

# HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE TOGETHER? --SUBSCRIPTION AND THE FUTURE OF THE PCA

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## INTRODUCTION--THE TWO VIEWS OF SUBSCRIPTION

It is commonly said that there are two alternative views of confessional subscription which are influential in our Assembly--"Full Subscription" and "System Subscription". The 'Full Subscriptionist' (F/S) believes that "*all of the doctrines in the Confession and Catechisms...are all part of the 'system of doctrine'*" (emphasis mine)<sup>1</sup> to which the ordinand subscribes in the second ordination vow. While the F/S position "*does not require the adoption of every word...*" it does require "*adopting every doctrine or teaching*".<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the "System Subscriptionist" (S/S) believes that there are "*parts of the Standards which might not be deemed as fundamentals of the system...*"<sup>3</sup> In short--the F/S insists every doctrine is part of the 'system' and the S/S insists that some doctrines are not part of the system. .

## WHY OUR UNITY PROBLEMS CANNOT BE SOLVED BY SUBSCRIPTION

I will come clean immediately and say that my own view is closer to the 'System Subscription' position. But I want to argue against the F/S position in a somewhat different way than is usual. As the title indicates, the PCA has major rifts within it. Brothers and churches are regularly in conflict over a broad range of issues. The question before us is not simply "What view of subscription should we adopt?" but "*Will any view of confessional subscription solve our disunity problems?*" I argue that it will not. It is often stated or implied that adopting the F/S position would unify us by making us a more consistently Reformed communion. I challenge that view. I believe our divergent views of subscription are only symptomatic and not truly at the heart of our disunity. My thesis is that even if we came to a consensus of *subscription-with-no-exceptions*--it would not really get to the heart of our rift.

**1. Worship.** There are great tensions over the issue of public worship within the PCA, but a 'strict' adherence to the WCF will not solve it. An interesting case study is the Free Church of Scotland, which has such a full subscription position that it is committed to unaccompanied, exclusive Psalm singing. Yet there is division over whether to introduce more contemporary tunes into Psalm worship or maintain the older melodies. And in 1997 a constitutional crisis occurred when one Free church held a Christmas Carol service (not Sunday worship service) as an 'outreach'. The furor was all part of a progression that led to a schism.<sup>4</sup> So even within an exclusive-Psalmody church, the same rifts and divisions over worship appear that have appeared among us. Appeals to the Confession will not ultimately solve our divisions over worship. **2. Inter-Church Relationships.** Another difference among us is how we relate to and view other church bodies. The WCF says that transubstantiation is superstitious and leads to idolatry (XXIX, 6), but does that mean it is wrong for a PCA minister to 'share a podium' with a Catholic priest, or that it is a sin for a believer to ever attend a Catholic service? Will 'full subscription' solve this? No. The Confession doesn't directly speak to this. The Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland split over this very issue some years ago<sup>5</sup>, and that church held to a very 'full subscription' policy to the WCF. So, too, in our midst there is a major cleavage over how we are to relate not only to non-Protestant bodies but non-Reformed ones. It is a huge problem and 'full subscription' will not solve it. **3. Creation.** There is a major controversy over the days of creation. Of course, the Confession speaks to this (WCF IV, 1) but very briefly and its phrase '*the space of six days*' is not spelled out. Much study has gone in to discerning what

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<sup>1</sup> Morton H. Smith, *The Case for Full Subscription to the Westminster Standards in the Presbyterian Church in America* (GPTS Press, 1992), p.7.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, p.8

<sup>3</sup> William Barker, "System Subscription" (unpublished version), p.1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Fraser MacDonald, "Scenes of Ecclesiastical Theatre in the Free Church of Scotland, 1981-2000" *Northern Scotland*, Vol 20 (2000), p.125-48.

<sup>5</sup> One of its prominent members, Lord McKay, attended the Catholic funeral of one of his colleagues.

the Westminster divines' personal beliefs were so as to posit the 'original intent' of the 'six days' term. But many scholars agree that the original intent behind the term '*singing of psalms*' in WCF XXI, 5 was certainly to preclude hymn-singing. Yet, because it is not spelled out, the PCA does not consider itself in non-compliance. How then will we solve the creation debate with an appeal to the Westminster authors' beliefs about Genesis 1? **4. Women.** There is a great deal of controversy about the role of women, but full subscription will not solve this. Beyond preclusion from office, the WCF and even the BCO do not speak specifically about what women can and cannot do in the church. The fact that there are numbers of Constitutional amendments being proposed shows that, right now, the F/S position is not solution. **5. Mission.** There are significant differences among us about how evangelism should be done, the relationship between evangelism and social justice, philosophy of church planting and church growth, and so on. Again, no appeal to WCF can really be made to deal with most of these items. Why? Because the Confession gives almost no treatment to the key themes of a) the meaning of the kingdom of God, b) the world mission of the church, or c) the relationship of the Holy Spirit to both. And these themes lie at the heart of our differences.

**Sum:** Nearly all presbyters in the PCA subscribe to the WCF with only the most minor exceptions (the only common one being with regard to the Sabbath). Yet elders who can agree on virtually everything in the lengthy WCF nonetheless find themselves in serious, continual conflict on a whole range of issues. There is regular talk of a 'split'. The source, cannot ultimately be blamed on a 'looseness' with regard to the confession. What then is the source of the problems? I suggest three more foundational divergences.

### **WHERE THE UNITY PROBLEMS COME FROM**

**1. How we read the culture.** First, we differ deeply over how to read and respond to our Western culture. In the debate on the PCA Web page earlier this year about the "Sonship" course of World Harvest Mission, Rev. Terry Johnson granted that there remained little actual doctrinal difference between himself and "Sonship", but added, "*yet I remain confused about Sonship's judgment as to what emphasis is needed today...The audience shapes our message because the distinctives of one group may require one point of emphasis or explanation, and another group something else...What is our context today?...The combination of overemphasis on grace (to the neglect of obedience, duty, responsibility, and effort) within a context of antinomianism is likely to produce license.*"<sup>6</sup> Here are two parties reading the WCF on adoption together and agreeing completely on what it says, but then reading the culture very differently as to how to communicate and apply it. I believe that this is also what is *really* behind much of the controversy around creation, women in the church, and use of contemporary music. The 'parties' are in (sometimes profound) disagreement about what 'the need of the hour' is and what the 'context' demands.

**2. How we read history.** Second, we differ significantly over our reading of church history. Many in the PCA read certain eras in church history (Old School Southern Presbyterianism, 17th century Puritanism) almost as 'golden ages', while others affirm the theology of the Confession and our American Presbyterian forebears but have a rather ambivalent view of the church in those times. Many of the battles over polity and practice come not from explicit terms in our Standards but over whether attitudes and practices (and even language-style) from these earlier eras are going to be maintained as well. These sorts of assumptions about history are often hidden and do not come out in our debates and yet they keep us from coming to agreement.

**3. How we read the Bible.** Third, we also differ, I believe, on the framework within which we read the Bible. Richard Lints writes of the difference between evangelicals who read Scripture as a progressive unfolding of the kingdom of God (a "redemptive historical" framework, e.g. Geerhardus Vos) and those who read Scripture as a body of 'datum' to be organized topically into doctrines (a "systematic-topical" framework, e.g. Charles Hodge).<sup>7</sup> Everyone acknowledges that we must

<sup>6</sup> Terry Johnson, "Response to Respondees", 1/26/2001, PCANews website.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology* (Eerdmans, 1993), pp.259-290. John Murray speaks of the "tendency to abstraction" of the S-T framework, the tendency to dehistoricize, and to arrive at "timeless", topically oriented universals. ("Systematic Theology" in *The New Testament Student and Theology*, J.H.Skilton, ed. P&R, 1976). The R-H framework, on the other hand focuses on God's special revelation not primarily as "naked information" but primarily as God's activity in history.

do both 'Biblical' and 'Systematic' theology. But the WCF virtually ignores the progress of redemptive history and the key topic kingdom of God. Yet one's view of the kingdom has enormous ramifications for your view of mission, evangelism, culture, the work of the church and of the ministry. Therefore, proponents of the divergent kingdom-views of Greg Bahnsen, of Meredith Kline, and of Abraham Kuyper can all live together in the PCA, subscribing to the Westminster Confession fully, and yet their differing views will put their followers at practical logger-heads continually.

**Sum:** Despite our common Confession, our strongly divergent ways of reading our contemporary culture, church history, and even the Bible leads to deep rifts. The reason we cannot agree on role of women, worship, missions and evangelism, and even on confessional subscription itself is because, to use Lints' language, though we share the same doctrinal framework, we have deeply divergent "theological visions" of how we are to communicate and apply our Reformed doctrine in our cultural context.<sup>8</sup>

**Why can't the WCF unify us as it is?** When our great Confession was written it *was* addressing the great issues in the culture at the time. The two main opposing forces to the gospel were Catholicism and Laudian Anglicanism. But the burning issues of our day are different. Now the opposing forces are secularism, pluralism, and non-Christian religions, and the great issue is how to embody the faith in a post-Christian West and in a pre-Christian east and south. The Confession wonderfully expresses the ancient faith, but it doesn't apply that faith to the issues that divide us and face us now. It doesn't ask the Bible a number of questions that *we* need help on, but they did not.<sup>9</sup> Thus the WCF actually creates too much 'space' in the PCA for people with deeply different theological visions. I completely affirm the importance of being a confessional church, rather than a liberal-mainline or 'evangelical-procedural' denomination. I completely affirm the wisdom and right of holding office bearers to subscribe solemnly to a Confession. I am only pointing out the (I think) insoluble disunity we have because our WCF was written in such a different time and place. Taking a F/S will not solve it.

## **WHAT SHOULD BE DONE NOW**

**A. ALTERNATIVES I DON'T RECOMMEND.** 1. **Let's not keep things as they are.** I think the "status quo" is not a viable option. The tensions are great and are not going away. Currently, each 'side' annually tries to make the denomination less hospitable for the opposition through all sorts of judicial rulings and resolutions at GA, or by keeping out of one's presbytery men who look too much like the other party. This is not getting at the roots of the disunity. If eventually one 'side' was to make the other side feel so unwelcome as to lead to a substantial exodus, even *that* would still not solve our disunity. New 'conservative' and 'liberal' wings would sprout. 2. **But let's not re-write the whole Confession.** I have always been influenced by Machen's skepticism expressed in his talk "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance".<sup>10</sup> He says, "*It is clear that ours is not a creed-making age*".<sup>11</sup> No church who would try to write a new creed could hope to muster the tiniest fraction of the great theological minds of the time. 3. **And let's not adopt any overlapping 'brief' statements'.** If we don't write a new Confession, should we adopt, in addition, some brief, more contemporary 'statement of faith'? There is great danger in trying to supplement Confession with a statement that covers the same ground. This strategy was used in mainline denominations to relativize the influence of the longer, historical creed. It would create confusion to adopt any statement that seeks to cover the same 'territory' that is already contained in the WCF.

<sup>8</sup> Lints, pp.312ff.

<sup>9</sup> When a church writes a confession, it is not simply writing down what the Bible says, it is writing down the Bible's *answers to the questions it is asking*. Harvie Conn once told me that the Westminster Confession in many ways failed to give the Korean church the guidance it needed. In Asian cultures, rooted in Confucianism, one of the most significant issues is the relationship to one's parents and ancestors. Yet the WCF says absolutely nothing about ancestor worship and parental authority. Why? It is not that the Bible has nothing to say, but that the Westminster divines didn't think to ask the Bible about that. In other words, every Confession is historically and culturally 'situated'. Harvie informally posited that the Korean church has suffered without guidance in this area (and others) because western Reformed Christians saw their creeds as timeless, universal, and final.

<sup>10</sup> J.Gresham Machen, "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance" in *God Transcendent* (Eerdmans, 1949), pp. 157-167)

<sup>11</sup> Machen, p.166.

**B. MEASURES I RECOMMEND. 1. First, a view of subscription that allows the full breadth of historic Reformed orthodoxy.** Even if we revise the Confession (see below) the F/S vs. S/S issue will haunt us unless we solve it. I propose (as Bryan Chapell) that we recognize the validity of exceptions to the Confession, but that those exceptions would only be to admit those with views from other streams of the Reformed Tradition than the British-Puritan voice of Westminster. The Continental views of Sabbath and worship put more emphasis on how Christ fulfilled the worship regulations of the Old Covenant. Eighteenth century Reformed revivalism puts more emphasis on the experience of the Spirit. Dutch Calvinism puts more emphasis on cultural transformation. We should not assume that any deviation from Old School Southern Presbyterianism is a drift toward liberalism. **2. Second, a careful but substantial amendment to our standards that speak to the contemporary context.** I suggest that we should write chapters in the 'gaps' left by the Westminster Standards. We should especially write a section or sections on the mission of the church and the kingdom of God. This would have to be deeply rooted and in no way contradictory to the ancient theology in the rest of the Confession. And yet it must fully face our contemporary situation.

If do this, however, we will find immediately that the deeply divergent 'theological visions' will clash. Any extensive confession-writing should be seen not as essentially a political process, but as a process of prayer, community, theological reflection, and repentance. Nevertheless, there will be great controversy when we seek a consensus on any of these issues, and almost certainly, when the dust clears, there will be both greater unity and some division. The process of creed-revision will surely enrich and invigorate and unify us in many ways. That is what creeds are supposed to do. But it is most likely that some people will feel duty bound to leave. If the church finally becomes more united in its theological vision through its confession, that will allow less 'space' for some. Yet--isn't this the only way to heal our divisions in a truly Reformed way, and with full integrity?

Also, the new parts of the Confession, along with the ancient body of it, could be the basis for a major renewal of our communion. John H. Kromminga says that a confessional statement originally has three functions. It may be used as 1) a witness to the world, 2) an instructional tool for members, and 3) a test of orthodoxy for office bearers.<sup>12</sup> He convincingly argues that the first aspect of witness enjoys its greatest prominence when the confession is new. Then people in the society around can hear their issues addressed and challenged. As time goes on and context changes, only the second and third uses are viable. Eventually, only the third use can function, as the language and concerns of the document become more remote even from Christians. Unless new confessions are re-revised and renewed, creeds lose the full scope of their usefulness. My proposal is a very conservative one. I do not suggest that we create an entirely new Confession. But we do need to do some substantial new Confession-writing, and if we do it well, it could renew both our unity and our witness to the world.

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<sup>12</sup> John H. Kromminga, "The Shape of a New Confession", *Calvin Theological Journal* 7 (November 1972): 149. See him cited and discussed in Harvie Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* (Zondervan, 1984), pp.241-245.