

Subscription to a Creed and the Authority of Holy Scripture *

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1. Creeds & subscription

Confessional subscription, that is, adherence to a doctrinal statement by office-bearers of the Church, is a subject of considerable importance, particularly for a strict-subscription church like the PCEA. It is also one of some difficulty given that we do not want to deny the primacy of Scripture by seeming to place our creeds on the same level as Scripture by not allowing

any dissent from them.

Indeed, even the practice of catechism preaching in the manner of some in the Dutch tradition has been one we have tended to follow only in so far as we follow the catechism subjects in a series of topical sermons drawn from Scripture. We are very jealous about not giving a place to creeds in the pulpit that belongs to the word of God alone. That's the theory anyway. This article aims to explore how the creeds should function in the life of the church.

Development of creeds

Initially it was enough to assert belief in some major truths of the Scriptures. Yet a brief confession such as 'Jesus is Lord' has many implications. As differences arose among those who claimed loyalty to Christ and the Scriptures, it was necessary to set out some of these implications at length.

In early Christian centuries there was much dispute concerning the person of Christ and his relationship to the Father and the

Holy Spirit. The orthodox Catholics of the time set out their understanding in a form we sum up as the doctrine of the Trinity. In the 16th century Reformation the issues included the relationship of Scripture and church tradition, the nature of justification, and the nature of the church and the sacraments. Protestants made statements on such issues, protesting against the denial of Scripture as the primary and ultimate standard. In the early 17th century there was controversy over God's grace and salvation leading to the Calvinistic statements of the Synod of Dort 1618/19.

While the Roman Catholic Church produced its decrees and sought submission to them on the authority of the Church, Protestants produced creeds but insisted on the primacy of Scripture, not Church or pope. Many Confessions were produced in the different lands to which the Reformation spread. The Westminster Confession of 1646/47 comes at the virtual close of the creed-writing age among Protestants. This accounts in part for it being really the high-water mark of creedal composition.

Some history¹

Seventeenth century Scots had no problems with strict

subscription to the Westminster Confession. The Church of Scotland (1690, 1694) and the Scottish Parliament (1693) legislated it as part of the compact that recognised the Church of Scotland as the legally established religion.

In Ireland the English Church was the established one. Presbyterians in the north (Ulster) formalised subscription for licentiates in 1698 but this was not the case in the south of Ireland. In 1719 the Crown granted recognition based on the Westminster Confession, but there were significant numbers who scrupled submitting to 'human tests of divine truths' and toward whom the Synod exercised forbearance. Non-subscribers usually eventually went off into unitarianism. The resolution came only much later with the enforcement of subscription in 1835 which paved the way for the union of 1840 with the Secession Church.

In North America a kind of modified subscription was agreed to in 1729. The Confession was accepted but exceptions in articles 'not essential and necessary' could be allowed by presbyteries. From this provision, intended to have limited application, came at length a laxity that destroyed the orthodox character of mainstream Presbyterianism, particularly in the early 20th century.

Meanwhile, the Scots' adherence to strict subscription was weakened in the latter half of the 19th century more especially from about 1875. Declaratory statements designed to soften the clear contours of orthodox Calvinism were adopted by various of the major Scottish bodies (1879, 1892), and had their impact in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. An ill-defined liberty of opinion allowed Presbytery or Assembly interference only if there was disturbance in the church. Changing intellectual currents were significant factors and the mainstream churches were further pushed into major heresy as the 20th century progressed. Key elements of the faith were sidelined or rejected.

I am far from saying that strict subscription is a guarantee of spiritual prosperity: The Church of Scotland during the reign of the Moderates c.1770-1820 was nominally at least a strict subscription church, but it was often cold and formal. The PCEA is and always has been a strict-subscription church, but that has not guaranteed outward progress. However, clear-cut subscription to doctrinal statements by ministers and office-bearers is certainly not without great importance. 'Guard the sacred deposit', said Paul to Timothy. But churches have often been unwilling to do this.

Options

In 1720 Irish minister Rev Samuel Haliday of Belfast, refused to subscribe the Confession, but offered the following statement:

I sincerely believe the scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the only rule of revealed religion, a sufficient test of orthodoxy or soundness in the Faith, and to settle all the terms of ministerial and Christian communion, to which nothing may be added by any synod, assembly or council whatsoever; and I find all the essential articles of the Christian doctrine to be contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith; which articles I receive upon the sole authority of the Holy Scriptures.²

So Haliday affirmed the primacy of Scripture, and the utility of the Confession as containing all the essential items of Christian belief, but he did not indicate how much or how little of the Confession he regarded as Scriptural. Haliday himself claimed that there were many non-essential items in the Confession. Clearly, his is a basis which does not secure clarity of belief, one of the chief purposes of a Confession.

The same position follows if we were to have a subscription to the Confession in so far as it agrees with Scripture, or a similar ambiguous form of words, such as those imposed by the Dutch King on the Reformed Church in 1816. Only if we affirm the Confession as founded on and in agreement with Scripture, and therefore something we accept because it is Scriptural, can we secure clarity and definiteness. But then what becomes of the primacy of Scripture and final appeal to it?

2. The primacy of Scripture

The primacy of Scripture is to be respected in Christ's Church. Elders and ministers are not to be chiefly specialists in Canon Law, resisting examination of the Word of God by a mere citation of the Confession of Faith. They *are* to be capable teachers of the Word of God, for it is to such that Christ has committed the affairs of his Church. The past cannot be ignored but the Gospel must be confessed in the present.

Hence, the FIRST function of a Confession of Faith is to

make sure that Scripture is our primary standard in all matters of faith and conduct.

We make that claim in the very first question addressed to candidates for office! *[Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God and the only rule of faith and practice?*] Thus a Scriptural Confession derives its authority from the Scriptures, not the other way around. The placement of the subject of Scripture as Chapter 1 in the Westminster Confession reminds us of this in a striking way. Also important is the way in which the Confession drives us back to the Scriptures in any controversy (1:8-10). We do not honour our Confession if we use it, rather than Scripture, to refute some error that may arise.

A SECOND function of a Confession of Faith is to provide a rallying point for those of like mind concerning the main teachings of Scripture.

A Confession will probably become more full in the light of fresh disputes or heresies which require a response, but it can never be a kind of definitive commentary on every passage of Scripture. Its explanations, however good and correct, are not inspired as Scripture is. Indeed, it is always open to revision

and restatement in the light of Scripture as the primary standard. Given the present fragmented state of the Christian Church it will always be wise to seek wider counsel before formal amendment with a view to avoiding idiosyncratic change.

A THIRD function of a Confession of Faith is to serve as a public statement of the faith of the people of God, and to teach the faith catechetically.

A Confession of Faith will be carefully expressed but it should not be in old-fashioned language lest it fail to be an adequate public statement and means of instruction. Its coverage is not all the minutiae of the theological schools, but the grand and clearly revealed truths in the Bible, which it seeks to commend to others.³

A FOURTH function of a Confession of Faith is to be a solemn bond for the office-bearers of the Church.

Their subscription to such a form of sound words provides a bond of fellowship and co-operation. The terms of subscription

must recognise the primary authority of Scripture as the rule of faith. And the vow must be taken sincerely (WCF 22:4), therefore also the meaning of the Confession must be clear.

A Confession produced by a meeting of many minds and/or formally adopted by the Church has greater authority than the opinion of an individual. Office-bearers need to be particularly careful not to elevate personal opinions to greater importance than the teachings expressed in the Confession.

A FIFTH function of a Confession is to form the basis of the trust on which Church property is held.

If these trusts do not give any power of change at all, to that extent they may not conform to the inherent power of the Church to formulate her Confession subject to Holy Scripture as set out above.⁴ On the other hand, those who seek change have often done so with a view to modifying adversely the essential doctrine of the Confession, rather than making it an even closer representation of the teaching of Scripture. If there is a genuine unanimity on the scripturalness of proposed changes, there should be no problem.

The Confession forbids us to make Synods or Councils the rule of faith (WCF 31:4), and this is a uniform principle of our Reformed tradition (eg. *Belgic Confession* Art 7; *Second Helvetic Confession* Ch II). Thus the productions of the Westminster Assembly cannot be regarded as the rule of faith, but they may be and ought to be a help to faith.

The Roman Church made its appeal to Scripture and tradition including decrees of Councils. Canon Law was the rule of faith not the Scriptures. The Confession is not rightly viewed if it is seen as a new Canon Law.

True, appealing to Scripture against the Confession in any significant way does involve 'abandonment of the communion of which the Confession is the bond' (John Macpherson, 1882). Yet even here, any judicial proceeding should emphasise the Scripture basis of the doctrine rejected. That will honour the Confession because that will honour Scripture!

End Notes

* From *The Presbyterian Banner*, March 2001.

1 I have provided a more detailed survey in Rowland S. Ward, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Study Guide* (Wantirna: New Melbourne Press, 1996) 204-213.

2 Finlay Holmes, *Our Irish Presbyterian Heritage* (Belfast: Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1992) 65.

3 Note my *The Westminster Confession and Catechisms in Modern English* (Melbourne 1996 reprinted, 2000, 2001). Examples of matters not decided include the infra-and supra-lapsarian order of the divine decrees, the definition of usury, the appointed time for the efficacy of baptism, and the relation of the active obedience of Christ to justification and sanctification. See also Peter J. Wallace , *Whose Meaning? The Question of Original Intent* at <<http://www.nd.edu/~pwallace/intent.htm>>.

4 Note this point well made in *Constitutional Catechism of the Free Church of Scotland* (1847) Q.44 & fn.

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