

The Justification of Confessions and the Logic of Confessional Subscription, With Some Observations and Suggestions Concerning the Practice of the Presbyterian Church in America

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Introduction

The theme of the 29th General Assembly is “unity and peace.” Pursuant to that end, North Texas Presbytery is sponsoring this pre-Assembly Convocation entitled “How Shall We Then Live Together—Subscription and the Future of the PCA.” From these terms I suppose it is not unfair to presume that our sponsors have concluded that in some way questions relating to the use of our doctrinal standards¹ have become an occasion for disunity, a lack of peace, difficulty in living together, perhaps even a threat to the future of the Presbyterian Church in America.

I do not doubt that there are grounds for such a conclusion, but here I would notice only how ironic is this state of affairs in light of the traditional Presbyterian rationale for the use of confessions. One of our “founding fathers,” Samuel Miller, for example, in his *The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions: Addressed Particularly to Candidates for the Ministry*² urged that candidates for the ministry must understand “the importance of Creeds and Confessions for maintaining the *unity* and purity of the visible Church.”³ Such an emphasis is commonplace in the literature addressing the subject.⁴ That one of the means for maintaining unity among us should itself be a cause for division is a most lamentable circumstance.

¹ Though the doctrinal standards of the PCA include the Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, for the sake of brevity and clarity I will use the term “Confession” throughout this paper as referring to all.

² (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1839); reprinted under the title *Miller On Creeds* (Greenville, SC: A. Press, 1987). It is from this reprint that I will be citing.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6. Emphasis added.

⁴ Cf. the testimony of the PCUSA Assembly in 1824: “*Resolved*, 1. That in the opinion of this Assembly confessions of faith, containing formulas of doctrine and rules for conducting the discipline and worship proper to be maintained in the house of God, are not only recognized as necessary and expedient, but as the character of human nature is continually aiming at innovation, absolutely requisite to the settled peace of the Church, and to the happy and orderly existence of Christian communion. Within the limits of Christendom few are to be found in the attitude of avowed hostility to Christianity. The name of Christian is claimed by all, and all are ready to profess their belief in the holy Scriptures; to many reserving to themselves the right of putting upon them what construction they please. In such a state of things, without the aid of confessions, Christian fellowship can exist only in a very limited degree. . . .” ***** 2. That though the Confession of Faith and standards of our Church are of no original authority, independent of the Scriptures, yet we regard them as a summary of those divine truths which are diffused throughout the sacred volume. They, as a system of doctrines, cannot be abandoned, in our opinion, without an abandonment of the word of God. They form a bond of fellowship in the faith of the gospel; and the General Assembly cannot but believe the precious immortals under their care to be more safe, in receiving the truth of God’s holy word as exhibited in the standards of our Church, than in being subject to the guidance of any instructor, whoever he may be, who may have confidence enough to set up his own opinions in opposition to the system of doctrines. . . . 4. Finally, the General Assembly recommend to all who are under their care, steadfastly to resist every temptation, however presented, which may have for its object the relaxation of those bonds of Christian fellowship which have hitherto been so eminently blessed of God, for the order, edification, and extension of the Presbyterian Church. . . .” Baird, *Digest*, pp. 41-42. Cf. A.A. Hodge: “At the same time, provision must be made for ecclesiastical discipline, and to secure the real co-operation of those who profess to work together in the same cause, so that public teachers in the same communion may not contradiction one another, and the one pull down what the other is striving to build up.” *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978), p. 2.

Insofar as our sponsor's concern is legitimate, however, I have no doubt that in large part the fault lies in the fact that we have no constitutional standard as to what subscription amounts to, and what powers belong to courts of original jurisdiction to allow for officers to subscribe to the Confession while denying the biblical fidelity of some portion of the Confession's teaching.⁵ In my judgment the fact that we are not agreed, as to how our articles of agreement should function to maintain agreement, but rather each one "does what is right in his own eyes," profoundly incapacitates our functioning as a Confessional church, and thus prevents us from reaping the promised benefits.

For my contribution to our discussion then, I will offer some arguments as to how one *ought* to think about subscription to our Confession, with the hope that in this discussion we might come to a greater unity with respect to what we actually do. The heart of what I hope to show is this: that the justification for having a confession ought logically to determine the manner of subscription to that confession.

The Justification of Confessions

Though Presbyterians have historically affirmed that the Bible is the only rule of faith and practice, they have been known as well for their vigorous commitment to the Westminster Standards, which are understood and prized as a true and faithful interpretation of the Word of God. This commitment to a confessional standard is made concrete in the requirement that all officers⁶ of the church *subscribe* to the standards.

American Presbyterians have long debated the meaning of confessional subscription. When a ministerial candidate responds affirmatively to the question: "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and the Catechism of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures. . . ."⁷ what precisely is he affirming? The answers to this question have been varied, and the parties formed around the answers have continued to find advocates to the present day.

In our contemporary discussions, one matter is most notable in its absence, i.e., how does the use of a "man-made" confession by the Church find any justification at all? This problem is particularly acute for Presbyterians. The very confession they defend and affirm appears at first glance to contradict creed making as well as creed subscribing. The Confession of Faith teaches that:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary

⁵ This is popularly known as permitting "exceptions."

⁶ Cf. A.A. Hodge: "In all churches a distinction is made between the terms upon which private members are admitted to membership, and the terms upon which office-bearers are admitted to their sacred trusts of teaching and ruling. A Church has no right to make anything a condition of membership which Christ has not made a condition of salvation. The Church is Christ's fold. The Sacraments are the seals of his covenant. All have a right to claim admittance who make a credible profession of the true religion—that is, who are presumptively the people of Christ. This credible profession of course involves a competent knowledge of the fundamental doctrine of Christianity—a declaration of personal faith in Christ and consecration to his service, and a temper of mind and habit consistent therewith. On the other hand, no man can be inducted into any office in any Church who does not profess to believe in the truth and wisdom of the constitution and laws which it will be his duty to conserve and administer. Otherwise all harmony of sentiment and all efficient co-operation in action would be impossible." *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978), p. 3.

⁷BCO 21-5.(2). The language quoted was originally adopted in 1788.

consequence may be deduced from Scripture; unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men. (1.6) The Old Testament . . . and the New Testament . . . being immediately inspired by God . . . in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them. (1.8) The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, . . . and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. (1.10) 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, if matters of faith and worship. (20.2)

How can the propositions that God alone is Lord of the conscience, and that the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture is the supreme judge of all controversies, be consistent with subscription to the Westminster Confession as a standard for ministerial admission and a rule for doctrinal controversy? In light of these bold statements of Scriptural sufficiency and authority the burden of proof on those who would defend confessional authority in this context appears significant.

Our Presbyterian forefathers, however, were not unaware of this burden, nor unwilling to bear it. Earlier discussions of the issue of confessional *subscription*, almost without exception, began with a statement of the *warrant* for doctrinal confessions, and only then moved on to consider their appropriate use.⁸

This, of course, raises the issue I wish to discuss: Is there a logical relation between the justification for the use of confessions in the Church, and the nature of the subscription that is, or ought to be required to them? A corollary question also arises: if one's view of subscription contradicts or undermines the rationale for the Church's confession, doesn't that in itself count as presumptive evidence against that view?

In considering this question, I first offer a standard definition of a confession from Samuel Miller:

By a Creed, or Confession of Faith, I mean, an exhibition, in human language, of those great doctrines which are believed by the framers of it to be taught in the Holy Scriptures; and which are drawn out in regular order, *for the purpose of ascertaining how far those who wish to unite in church fellowship are really agreed in the fundamental principles of Christianity.*⁹

⁸ See the works cited in the "Recommended Reading" list at the conclusion of the paper.

⁹ *Miller on Creeds*, p. 7. Emphasis added. Cf. the representative statement recorded in the Assembly's *Digest* from 1805: "Under the specious pretence of honoring the sacred scriptures, they would persuade you to reject all written or printed creeds and forms of discipline, alleging that those who adopt such, substitute them for divine inspiration. *****But, dear brethren, we presume you need scarcely be informed of the absurdity of such insinuations—You know that *we*; you know that *you yourselves* consider them differently. Confessions or creeds are only the doctrines which we believe to be revealed to us from heaven, collected from different parts of sacred scripture, and brought into one view.—Must not all who read their bibles and believe them, form some opinion of what is taught therein? And where can be the criminality, when they have thus searched and collected, to publish what they believe to be the truth of God?—In so doing, we act in open day, as children of light, and do not leave the world to conjecture, whether we be Pelagians, Semi-Pelagians, Catholics, Arminians, or Calvinists; or whether we differ essentially from them all. We do not leave those with whom we would untie in the most tender and endearing bonds, at a loss to know whether we believe, or disbelieve, what they esteem the essential doctrines of christianity. . . ." From *A Digest, Complied From the Records of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and From the Records of the Late Synod of New York and Philadelphia, of Their Acts and Proceedings, That Appear to be of*

Notice that in Miller's definition, the purpose of the confession *itself* is to state what its adopters agree to as the fundamental principles of Christianity. It is not framed to *contain* such principles among others, for what would be the point of including articles not agreed upon in articles of agreement?

In discussing this definition Miller taking pains to emphasize that in adopting a confession it does not become a law enacted by the Church, for he denies that the Church has any properly legislative power.

Creeds and Confessions do not claim to be in themselves laws of Christ's house, or legislative enactments, by which any set of opinions are constituted truths, and which require, on that account, to be received as truths among the members of his family. They only profess to be *summaries*, extracted from the Scriptures, of a few of those great Gospel doctrines, which are taught by Christ himself; and which those who make the summary in particular case, concur in deeming important, and agree to make the test of their religious union.¹⁰

Now it is the formal *summarizing* that historically Presbyterians have unambiguously affirmed as, "not only lawful and expedient," "but also indispensably necessary to the harmony and purity of the visible Church."¹¹ How so? The rationale may be epitomized as follows. Each teacher in the church is bound to teach the message that Christ has set forth in his Word. Some parts of that message are absolutely essential to salvation; other parts, though not essential to salvation, are essential to the well-being of the Church, because her master instructed her to teach his disciples to obey all that he had commanded. All Protestants acknowledge the right of private judgment—that the meaning of the Word as the recipient understands it in good conscience is the word of Christ to him. Yet because of their imperfections, professed believers sincerely differ as to the correct understanding of the Scriptures. Each is duty-bound to teach as he understands the Word of Christ. There is no infallible arbiter available to the Church in this age to sort out the differences between teachers. It follows that it is impossible for professed believers to live in complete unity with such differences as exist, without the fellowship either tending to indifference with respect to the disputed doctrines, or suffering a constant theological warfare. In such a state either truth or peace will be sacrificed. Thus, professed believers who are agreed as to the heart of the gospel, but who differ from one another in matters of real significance, must exist as separate denominations

Permanent Authority and Interest; Together With a Short Account of the Missions Conducted by the Presbyterian Church, by order of the General Assembly (Philadelphia, PA: Printed for the Trustees of the Assembly by R. P. M'Culloh, 1820), pp. 133-34.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 8. Miller offers nine arguments in favor of the necessity of creeds: they are necessary for the sake of unity, truth, candor, for study, from the experience of the Church past, from the character of their opponents of creeds, from the fact that even those opposed to them use them, from the need for accredited manuals of doctrine, and for the transmission of doctrine from on generation to another. Cf. A.A. Hodge: "Creeds and Confessions, therefore, have been found necessary in all ages and branches of the Church, and, when not abused, have been useful for the following purposes: (1.) To mark, disseminate and preserve the attainments made in the knowledge of Christian truth by any branch of the Church in any crisis of its development. (2.) To discriminate the truth from the glosses of false teachers, and to present it in its integrity and due proportions. (3.) To act as the basis of ecclesiastical fellowship among those so nearly agreed as to be able to labor together in harmony. (4.) To be used as instruments in the great work of popular instruction." *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978), p. 2-3.

of Christians, charitably respecting each other's right and duty to maintain their differences, while affirming that together they make up the visible Church.¹² To that end, each denomination must set forth its understanding of the teaching of Scripture in a confession, for the purpose of uniting those who are of like mind in fellowship and mission in a voluntary society.¹³

Miller reasoned soundly when he concluded:

The inference then plainly is, that no church can hope to maintain a homogeneous character;—no church can be secure either of purity or peace . . . without some test of truth, explicitly agreed upon, and adopted by her; . . . something recorded; something publicly known; something capable of being referred to when most needed; which not merely this or that private member supposes to have been received; but to which the church as such has agreed to adhere, as a bond of union.¹⁴

The Logic of Subscription

Is there a logical relation between this justification for the use of confessions in the Church, and the nature of the subscription that is, or ought to be, required to such confessions? It appears to me quite clear that any view of subscription which allows the church court to receive candidates, and qualify them to preach and teach in their communion, while those candidates avowedly deny the doctrines of the standards, is contradictory to the justification of confessions set forth above. Such subscription actually undermines the functioning of a doctrinal standard, as can be seen by briefly comparing its employment, to the main ends which a confession is designed to achieve.

In the first place, such subscription does little to maintain the unity of the church. Rather than a clear, stable and certain statement of what is agreed upon as the teaching of the Scripture, this view leaves this portion of the body of Christ adrift, always searching for that essential core which must be affirmed, while ready to allow defection from those doctrines not fundamental. And of course these judgments may vary from year to year, from Presbytery to Presbytery, from one Presbytery meeting to another, or, most damnably, from one candidate to another (based on extra-biblical criterion).

¹² Cf. *BCO* 2.2.

¹³ See Robert L. Dabney, "The Form of Sound Words," *The Central Presbyterian* 6:43 (May 18, 1871): 1; reprinted as "Broad Churchism," in *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney, D.D., L.L.D.*, ed. by C.R. Vaughan. (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), II:447-463. Cf. the views of the PCUSA Assembly in 1811, addressed in a letter to Rev. J.W. Stephenson: "Adhere sacredly to our adopted standards, whilst you extend the hand of fellowship to others who, you have reason to hope, love our Lord Jesus Christ. In this way alone, do we conceive, peace can be cultivated, and union, in the end, established between differing christians. To relinquish principles for the sake of peace, is too dear a sacrifice. And every overture made to us from any quarter, to produce a union at such an expense, we unhesitatingly reject. . . . Take your stand, therefore, on the ground of the confession of faith, and the book of discipline. Keep that ground. If these men wish to join our church, they know the terms. Their wish to alter these terms is not very modest; for it is requesting the majority to yield to the minority. As we force no one to adopt our standards, there is no oppression exercised over any by our adherence to our own principles. . . . Whilst we thus exhort you to receive none upon *any modification* of our standards, we recommend to you a conciliatory, mild, and forbearing conduct to those who are out of our communion.—Vol. III. p. 7." From *A Digest, Compiled From the Records of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and From the Records of the Late Synod of New York and Philadelphia, of Their Acts and Proceedings, That Appear to be of Permanent Authority and Interest; Together With a Short Account of the Missions Conducted by the Presbyterian Church*, by order of the General Assembly (Philadelphia, PA: Printed for the Trustees of the Assembly by R. P. M'Culloh, 1820), pp. 140-142.

¹⁴ *Miller on Creeds*, p. 15-16.

Neither does such a view aid the Church in its duty as a depository, a guardian, and a witness to the truth. At best this “loose” subscription makes the confession a collection of propositions which may or may not be asserted by most or some of its teachers as true. Rather than an honest and straightforward statement of its Biblical convictions, published abroad for all to consider, the Church is left to equivocate, easily bending with the prevailing cultural winds.

But the reality is, that those who oppose the “strict” view in favor of at least a theoretical commitment to a “looser” approach, actually find themselves in practice adopting a rigorous position quite at odds with their profession. With respect to certain doctrines, all subscriptionists are strict subscriptionists. That is to say for each subscriber, there are some parts of his confession which are non-negotiable. Some want the extent of their confession to coincide with the non-negotiable parts; others are content to have the non-negotiable parts lie somewhere within their confession. This latter class typically will not or cannot not say beforehand what the non-negotiable, strictly-subscribed-to-core amounts to, but rather define it *ad hoc*, depending upon the mood of the court, the candidate in question, and the will of the current majority. But this practice clearly undermines the very rationale of having a confession in the first place. In this light it can be seen that the debate about subscription is really a conflict about which articles ought to be subscribed to, not the strictness, or looseness, of the subscription. Some maintain that one ought to strictly subscribe to all the doctrines of the Confession; others maintain that one ought to strictly subscribe to a more limited number within the Confession.

Contrary to the above, I want to urge that the following outline sets forth principles of confessional subscription that are logically consistent with a sound justification of the use of confessions in the Church.

1. The Confession is a subordinate standard; but it is nonetheless a real standard. The Confession’s subordination is not in its *functioning* in the church, as if in every case of its use one might appeal to Scripture in opposition to the Confession. On such a view the Confession is not a standard at all. Its subordination is in its *derivation* from Scripture, as framed and adopted. But once adopted the Confession functions as the standard setting forth the understanding of Scripture that the officers of the Church have agreed to uphold.¹⁵

¹⁵ Cf. Francis Turretin: “The authority of these [public confessions of the Church] should be great in the Churches among the godly, yet it falls below the authority of Scripture. The latter is the rule, the former is the thing regulated. The latter alone is *aujtovpisto*” and both in words and in matter is divine and infallible. The former, as in matter they are divine, yet in language and in mode of treatment are human documents. To the latter faith is due directly and absolutely, the former must be judged, and by such mediation be believed, if they agree with the word. The latter is the fixed and unchangeable rule of faith, but the former are liable to fresh revision and examination, in which it is right not only to explain and expand them, but also to correct any flaw noticed in them and to reform them by the norm of the word. Whence it is clear that they err in excess here, who make such confessions replace the norm of actual truth and equate them with the word of God, since at most they are but secondary norms, not of truth but of the doctrine received in a particular Church, since by them may be perceived and discerned, what agrees with the Church’s doctrine or what disagrees with it.*****Thus their true authority is to be found in the fact that they are binding on those who are liable to them in the forum of the outward fellowship, because written by the Churches or in the name of the Churches, by which the individual members in the outward communion are bound, 1 Cor. 14:32. . . . Thus they cannot bind in the inward court of conscience, except so far as they are found to agree with the word of God, which alone has the power to bind conscience.” From *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: John D. Lowe, 1847-48), XVIII, xxx, 9-10, cited in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics set out and illustrated from the sources*, rev. and ed. by Ernst Bizer; trans. by G.T. Thomson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), pp. 687-688. Cf. James Henley Thornwell: “The Constitution is, with Presbyterians, the accredited interpretation of the Word of God. It is not an inference from it, nor an addition to it, but the very system of the Bible. . . . That Word has to be

2. The church in her Confession sets forth what she has determined to be some of the important points of Scripture's teaching, but by no means does the Confession seek to set forth all the truth of the Scripture.¹⁶
3. The proper number of articles in a confession is a question of prudence, but that number should certainly include some doctrines that are broader than the fundamentals of the Gospel.¹⁷
4. Matters not addressed by the Confession are not properly a part of the articles of agreement, and thus differences of opinion in such matters should be dealt with in charity, as a part of the respectful, brotherly wrestling with Scripture that is the ongoing calling of the Church.¹⁸

interpreted. If the Constitution is what we profess to believe, we have the interpretation to our hand—we have already wrought out for us the only result we could reach, if we made the interpretation anew in every instance. . . ." *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell, D.D., LL.D.* 4 vols. (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1871-75); reprint (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), IV:367.

¹⁶ E.g., no confessional determination of the proper interpretation of various texts of Scripture; no approved Bible commentary; texts that support doctrines of the Standards not agreed upon. Cf. William Cunningham: "But it does not, by any means, follow from this, that the precise and definite statements, on doctrinal subjects, which the writings of these men [the Reformers] present—although true in themselves and warranted by Scripture, as in general we believe them to be—should be embodied in symbolical books, and be thereby made terms of communion with a view to ordination to the ministry, and grounds of separation among churches. The duty of a church in settling her symbols, or arranging her terms of communion, is to be regulated by different principles from those which determine the duty of individuals, who are simply bound to acquire and to profess as much of accurate and distinct knowledge of truth as they can attain to, on all matters, whether important or not. When a church is arranging her terms of communion, other considerations, in addition to that of the mere truth of the statements, must be brought to bear upon the question, of what it is right, necessary, and expedient to do, or of what amount of unity in matters of opinion ought to be required. The principles applicable to this branch of the church's duty have never been subjected to a thorough discussion by competent parties, though they are very important in their bearings; and the right application of them is attended with great difficulty. . . ." *Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, p. 412.

¹⁷ Cf. Samuel Miller: "The extent to which we ought to go in multiplying articles [of a creed], is a secondary question, the answer to which must depend on the exigencies of the church framing the Creed.***** . . . I have no hesitation in saying, that in my opinion, church Creeds not only lawfully *may*, but always *ought*, to contain a number of articles besides those which are fundamental. . . . [T]here are many points confessedly not fundamental, concerning which, nevertheless, it is of the utmost importance to Christian peace and edification, that the members, and especially the ministers of every church should be harmonious in their views and practice. . . . *****To exemplify my meaning. . . . [instances of churches opposed to an ordained ministry, anti-pedobaptists and Prelatists described] ***** In all these cases, it is evident there is nothing fundamental to the existence of vital piety. Yet it is equally evident, that those who differ entirely and zealously concerning the points supposed, cannot be comfortable in the same ecclesiastical communion. But how is their coming together, and the consequent discord and strife, which would be inevitable, to be prevented? I know of no method but so constructing their Confessions of Faith as to form different families or denominations, and to shut out from each those who are hostile to its distinguishing principles of order.***** It is plain, then, that unless Confessions of Faith contain articles, not, strictly speaking, fundamental, they cannot possible answer one principal purpose for which they are formed, viz. guarding churches which receive the pure order and discipline, as well as truth, of Scripture, from the intrusion of teachers, who, though they may be pious, yet could not fail to disturb the peace, and mar the edification of the more correct and sound part of the body." *Miller On Creeds*, pp. 44, 88-94.

¹⁸ E.g.: "decrees" (3), but neither infra- nor supra-lapsarian; "providence" (5), but no method specified, e.g., *concursum*; "sin was imputed" (6.3), but neither mediate nor immediate; "being the root of all mankind" (6.3), but no theory of the propagation of the soul (neither agnostic, nor creationist nor traducianist; Christ's work "fully satisfied" (8.5), but some holding a quantitative/commercial view as opposed to a moral/legal equivalence; "free will" (9.1), but not the doctrine of philosophical necessity nor the power of contrary choice; "mutably" (9.2), but no theory of how the change was wrought; "are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God" (21.5), but some add, the collection of offerings, and some to that, offerings as a tithe; "elect infants" (10.3), but some agnostic, others supposing some infants dying in infancy, others supposing all infants of believers dying in infancy, others yet supposing all infants

5. An exception to the Confession, from the point of view of the Church confessing, is an exception to the teaching of Scripture (although obviously not from the point of view of the sincere exceptor).¹⁹
6. In subscribing to the Confession the candidate for office enters into a solemn compact with the assembly of elders that authorizes him to teach in their branch of the church, and thus the candidate must make plain all that is in his heart and mind with respect to the Confession, and the assembly of elders must carefully and sympathetically examine all those who profess to subscribe.²⁰

dying in infancy. Dabney sees the Confession's underspecificity in such cases, as an example of its great moderation. See "The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession of Faith—Its Fundamental and Regulative Ideas, and the Necessity and Value of Creeds," in *Memorial Volume of the Westminster Assembly, 1647-1897*, Francis Beattie, et al., eds. (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1897), pp. 87-114.

¹⁹ Cf. John Murray: "The persons subscribing to that creed are bound to adhere to its teachings as long as they enjoy the privileges accruing from that subscription and from the fellowship it entails. They must relinquish these privileges whenever they are no longer able to avow the tenets expressed in the creed. In this sense a creed may be said to be normative within the communion adopting it. For the Church concerned officially declares in the creed what it believes the teaching of Scripture to be. And so the person who has come to renounce the tenets of the creed to which he once subscribed has no right to continue to exercise the privileges contingent upon subscription. He may not in such a case protest his right to these privileges by appeal to Scripture as the supreme authority. It is entirely conceivable that the creed may be in error and his renunciation of it warranted and required by Scripture. But his resort in such a case must be to renounce subscription and with such renunciation the privileges incident to it. Then he may proceed to expose the falsity of the creedal position in the light of Scripture." "Tradition: Romish and Protestant," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol.4, *Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), p. 272.

²⁰ For example, in Potomac Presbytery a candidate must prepare a written statement, based upon a conscientious examination of the Constitution of the PCA, responding to the following: "Are you doubtful about, or in disagreement with, the biblical fidelity of any of the doctrines, concepts, phrases or wording of the doctrinal standards of the PCA? In each case, state in detail your views." Cf. Miller: "We may see from what has been said, that subscribing to a Church Creed, is not a mere formality; but a very solemn transaction, which means much, and infers the most serious obligations. . . . For myself, I know of no transaction, in which insincerity is more justly chargeable with the dreadful sin of 'lying to the Holy Ghost,' than this. ***** Set it down, then, as a first principle of common honesty, as well as of Christian truth, that subscription to Articles of Faith, is a weighty transaction, which really means what it professes to mean; that no man is ever at liberty to subscribe articles which he does not truly and fully believe; and that, in subscribing, he brings himself under a solemn, covenant engagement to the church which he enters, to walk with it 'in the unity of faith,' and 'in the bond of peace and love.' If he cannot do this honestly, let him not profess to do it at all. . . . ***** You will, perhaps, ask me, what shall be done by a man who loves the Presbyterian Church; who considers it as approaching nearer to the scriptural model than any other with which he is acquainted; who regards its Confession of Faith as by far the best, in its great outlines, and in all its fundamental articles, that he knows; and who yet, in some of its minor details cannot entirely concur? Can such an one honestly subscribe, without any previous explanation of his views? I answer by no means. Ought he, then, you will ask, to abandon all thoughts of uniting himself with our Church, when he is in cordial harmony with it in all fundamental principles, and nearer to it, in all respects, than to any other Church on earth? I again answer by no means. I know of no other mode of proceeding in such a case as this which Christian candor, and a pure conscience will justify, than the following: Let the candidate for admission unfold to the Presbytery before which he presents himself, all his doubts and scruples, with perfect frankness; opening his whole heart, as if on oath; and neither softening nor concealing any thing. Let him cause them distinctly to understand, that if he subscribe the Confession of Faith, he must be understood to do it in consistency with the exceptions and explanations which he specifies. If the Presbytery, after this fair understanding, should be of the opinion, that the excepted points were of little or no importance, and interfered with no article of faith, and should be willing to receive his subscription in the usual way, he may proceed. Such a method of proceeding will best accord with every principle of truth and honor; and will remove all ground of either self-reproach, or of reproach on the part of others, afterwards." *Miller on Creeds*, pp. 98, 100-102.

7. Subscription to the very words of the Confession is not properly a part of what is required, but rather subscription to the propositions expressed in those words.²¹ Thus an officer candidate might well take exception to the *form* of the Confession in some particular. Here the candidate professes to affirm the Standards' doctrine, but in words other than those of the Standards.²² The court must judge whether the candidate's words are an essentially faithful expression of the standard's teaching, or in fact an exception of substance. Exceptions of form, if approved, may be freely taught.
8. Subscription to the *all* that might be, or has been, construed as the sense of the words of the Confession is not properly a part of what is required, but only *essential* agreement. Thus an officer candidate might well profess to affirm the words of the Confession while taking exception to a particular construction of those words.²³ Here the candidate professes to affirm the words of the Standards in a particular case, but in a sense that the candidate supposes may differ in some way with the manner in which the Standards have been traditionally understood by the court. The court must judge whether that sense is in essential agreement with the Standards, or in fact an exception of substance. Exceptions in sense, if approved, may be freely taught.
9. The historical sense of the terms as first propounded provides the framework for a proper understanding of the Confession, but that sense does not necessarily preclude the possibility of a permissible development in understanding which nonetheless maintains an essential agreement with that historical sense.²⁴
10. It is inconsistent with the very purpose of, and justification for, Confessions to allow those to subscribe who, without any qualification, simply deny the biblical fidelity of its doctrines, i.e., take exceptions of substance.²⁵

²¹ But consider George A. Baxter's warning: "A minister may disturb the peace of his church, by appearing to deviate from its creed, when he does not do so in reality. He may do this by the substitution of new terms, to give the air of novelty to his speculations. . . . Much of the new divinity would become old divinity, if the terms of our Confession, or similar terms, were used to express, what, on fair explanation, appear to be the real sentiments of its authors." Cited in William Henry Foote, *Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical*, second series (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott and Company, 1856), p. 458.

²² E.g.: "passions" (2.1) objected to in the contemporary sense of feelings; as opposed to a denial of passive powers, while affirming active affections of the will; "the regenerate *part*" (13.3), objected to as giving the impression that the soul is partitioned; in baptism, "the grace promised is not only offered, but really . . . *conferred*" (28.6), as title, but not as received in present experience.

²³ E.g.: "God . . . neither is nor can be the author . . . of sin" (3.1, 5.4), in the sense that God is nonetheless the one who authors the story of creation and redemption; "recreations" and "duties of necessity" (21.8): various senses permissible; "by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto" (28.2), in a sense which permits a Roman priest to qualify; "wine" (29.3), in the sense of grape juice; "overseers and other rulers" (31.1): in the sense that one might allow the use of the term "overseer" for the minister by way of pre-eminence, without denying the use of the term overseers to these "other rulers."

²⁴ E.g.: "light of nature" (1.1. et al) the Puritan vs. Van Tilian sense; "covenant" (7), contract vs. a unilateral treaty; "necessity" with respect to the works of the Sabbath (21.8), pre-industrial revolution vs. post-industrial revolution necessities; "with the selfsame bodies, and none other" (32.2) material, formal, or some other sense of identity; "space of six days" (4.1), solar or otherwise; "singing of psalms with grace in the heart" (21.2), in the sense of hymns.

²⁵ Cf. the Assembly answer to a query in 1848: "When Ministers and other officers are ordained in the Presbyterian Church, and give an affirmative answer to the question: 'Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of this Church as containing the system of doctrines taught in the holy Scripture?' are such Ministers and officers to be understood as embracing and assenting to the doctrines, principles, precepts, and statements contained in the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, in the same unqualified sense in which they are understood to embrace and assent to the doctrines, principles, precepts, and statements contained in other parts of the Confession of Faith?*****The

11. There is no spiritual tyranny in requiring such a subscription—no violation of liberty of conscience—for the subscription is voluntary, the Confession having been set forth for the very purpose of uniting in fellowship those who from biblical conviction can agree.²⁶
12. An officer cannot, submitting to the authority of the church, give the impression that he believes what he does not. Therefore all officers must have the right to testify to their conscience in a matter wherein they differ with the Church's Confession. So too one cannot, submitting to the authority of the church, absolutely refrain from declaring what Christ has called one to teach.²⁷ Nevertheless an officer can properly and prudentially regulate the manner, and limit the forums, in which he expresses his views.
13. Thus the courts of original jurisdiction should consider carefully any professed exceptions to the substance of the Confession's teaching. Here the candidate supposes that he disagrees with the Confession, credibly believing the Bible to teach other than what the Standards teach. The court must judge whether the excepted doctrine so undermines the integrity of the system of doctrine, government, discipline and worship of the Standards as to 1) make doubtful the candidate's profession of that system, or, 2) make impossible the candidate's practice under that system; in either of which cases, the exception cannot be permitted. If the exception is found permissible, the candidate shall be approved only on condition that: a) he shall not be permitted to teach in opposition to the Standards; b) he must be able and willing to teach the doctrine of the Standards with sympathy and deference, and bring his practice into conformity with the Standards' teaching; c) he shall be permitted to express his own conscience on the matter in the course of his teaching on the subject; and d) he shall be permitted peacefully and respectfully to advocate his views before the courts of the church in order to persuade the church to modify its Standards.
14. If an officer finds his study of scripture leading to conclusions contrary to the Confession, he should first raise his concerns, not in public, nor with people he serves, but with his brother officers. The matter should be raised for discussion, so that the church may help resolve the doubts, or become persuaded that a change in her Confession is necessary.²⁸

committee recommended that the question be answered in the affirmative, and the recommendation was adopted." From Samuel J. Baird, *A Collection of the Acts, Deliverances, and Testimonies of the Supreme Judicatory of the Presbyterian Church, Form its Origin in American of the Present Time. . .*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), p. 43.

²⁶ See *BCO*, Preface, II. Preliminary Principles. 1-2. Cf. A.A. Hodge: "It must be remembered, however, that the matter of these Creeds and Confessions binds the consciences of men only so far as it is purely scriptural, and because it is so; and as to the form in which the matter is stated, they bind those only who have voluntarily subscribed the Confession, and because of that subscription." *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978), p. 3.

²⁷ Cf. John Murray: "The person who adopts a creed and subscribes to it is never justified in doing so merely on the authority of the Church or simply because it is the creed of the Church to which he belongs. Creedal adoption or subscription must always proceed from the conviction that the creed is in accord with Scripture and declares its truth. The person adopting can never pass on the responsibility for such personal and individual conviction to the Church and its official action. The moment acceptance is conceded on the basis that it is the interpretation and formulation of the Church rather than on the basis of consonance with Scripture, in that moment the Church is accorded the place of God and the authority of the Church is substituted for the authority of God's Word. The gravity of such a spiritual catastrophe cannot be measured. For in principle the idolatry perpetrated by Rome has been conceded and the basis has been laid for the gross impieties and tyrannies that have followed the career of the Romish Church." "Tradition: Romish and Protestant," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol.4, *Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), pp. 272-273.

²⁸ Cf. Francis Turretin: "Accordingly if they think they see in them anything worth correcting, they should undertake nothing rashly or *ajtavktw*" and unseasonable, so as vitally to disturb their mother's innards, as schismatics

15. By the wholesome procedures of appeal and complaint, used with restraint and modesty, the Church defines and refines the boundaries of the language of her Confession through judgment in particular cases.²⁹

Such principles, it appears to me, inform a view of subscription that alone is consistent with a sound justification of Confessions. The burden of proof lies, in my judgment, with those who would advocate other views to come up with a defense for their use of confessions that does not amount to a re-articulation of the faulty arguments employed by those who oppose them outright, and is able to make some sense out of their continued employment for the unity, purity, and peace of the Church.

Where Do We Go From Here?

First, a few preliminary observations. I think it would be fair to say that the PCA, in its brief history, has not been uniformly operating according to the principles set forth above.³⁰ Having found a proposition we can all agree on, let me try to build from there.

What do I make of that fact? I suppose we are the weaker for it, but that imperfection certainly does not undo the denomination. Before us is a matter of the well-being of the Church, not its very existence. We must all learn to live with imperfection while we labor with our eyes on the prize. But though the view I have articulated has not been generally embraced, I see no reason why it should trouble the church for me to charitably and peaceably argue in its favor. Yet some seem to find in this advocacy a threat, and as such, find the very thought of such debates something to lament. I would like to understand more of why this is the case, but I am well persuaded that without such discussion neither the purity nor the peace of the PCA as she is now constituted will be sustained.

The fact is, however, that since the PCA has not uniformly operated on such principles as above, we may have considerably less confessional unity than we might otherwise have had. What should we do, from the point of view that I am urging, to remedy this circumstance?

First, I would have us devote serious efforts toward establishing a constitutional standard for subscription.³¹ Some public standard, reflecting real agreement, even if not all that I would

do, but should commend the difficulties they have to their Church; or either put her public opinion before their own private judgment, or break away from her communion, if conscience cannot acquiesce in her judgment.” From *Institutio Theologiae Elenticae*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: John D. Lowe, 1847-48), XVIII, xxx, 9-10, cited in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics set out and illustrated from the sources*, rev. and ed. by Ernst Bizer; trans. by G.T. Thomson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), pp. 687-688.

²⁹ Cf. F.L. Patton: “There is no doubt that there is an area of tolerated divergence from the Confession of Faith. How large that area is will depend upon the degree of readiness there may be in the Church to move the ecclesiastical courts, and upon the decisions reached in the court of last resort. Historical students may tell us what the Church has thought upon the subject, and dogmatic theologians may tell us what the Church ought to think; but it is only as the General Assembly decides concrete cases in appellate jurisdiction, and the principle of *stare decisis* may be supposed to govern subsequent deliverances, that the area of tolerated divergence can be defined.” *The Revision of the Confession of Faith*. Read before the Presbyterian Social Union, New York, December 2, 1889, p. 6.

³⁰ Though I should say that Potomac Presbytery, without formally endorsing such a view, has never in fact (to my memory) acted contrary to these principles in dealing with candidates.

³¹ Cf. the counsel of the 22nd General Assembly: “. . . with respect to the question concerning subscription, the Assembly suggests that interested Ruling and Teaching Elders (particularly from ostensibly differing points of view) could serve the church well by producing and circulating among themselves draft language for a new section IV of the Preface of *The Book of Church Order* (to be titled: “Of the Church’s Confession and Subscription”) where in brief paragraphs would be stated the nature and authority of the Confession and Catechisms, their justification and

seek, is far better than no standard at all. In my judgment until we establish such a standard, we will continually be troubled with controversy concerning subscription and have no ready means of resolution. Of course the work in seeking to establish such a standard will require great self-discipline, for the temptation will lurk near at hand to affirm a theory of subscription sustaining one's own peculiarities, rather than that which is consistent with the rule of Christ and is adapted to the good of the Church.

Second, in my judgment a faulty theory and practice of subscription is far more dangerous to the health of the Church than an imprudent (either to few or to many) specification of doctrines in the Confession. Thus if the PCA could agree on what I take to be a sound view of subscription, I, for one, would be amenable to discussing what elements in our current Confession must be removed in order for the PCA to find in that Confession a real expression of our articles of unity. Thus I would favor a consideration of amendments to the Confession where it simply does not constitute the articles of agreement in the Presbyterian Church in America today.³²

Third, I would have the courts of the church insist that the seminaries serving the PCA devotedly teach the Confession itself as providing the foundational outline of their theological study, and not just as a minor survey course offered in the final year to prepare the candidate for ordination exams. In the many years I have served on the credentials committee of Potomac Presbytery, I have seen evidence of a continuing lack of depth in understanding of our Confession on the part of our candidates, candidates who have been uniformly able and diligent, but who have clearly not been taught to embrace the Confession as a precious gift of God's providence for our good, and a "form of sound words" marvelously adapted to the public expression of their biblical faith. I would have the seminaries teach the Confession as derived from the Scriptures, set forth in its original historical context, compared carefully to the views it rejects, pursued in its use among American Presbyterians, and displayed its contemporary significance for the glory of Christ and the good of His Church.³³

purposes, and the meaning of subscription to the doctrinal standards in the PCA. Such drafts as perfected through prayerful study and charitable discussion, without the pressures and politics of an impending vote, could then be proposed to the Presbyteries for study, perfection, and circulation among themselves, in hope that some measure of consensus could be achieved in the church before the formal amending process of sending an overture to the General Assembly even begins. Perhaps this course, with the Lord's blessing, would provide a way for securing both the bonds of our unity, and the purity of our faith, while maintaining peace in the church under the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ." *M22GA* (1994), pp. 233-34.

³² Something like this, for example, appears to have been Thornwell's counsel. See James Henley Thornwell, "The General Assembly of 1847," in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell, D.D., LL.D.*, 4 vols. (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1871-75); reprint (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), IV:493.

³³ Cf. George A. Baxter, professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary (Virginia) and principle leader of the Old School Presbyterians, South: "I think it desirable that preachers trained in this Seminary, would be imbued with a cordial attachment to our Confession of Faith. The Scriptures are an infallible guide; the creed is only the best exposition which a fallible church could give of the Scriptures. As such, however, they must take [make?] it the bond of union in all their operations. It is therefore not only desirable but necessary that the ministers of a church should be imbued with a cordial attachment to its creed as the bond of its union. The creed of a church cannot be broken up, or trampled under foot, without such a complete destruction of its harmony as would ruin its usefulness. . . ." Cited in William Henry Foote, *Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical*, second series (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott and Company, 1856), p. 458.

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APPENDIX
OUTLINE OF A PROPOSAL FOR A BCO PROVISION
ON SUBSCRIPTION

IV. OF THE CHURCH'S DOCTRINAL STANDARDS & SUBSCRIPTION

1. [Brief paragraph stating the nature of a doctrinal standard, e.g., a standard exposition of the teaching of the Bible]
2. [Brief paragraph stating the purposes of a doctrinal standard]
3. [Brief paragraph stating the justification of a doctrinal standard]
4. [Brief paragraph stating the authority of a doctrinal standard]
5. Definition and Description of Subscription to Doctrinal Standards in PCA.

With respect to the second ordination vow (*BCO* 21-5. 2; 24-5.2), the candidate affirms the system of doctrine, government, discipline and worship set forth in the Standards as expressive of his understanding of the teaching of Scripture. Any exception, defined as any reservations concerning, or objections to the doctrinal standards, shall be plainly set before the of court jurisdiction. That court shall consider any professed exceptions as follows:

1. Exceptions to Form

The candidate professes to affirm the Standards' doctrine, but in words other than those of the Standards. The court must judge whether the candidate's words are an essentially faithful expression of the standard's teaching, or in fact an exception of substance (*infra*)

Exceptions of form, if approved by a majority vote of the court, may be freely taught.

2. Exceptions in Sense

The candidate professes to affirm the words of the Standards in a particular case, but in a sense that the candidate supposes may differ in some way with the manner in which the Standards have been historically understood by the court. The court must judge whether that sense is in essential agreement with the Standards, or in fact an exception of substance. (*infra*)

Exceptions in sense, if approved by a majority vote of the court, may be freely taught.

3. Exceptions of Substance

The candidate disagrees with the Standards with respect to their teaching, credibly believing the Bible to teach other than what the Standards teach. The court must judge whether the excepted doctrine so undermines the integrity of the system of doctrine, government, discipline and worship of the Standards as to 1) make doubtful the candidate's profession of that system, or, 2) make impossible the candidate's practice under that system; in either of which cases, the exception cannot be permitted. If the exception is found permissible, the candidate shall be approved only on condition that:

- a. he shall not be permitted to teach in opposition to the Standards;
- b. he must be able and willing to teach the doctrine of the Standards with sympathy and deference, and bring his practice into conformity with the Standards' teaching;
- c. he shall be permitted to express his own conscience on the matter in the course of his teaching on the subject; and
- d. he shall be permitted peacefully and respectfully to advocate his views before the courts of the church in order to persuade the church to modify its Standards.

No court shall permit any exceptions of substance except as set forth above, and then only with three-fourths approval of that court, subject always to the review of the higher courts. Whenever an exception of substance is permitted, the court shall make a full record of the exception, including a citation of the portion of the Standards excepted, and a brief statement of the candidate's views.

A further conforming amendment should also be adopted, i.e.: amend *BCO* 26-3 to read, "This paragraph (26-3) and *Preface (I. - IV.)* can be amended only by the same method prescribed for the amendment of the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the Church."