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and therefore cannot be recognized as a Christian Church.

The declaration of the apostasy of that church led logically to a consideration of the validity of its ordinances, particularly baptism. In 1845 the matter came up in the General Assembly of the Old School. (The division of the Presbyterian Church into

Old and New School led to slightly different handling of the issue by the two bodies although the results were the same.) By a vote of 173 to 8 the Assembly rejected the validity of Roman Catholic baptism on the ground that it could no longer be called Christian baptism since the Roman Catholic body was not a true church. "Though once a branch of the visible Church, [she] has long since become utterly corrupt, and hopelessly apostate." (Statement of the General Assembly of 1845)

One of the eight dissenting votes was that of Charles Hodge of Princeton. Hodge spoke to the matter in *The Princeton Review* of 1845 (an article reprinted in his volume, *Church Polity*, 1878). Hodge argued that the General Assembly had gone beyond the position of the Reformers and the Confession of Faith. "The question of whether the church of Rome is a true church, may be affirmed or denied according to the sense attached to those terms." By this he meant that the Reformers on the one hand could identify the Roman system to be anti-Christ and apostate and on the other hand by looking at their profession of the Triune God and the presence of true believers could call Rome a church in the sense that apostate Israel was still under the covenant. Thus the issue for Hodge was not whether Rome could be called *a true church*, but *a pure church*. "All the definitions given in our books, tell us what a pure church is. And when Protestants deny the church of Rome to be a church, they deny that she comes within their definition of a pure church, though they admit her to be a corrupt and apostate church" (*Church Polity*). Hodge's view was not universally accepted among Presbyterians. James H. Thornwell, reflecting the direction the Southern Presbyterians would take, supported the General Assembly. In later years the General Assembly position was dropped.

It should be noted that the practice of our denomination (both as presently constituted and in its Bible Presbyterian tradition) has been to accept the baptisms and ordinations of the Roman Catholic and UPUSA churches as valid in spite of the fact that both could be considered to have been "declared apostate" by our denomination at one time or another. In its report to the twenty-third General Synod of the Bible Presbyterian Church, the Judicial Commission recommended that a former Roman Catholic priest not be re-ordained but be received only on the basis of a doctrinal examination. The Synod supported this recommendation.

VII. THE NORTHERN PRESBYTERIAN SEPARATIST MOVEMENT

The Separatist Movement in Presbyterianism, 1922-1979

The roots of the Presbyterian separatist movement stretch back into the controversy with liberalism of the early twenties. It came to a crisis point when Harry Emerson Fosdick preached his now famous and aggravating sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?", boldly upholding Modernistic doctrine. The Philadelphia Presbytery overtured the next General Assembly to direct the Presbytery of New York to bring the preaching of the Presbyterian Church, where Baptist Fosdick was supplying the pulpit, into line with the system of doctrine of the *Confession*. The overture passed the 1923 Assembly by only a 439-359 majority, showing the strength of the liberals with those who argued toleration for the sake of peace.

Early in 1924 the minority, with many other ministers, issued the Auburn Affirmation (eventually signed by 1274 ministers) to "safeguard the unity and liberty of the Church. The five themes reaffirmed by the 1923 Assembly – Biblical

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inspiration, the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection, and Christ's supernatural power -- were stated to be facts but the Assembly's descriptions of them were said to be "theories," which only some of the Affirmationists chose to accept. Biblical inerrancy was specifically mentioned as being unacceptable.

The "toleration group" in successive assemblies increasingly supported the liberals and together, in 1929, they voted for the reorganization of Princeton Seminary along liberal lines. This led directly to the establishment of Westminster Seminary as an independent school. In 1934, following the 1933 formation of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions as an outlet for the support of sound Presbyterian missionaries, the assembly in effect mandated that Presbyteries put to trial and expel the new Board's members. The so-called "Mandate of 1934" stated "A church member or an individual church that will not give to promote the officially authorized missionary program of the Presbyterian Church is in exactly the same position with reference to the Constitution of the Church as a church or an individual that would refuse to take part in the celebration of the Lord's Supper or any of the prescribed ordinances of the denomination as set forth in Chapter VII of the Form of Government." (cf. *The Presbyterian Conflict*, Edwin H. Rian, p. 152ff, 309ff.) Dr. J. Gresham Machen insisted that this established a policy of "exclusion from the ministry of all who will not support the propaganda of the Modernist boards and agencies." (*Presbyterian Guardian*, May 4, 1936) The action of the 1934 General Assembly was seized upon by Dr. Machen and others of the growing separation movement as illustrating clearly the apostasy of the Presbyterian Church in the USA. In a lengthy tract published in the *Christian Beacon* of 1937 and later issued as "The Case for Compromise", lawyer H. McAllister Griffiths argued that if the General Assembly of 1936 upheld the judicial appeals of the "Mandate of 1934", then clearly the church as a whole was apostate. The church had placed its authority above the Word of God. Referring to this issue Machen himself wrote in the *Guardian* articles noted above that "A church that places the word of man above the Word of God and that dethrones Jesus Christ is an apostate church. It is the duty of all true Christians to separate from such a church." Machen's reasoning about the charge of schism was essentially the same as that of Calvin and the Reformers; "Here, then, is the principle of the thing -- it is schism to leave a church if that church is true to the Bible, but it is not schism if that church is not true to the Bible. In the latter case, far from its being schism to separate from the church in question, it is schism to remain in it, since to remain in it means to disobey the Word of God and to separate oneself from the true Church of Jesus Christ." (*Presbyterian Guardian*, April 20, 1936)

It was out of this crucible that the Presbyterian Church of America was founded in 1936, not as a new church, but to carry on the "spiritual succession" of the Presbyterian Church, USA.

Unfortunately, the move to separate was easier to taken than the establishment of a new identity. And in the years that followed, "apostasy" and "separation" were integral to the struggles of the new church. What follows are brief references to some of the discussions (cf. *The History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod*, by George Hutchinson).

1. On June 4, 1937 a small group of men separated from the PCA and met in Philadelphia to draw up "Articles of Association" for the formation of a new

Presbyterian church. They stated the reasons for their new association follows:

For the sake of fellowship in the principles for which we stand and as a testimony to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and because of the official apostasy of the Presbyterian Church in the USA, and because of the departure of the Presbyterian Church of America from the historic position of American Presbyterianism, we ... do associate ourselves together in the Bible Presbyterian Synod. (Hutchinson, p. 247)

The next day the first synod was organized on the above basis. In the subsequent years the Bible Presbyterian Church frequently issued calls to separation from the Presbyterian Church, USA, because of its apostasy.

2. In August 1944 two ministers of the BPC published a new paper called the "Clarion" to advance a very strong separatist position. It was presented as believing "not only in separation from infidels, but also in separation from disorderly brethren who, while personally sound in their views, insist on remaining in organizational fellowship with modernists." The answer of Carl McIntire, editor of the *Christian Beacon*, is interesting. "There are many godly people still in the apostate denominations, ignorant, leaderless, confused heartbroken, whom we must reach. We must not separate further from them than God's Word requires, or place unnecessary barriers between them and us ... we must beware of these influences which may arise in our midst which would pull us to an extreme position and hinder our testimony ... I am convinced that if the view held by Dr. Dillard ("Clarion") shall prevail ... the BPC will wrap its own 'extreme separation' robes about it and lie down to its internal nightmares." (Hutchinson, p. 257)
3. The Synod of 1945 tried to resolve the dilemma through the adoption of the Harvey Cedars Resolutions. There were two resolutions; the first dealt with personal separation and the second with ecclesiastical separation. The second reads as follows:
 - a. We hold that it is a Christian's duty to separate himself from all cooperation in religious activities with those who deny the full authority and dependability of the Word of God, and that no consideration of expediency could ever warrant such cooperation.
 - b. As concerns cooperation with those who, while themselves believing in the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, continue in membership in denominations which include known unbelievers, and fail to see clearly and to observe fully the scriptural injunction to separate themselves from such organizations, we hold that this is a sphere of expediency, that is, one in which no man's conscience may be bound by other men; however, we as a Synod feel that great harm is done in many cases by such cooperation, and hence that it is unwise to enter upon or continue in them without careful consideration.
 - c. Regarding such individuals as are described in paragraph one, we should seek by every possible means to win them to Christ; regarding such individuals as are described in paragraph two we urge that they be dealt with in a spirit of brotherly love, seeking by every proper means to win them to the spiritual position of separation rather than to drive them from us, and yet not violating our conscience.

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It should be noted that the same Synod fully endorsed membership in the American Council of Christian Churches which at that time provided associate memberships for individuals still in denominations of the Federal Council of Christian Churches.

- d. The mid-fifties witness the development of further controversy, this time growing out of the increasingly restrictive separation of the American Council of Christian Churches and the International Council of Christian Churches. The president of these councils, Carl McIntire, was accused of "alienating more and more persons and groups" and of making "even the very word 'separation' a stench in the American Council world." (Hutchinson, p. 288) The majority of the 1955 St. Louis synod voted to withdraw from the two councils. By the end of the next year the church was split in two, with approximately 40% following McIntire's lead. The continuing BPC, Inc., officially declared at its Columbus Synod, "While we affirm and maintain unyielding loyalty to the doctrine of the priority of the visible Church, we repudiate that extreme separation which ignores our responsibility to demonstrate the love of God toward our Christian brethren as the distinguishing mark of our discipleship." (Hutchinson, p. 293) This stance was not to be interpreted as repudiating the importance of separation from unbelief and apostasy, but only concerned procedures. Dr. Francis Schaeffer, a member of the Bible Presbyterian Church from the outset, would later say, "We took the right stand but in the wrong way." (cf. *The Church Before a Watching World*, especially his essay, "Adultery and Apostasy -- the Bride and Bridegroom Theme".)
- e. The Plan of Union, approved by the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and Reformed Presbyterian Church, General Synod, in 1964, spoke to the issue of separation with these words: "We counsel our ministry and membership that there is widespread apostasy and unbelief in church organizations today, and that we are not to be partakers with unbelievers in their religious activities." As for "believers who maintain associations with liberal church organizations" it was resolved "that we exercise great care and take every precaution to preserve an uncompromising stand with the Lord and His infallible Word, yet all the while dealing with others in grace and love." (Hutchinson, p. 382)
- f. The Synod of 1974 approved the appointment of a study committee "to define the biblical bounds of ecclesiastical separation and to formulate guidelines for specific application for the sake of the purity of the church." A lengthy report was received and adopted in 1976. It was declared that "The motivating principle behind biblical separation is submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ ... The church which aggressively attempts to be a pure church ... will attempt to win over before separating from anything or anyone opposing this commitment." In writing on "Defining the Bounds of Ecclesiastical Separation for the Local Church" guidelines are given stressing the responsibility of the elders of the local church adequately to assess the past, present, and

probably future ecclesiastical purity of the body with which the union (or assumedly cooperation) is contemplated. The report then affirms the need of "a judgment about the kind and degree of influences at work in the contemporary situation which apparently are leading the organization to its probable future;" and the need of arriving at "a reasonable prognostication concerning the continuing commitment of the organization to the doctrine of the purity of the church." The accent here is not one of automatic prohibition when union or cooperation with another body on the local church level is being considered but one of emphasizing the need of the session carefully assessing where the body presently stands and where it seems to be going. (Minutes of 154th Synod, p. 144ff)

- g. The concept of judging the appropriateness of cooperation at the level where it will take place, it was argued by the Southern Presbytery at the 1978 Synod, is incorporated in the Form of Government, IV, 9, e.; "Particular churches shall not be prevented from participation in such activities as local Bible conferences, evangelistic programs, or interdenominational associations of particular churches free from apostasy." The Judicial Commission's recommendation that the Presbytery's position be sustained quoted the Plan of Union as quoted above in (5). Synod sustained the recommendation and recognized the right of the Lookout Mountain RPCES to hold a joint Summer Bible School with the local PCUS church.

CONCLUSIONS

1. With reference to Apostasy -

Biblical and historical studies do not seem to provide some final definition of apostasy. We conclude that such a definition is not required. Its use has not been and need not be limited to some sort of final, total, and irrevocable repudiation of everything Biblical and Christian. If such were the case, the term could rightly be used only of Satan or the Harlot of Revelation 17-18. Our studies suggest that apostasy can be described as a process of moving away as well as a condition or state of denial of the faith once believed in. For this reason, trying to define an "apostate church" has proved to be our most difficult task. What is the line to be crossed before that label pertains? How blatant must the denial of Christ and His Word be? We did not want to abandon use of the word but we also felt great reluctance to call another church apostate even though we might agree that under the judgment of God He might so label a church in our day as He did Israel. However, we did not feel it at all inappropriate for the Church today to discuss the issue or to help Christians desiring to be faithful to Christ to recognize that such faithfulness must at times include "earnestly contending for the faith" (Jude 3) and pronouncing the "anathema" when a false gospel is preached (Gal. 1:6-9). In our thinking, the weight of the matter before us did not fall on the issue of apostasy but of separation.

2. With reference to Separation -

The committee did not conclude that ecclesiastical apostasy and ecclesiastical separation were identical issues. Much of the need to "prove" apostasy seems to have

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come from the assumption that apostasy was the only legitimate basis for separation. We have concluded that there are discernible circumstances which not only justify but mandate separation from an ecclesiastical body. As explained above, the Reformers identified three "marks of the church" whose presence meant that a church was true and therefore separation would be schism but whose absence made separation a necessity if the true church was to continue. We believe the thinking of the Reformers and their creeds on this issue needs to be restudied and newly appreciated for our own age. In particular, our study has focused on the question of discipline. In the light of the importance of the ability of a body to discipline itself in accordance with Scripture, a practical criterion for considering separation as most honoring to Christ is the point at which discipline for aberrant doctrine or life can or will no longer be administered. We recognize that separation when done is a painful process, but we nevertheless feel the issue of discipline, particularly in the area of false teaching, cannot be overlooked in this discussion. We cannot find any basis for tolerating that which denies Christ. In particular we are dismayed by contemporary statements about a "pluralistic" church. The context of such a term is the assumption that since false teaching, including even denial of the deity of Christ, cannot be disciplined then we should have a church in which the true and the false coexist. This may be true of the world, but not of the church, purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ.

3. With Reference to the Remnants of the True -

We rejoice that in many instances remnants of true orthodoxy can be found even where denial of basic Christian doctrine seems to prevail. This is true in the case of many believing individuals and particular congregations. It is also the case with regard to such ordinances of the church as baptism or ordination. It was the practice of the Reformers, reaffirmed by the Confession of Faith and followed by our denomination in its various branches, to not rebaptize or reordain those coming from denominations at least professing the historic Faith. We see no reason to change this practice.

4. With Reference to Cooperation with Those Who Have Not Separated -

A corollary issue to that of separation is the stance that those who have separated from "unsound" (to use the language of the FOG) churches or denominations are to take toward those true brethren in Christ who have not. Prudence must be exercised in two directions. On the one hand we must avoid an unnecessary aloofness that can lead to a false pride and even further separations over less and less crucial issues. On the other hand we should avoid fellowship on an ecclesiastical level that will lead to participation with or tacit approval of those who undermine the Faith in doctrine or life. Specific instances in applying this are so varied that the Form of Government (IV, 9, e) has wisely urged that each instance be handled by the judicatory involved when questions of propriety arise. It must also be noted that unless there is latitude to interpret the phrase "free from apostasy", there could not be fellowship with anyone, including ourselves.

With reference to the matter which gave rise to this report, we agree with the Judicial Commission and the Synod that the local church involved had a right under our Form of Government to decide for itself to cooperate with another local church. We do not agree with the reasoning that such cooperation was necessarily proper because the denomination to which the church belonged had not been officially declared "apostate". As noted above (1) whether or not a church is apostate is a judgment we do not feel is

necessary to make even though we can defend the Scripturalness or our separation from that body. We would agree with those who point out that a local church cannot be considered totally apart from its parent body, but we nevertheless conclude that we must recognize that *a de facto* situation exists in which local congregations or ministers true to the faith continue to participate in denominations whose leadership and direction give every evidence of apostasy. In many instances our own judgment might be that the time has long past to separate for the honor of Christ; nevertheless we believe that we must not be closed to extending encouragement to these brethren. Particular encouragement should be given to those who are open to consider the importance of working for the purity of the visible church.

PART II PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

Having cited this full statement of the RPCES, we need to be reminded of the exact standing of the RPCES papers have in the PCA. The plan for the "Joining and Receiving of the PCA and the RPCES" states: "In receiving these denominations' (RPCES), the Presbyterian Church in America recognizes ... their historical documents as valuable and significant material which will be used in the perfecting of the Church." These documents do not automatically become the adopted positions of the PCA, but are to be used by the PCA in perfecting her own development. What this combining of various position papers from each of the Churches is one of the best means for the PCA to move toward a perfecting of herself as envisioned by the Joining and Receiving paper. In contrast to what has been said of the RPCES papers, all of the papers cited below from the PCA are position statements of this Church.

On December 4, 1973, the body that was to become known as the Presbyterian Church in America convened its first General Assembly, and formed itself into a new Presbyterian Church. This group came out of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern Presbyterian Church). Its first act as an Assembly was to adopt the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as originally adopted by the first American General Assembly in 1789, with two minor amendments.

As a new Church, this Assembly, following the example of her mother Church, (the PCUS) addressed a [Message to all Churches of Jesus Christ throughout the world](#). Seeing herself as the true continuation of that mother Church, she based her letter upon that of the mother Church. In this Message, the reason for separation is set forth, and the purpose of her being.

[NOTE: The full text is printed on pp. 7ff.](#)