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Review of William S. Barker's "What Does Subscription to Our Standards Mean?"

by Brian T. Wingard, Ph.D.

The somewhat edited text of the remarks of Dr. Barker at the "forum on Confessional Subscription" held at the 20th General Assembly of the PCA have been published in the *Presbyterian Advocate*. Since this issue of the *Bulletin* is focusing on subscription, and since Dr. Barker's voice is influential in the Presbyterian and Reformed community, it has seemed to us to be useful to publish some notice of his views.

"What's in a Name?"

Dr. Barker has chosen to give his view of subscription the title, "honest subscription." We would be sorry if Dr. Barker meant to imply by the use of this title that those who hold to "full" or "strict" subscription advocate dishonesty. Who would approve the practice of a hypocritical subscription to the totality of the Confessional Standards by an officer or licentiate if this does not really reflect the honest belief of his heart? As long as subscription to the *Confession* is an oath freely and voluntarily taken, no man shall ever be forced to lie no matter how subscription may be interpreted.

We suggest that "system subscription" would be a better name for Dr. Barker's view. It would not be burdened with the pejorative adjective "loose," while, at the same time it would not imply that there is dishonesty involved in the opposing viewpoint.

Scripture and the Standards

In his remarks Dr. Barker raises the fear that the "full subscription" view has the effect of raising the subordinate standards to the level of Scripture. This assertion has always been denied by those holding to "full" subscription. To our mind Dr. Barker has failed to establish that this is so, and has made the case in the assertion in the face of the direct denial of the man with which he was interacting. Dr. Smith has written "I know of no one who contemplated considering the Westminster Standards as equal to the Bible."¹

- PCA report:
"Nothing more or less than the very words of the Holy Spirit."
- Theoc. 11:1-2
- Theoc. 11:2-3
- Theoc. 11:3-4

It is fallacious to assume that believing any statement is true is the same thing as professing that statement (of whatever length) to be infallible and inerrant, which is our confession concerning the Word of God. It is likewise fallacious to assume that believing a document to be true is the same as believing it to be God breathed (θεοπνευστος), which is also our confession concerning the Scriptures. No one has ever believed the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and Catechisms were either incapable of error or immediately inspired by the Holy Spirit. The argument might be put as simply as this: All documents which are infallible and inspired are true, but not all documents which are true are infallible and inspired.

One particularly disturbing phrase is found in Dr. Barker's assertion as to the object of subscription. He writes: "We adopt these secondary standards, not as themselves equated with the system of doctrine taught in Scripture, but as containing that system."² This statement appears to be based upon a definition of the term "contained" which is very close to the manner in which the Neo-Orthodox theologians would like to define the word "contained" in the second question and answer to the *Shorter Catechism*, which refers to the Word of God being contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. If we allow the subscription oath to mean that the Standards contain the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures, along

- This is what we do not want