

SUBSCRIPTION TO THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS
IN THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

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Preface

The subject of confession subscription is one that has been of perennial difficulty in American Presbyterianism, and threatens the peace and unity of the Presbyterian Church in America at the present time.

Definitions

The Place of Creeds or Confessions in the Life of the Church

In order to understand the meaning of subscription to the confession of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), it is necessary to define the place of the creeds or confessions in the church. A creedal or confessional statement is a statement of what an individual or a denomination confesses to be his or its belief. That creedal statements are biblical is seen in the faithful sayings that the apostle cites in the pastoral Epistles. For example, "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. 1:15).

The PCA, as it came into being, declared herself to be committed to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as held by the American Presbyterian Churches since 1789. The action was in these words: "The General Assembly of the National Presbyterian Church adopted the following standards as the bond of union:

1. The Westminster Confession of Faith as proposed by the Steering Committee for the Continuing Presbyterian Church.
2. The unamended Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms."¹

¹*Minutes of the First General Assembly*, 1-31, 31.

These standards are "the bond of union" on which we have agreed. That is, they are the doctrinal standards to which the PCA is committed, and which serve as the bond of our unity together. If we are not agreed on these matters, then we have no bond of unity to hold us together in a single denomination.

Subscription to these Standards

First, the idea of subscription is that of a formal committing of oneself to that which he subscribes. The second ordination vow of the PCA is a vow in which the ordinand affirms his faith. It involves his subscription to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as the confession of his faith. It reads:

Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and the catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures: and do you further promise that if at any time you find yourself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system of doctrine, you will on your own initiative, make known to your Presbytery (session) the change which has taken place in your views since the assumption of this ordination vow.²

Strict or Full Subscription Defined

Before going further, it would be well to define what we understand the terms "strict" and "loose" subscription to mean. First, the two words "strict" and "loose" are not the best terms by which to describe the two views we hold. This terminology goes back to the past century. In some ways, both terms are caricatures of the positions bearing these names. Instead of "strict subscription" the latter description is "full subscription." For the expression "loose subscription" we may substitute "system of theology subscription," which shall be abbreviated as "system subscription" throughout this essay.

Strict or full subscription takes at face value the second Question above, "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures . . ." It holds that the ordinand is subscribing to nothing more or less than the entirety of the Confession and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the

²*Book of Church Order*, 21-25, 24-25 (hereafter cited as *BCO*).

Scriptures. In other words, the system of doctrine to which we subscribe is that which is contained in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. This is not to say that the full subscriptionist does not recognize that some of the teachings of the Confession and Catechisms are not more foundational than others, but it is to say that the full subscriptionist believes that in professing that the Confession and Catechisms of this church are his confession, he is subscribing to all of the doctrines in the Confession and Catechisms. They are all part of the system of doctrine, though admittedly, some are more essential than others. Note that full subscription does not require subscription in terms of adopting every word of the Confession and Catechisms, but rather in terms of every doctrine or teaching of the Confession and Catechisms.

Loose or System Subscription Defined

Loose or system subscription, on the other hand, maintains that we subscribe to a system of doctrine, which is not specifically defined, but which is contained in the Confession and Catechisms of the church. System subscription holds to the adoption of all the fundamental and essential doctrines of the system. Other expressions of the Confessions and Catechisms are not judged to be essential to the system of doctrine as a matter of indifference, whether the ordinand adopts them or not.

Involved in both of these views is the concept of "doctrine." Essentially the word means a teaching. When the full subscriptionist insists on the fact that our subscription includes all of the doctrines in the confessional standards, he is not insisting on every statement regarding each of these doctrines, but rather that each of the areas of teaching dealt with by the standards is included in his subscription. The system subscriptionist maintains, on the other hand, that only the doctrines comprising the system are mandated in the subscription. Those propositions or expressions, and even those doctrines that are not a part of the system, are not included. The definition of what is included in the system is one that is to be determined by the courts of the church as occasion arises.

Illustration of the Differences

Let us illustrate the kind of differences that arise. The full subscriptionist believes that he is committed to every doctrinal position set forth in the Confession and Catechisms. He is thus committed to the view of marriage and divorce set forth in the confession. If a member of his

church desires to marry a Roman Catholic, which is specifically spoken against in the Confession, the full subscriptionist would not feel that he has the liberty to perform such a marriage, but rather must warn his parishioner against such a marriage. The system subscriptionist may view that part of the chapter on marriage as not a part of the system, and might feel that he would be at perfect liberty to perform such a marriage.

A number of other illustrations could be presented, such as, views of the Sabbath, of the conduct of worship services, etc. The full subscriptionist holds to the Sabbath as set forth in the Catechisms, while the system subscriptionist may feel that he is at liberty to do a number of things forbidden by the Catechisms. So also with the regulative principle of worship. The full subscriptionist views this as the position of the Presbyterian Church and does not want crosses or pictures of Christ in the place of worship. He also wants to be able to point directly to Scripture for everything that he does do in his worship service. The system subscriptionist may feel that the use of crosses, or even of pictures of Christ, is permissible. He judges this part of the Catechism as one to which exception may be taken since he may not feel that the scriptural system of doctrine requires it. When we see how our views of subscription apply to our public practice, we see why there is such a tension between the two groups.

*A Brief History of the Use of Subscription
to the Standards in American Presbyterianism*

Subscription in Great Britain

The Westminster Assembly was divided over the issue of subscription. Eventually the Assembly did not settle the issue, but left this to Parliament. In Scotland, the General Assembly adopted the Westminster Confession in 1645. The Presbytery in Ulster, Northern Ireland, followed suit and also adopted it.

Required subscription to the confession and catechisms was not enacted in Scotland until 1690, with several acts requiring subscription of all ministers and elders. In 1696, the Assembly adopted an act prohibiting all ministers and church members from teaching, preaching, speaking or printing "any doctrine, tenet, or opinion contrary unto, or inconsistent with the Confession of Faith of this Church, or any article, part, or proposition therein" (Acts, 253, 225, 239f.). Again in 1699 the Assembly recommended that Synods and Presbyteries determine which ministers in their bounds had not yet subscribed, and to require such

subscription (Acts, 285, 294). In 1711, the Assembly required the following form of subscription:

Do you sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith . . . to be founded upon the Word of God; and do you acknowledge the same as the confession of your faith; and will you firmly and constantly adhere thereto, and to the utmost of your power assert, maintain, and defend the same, and the purity of worship, as presently practiced in this National Church. . ? (Acts, 455).

Sad to say, the Church of Scotland failed to enforce this requirement of subscription, and within two decades, the Session took place (1733). Among the reasons for this was the fact that the ruling party in the church subverted the Presbyterian Constitution. "Moreover, the prevailing party pursued measures subversive to the evangelical doctrine of the Confession of Faith by permitting heretical Professors to escape deposition; while at the same time condemning the *Marrow* teaching, which would soon lead to an Established Church like the Church of England, Arminian in practice although Calvinistic on paper."³

In Ireland, particularly Northern Ireland, subscription to the "Standards" began in 1697. As a young man was licensed to preach, he was obliged to subscribe to the Confession in all its articles as the confession of his faith. As in Scotland, this was not strictly enforced. Eventually the church in Ireland was rocked by the subscription controversy, in which the issue was whether subscription was right or wrong. The church became divided between the Subscribers and the Non-subscribers. The Presbyterians around Belfast, with English but not Scottish roots, were generally non-subscribers. They were so lax as to say that the deity of Christ was not necessary. One's conscience, and not the Bible or any confessional statement, was to be the rule of life and practice. In 1720 and again in 1721, the Synod adopted a Pacific Act, intended to bring peace to the church. A war of pamphlets and sermons was waged for several years until in 1726, the Synod gave up trying to make concessions to the non-subscribers and excluded the Presbytery of Antrim. This was enacted because of the convictions of the ruling elders. Latimer, in his *History*, said "Thanks to the faithful and honest eldership of the Church. . . . From her history . . . let the Presbyterian

³George Hutchinson, *History of the Presbyterian Church in America* (unpublished MS), I:E-51.

Church . . . learn the important lesson of abiding faithfully by her confession of faith. That confession may, indeed be enlarged, or abridged, or varied, to suit abounding error; but let her . . . suffer no latitudinarian pretexts of Christian liberty to absolve those who seek to exercise the ministry in her communion from declaring their concurrence in her recognized standards."⁴

Sad to say, the Irish Church failed to enforce subscription, and the result was that by the middle of the 18th century, she was succumbing to so-called Moderatism and New Light, just as the Church of Scotland did. During this time a great many Scotch-Irish emigrated to America. By 1776 some 400,000 Ulster Scots were settled in the colonies, most arriving between 1718 and 1748. They, thus, became a predominant force in the Presbyterian Church in America.

The First Presbytery in America

The first American Presbytery was established in 1706 under the leadership of Francis Makemie, sent to America by the Church in Ireland. Sad to say, the first page of the Minutes of the Presbytery is missing, and thus the terms of the union are not known. Ashbel Green argued "with a great deal of force, and has rendered it highly probable that the first page contained some statement of the principles, both as to doctrine and discipline, on which the Presbytery was formed."⁵ The fact that no one refers to any requirement of subscription in the subsequent years, seems to indicate that there was no such formal provision of subscription to a particular Confession made.

Dr. Charles Hodge argues quite cogently that it is certain that the Presbytery and then Synod (organized 1717) would have ascertained that all those who joined them were sound in the faith, which meant that they were Calvinists, not just broad evangelicals.⁶ He concludes, "The single consideration, then, that all of the early ministers of our church came from places where Calvinism not only prevailed, but where it was strenuously insisted upon, is, in the absence of all evidence to the contrary, sufficient to prove that they were not so singular, or so much

⁴As cited by Hutchinson, I:E-73.

⁵Charles Hodge, *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1851), I:88 (hereafter cited as *Constitutional History*).

⁶Hodge, *Constitutional History*, I:84-86.

in advance of the spirit of their age as to bring down their demands to the low standard of absolutely essential doctrines."⁷

The Move to Subscription

Some presbyteries began to require subscription before it was adopted by the Synod. For example, New Castle Presbytery required it as early as 1724.⁸ The issue of subscription was agitated primarily by those who had come to America from Northern Ireland, because some serious doctrinal deviations had occurred there. The fact is, at least two men seeking transfer to the Synod in America from Ireland were rejected for unsound theology. With this going on, the Rev. John Thomson, a native of Ireland, presented an overture to the Synod of 1728 calling for the adoption of the Westminster Standards. The Synod determined not to handle it then, but to put out a call to the church for a full Synod in 1729, at which time they would consider the matter.

The Adopting Act

Without getting "bogged down" in the details, suffice it to say that there was a preliminary act in the morning declaring the intention that all ministers "shall declare their agreement in and approbation of the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being, in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine; and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the Confession of our faith."⁹ In the afternoon, the Synod passed the following Adopting Act:

All the ministers of this Synod now present except one, who declared himself not prepared, viz.: Masters. Jedediah Andrews, Thomas Craighead, John Thompson, James Anderson, John Pierson, Samuel Gelston, Joseph Houston, Gilbert Tennent, Adam Boyd, Jonathan Dickinson, John Bradner, Alexander Hucheson, Thomas Evans, Hugh Stevenson, William Tennent, Hugh Conn, George Gillespie, and John Wilson; after proposing all the scruples that any of them had to make against any

⁷Hodge, *Constitutional History*, I:86.

⁸Hodge, *Constitutional History*, I:88.

⁹Hodge, *Constitutional History*, I:146.

articles and expressions in the Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, have unanimously agreed in the solution of those scruples, and in declaring the said Confession and Catechisms to be the confession of their faith, excepting only some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters, concerning which clauses the Synod do unanimously declare that they do not receive those articles in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods, with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority, or power to persecute any for their religion, or in any sense contrary to the Protestant succession to the throne of Great Britain. The Synod observing that unanimity, peace, and unity which appeared in all their consultations and determinations in the affairs of the Confession, did unanimously agree in giving thanks to God in solemn prayer and praise.¹⁰

Provision for Exceptions

It should be noted that the Synod adopted the Confession and Catechisms as the confession of their faith, excepting only some clauses of the twentieth and twenty-third chapters, which they unanimously agreed were not to be understood as teaching that "the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods, with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority, or power to persecute any for their religion. . . ." It was then the adoption of the Confession and Catechisms, not of some undefined system of doctrine. They did not even refer to a system of doctrine in this, the actual Adopting Act. They did do so, however, in the preliminary act of the morning, and in particular as they spoke to the matter of future entrants into the ministry, and their taking of exceptions.

. . . And we do also agree, that all Presbyteries within our bounds shall take care not to admit any candidate for the ministry into the exercise of the sacred function, but what declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession, either by subscribing to the said Confession of Faith and Catechisms, or by a verbal declaration of his assent thereto, as such candidate or minister shall think best. And in case any minister of this Synod, or any

¹⁰Hodge, *Constitutional History*, I:153.

candidate for the ministry shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall, at the time of his making the said declaration, declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod; who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds, and to ministerial communion, if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government. . . .¹¹

Reaffirmation of the Intent by Synod

Admittedly, there seems to be some ambiguity here between the Adopting Act and its application to future ministers. The Synod in 1730 explained that it intended all new entrants into the ministry to adopt the Standards in the same way they did.

Whereas some persons have been dissatisfied with the manner of wording our last year's agreement about the Confession, etc.; supposing some expression not sufficiently obligatory upon entrants; overtured, that the Synod do now declare that they understand those clauses that respect the admission of entrants in such a sense, as to oblige them to receive and adopt the Confession and Catechisms, at their admission, in the same manner and as fully as the members of the Synod there were then present. Which overture was unanimously agreed to by Synod.¹²

Hodge goes on to say: "The Synod says that they intended, by the clauses in question, to bind the new members to adopt the Confession as fully as they themselves had done; that is, to adopt the whole of it, except certain clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters."¹³ This explanation by the Synod was of particular significance, in that it was made up very largely of the same membership as that of the year before.

The matter did not die at that time, but continued to be agitated by some. In 1735, a heresy trial brought to the fore the fact that there

¹¹Minutes of the Synod of Philadelphia, *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, n.d.), 94.

¹²Hodge, *Constitutional History*, 1:154.

¹³Hodge, *Constitutional History*, 1:155.

could be a misunderstanding regarding the meaning of the Adopting Act. It was the case of Samuel Hemphill, who had been received from Ireland, having subscribed to the Westminster Standards. He was an eloquent preacher. It turned out, however, that the eloquent sermons of Hemphill were often not his own, but were plagiarized from British preachers, some of whom were Arian. He was made assistant to Jedidiah Andrews of Philadelphia, who, upon hearing some of his sermons, brought charges against him for heresy. A Commission was appointed to handle the case. Hemphill was eventually removed from the ministry by the Synod. No less a figure than Benjamin Franklin came to the defense of Hemphill in a series of four pamphlets. It was Jonathan Dickinson who responded to Franklin's "A Letter to a Friend in the Country" with "Remarks Upon a Pamphlet entitled A Letter" (Philadelphia, 1735) in defense of the Commission's discipline of Hemphill:

Let it be remembered that we allow no power in any church or religious society, to determine what articles of religion are, or what are not, essential to salvation, for any but themselves, and those that are willing to join with them upon their own principles. We allow of no Confession of Faith as a text of orthodoxy for others, but only as a declaration of our own sentiments; nor may this be imposed upon the members of our own society, nor their assent required to anything as a condition of their communion with us, but what we esteem essentially necessary (26).

In Vindication of the Reverend Commission of the Synod (Philadelphia, 1735) in further response to Franklin Synod's Commission said of Hemphill, who had subscribed to the Westminster Standards both in Ireland and in America, but now claimed he was required to adhere only to its essential and necessary doctrines:

All that he declared to at his admission into the Synod, were the fundamental articles of the Confession of Faith, when it is certainly true, and can be attested by above forty members of the Synod then present, that he solemnly declared his assent to every article in the Westminster Confession of Faith and in the Larger and Shorter Catechisms without one exception, and assured us he had before subscribed the same in Ireland.

After reference to the Adopting Act and its allowance of scruples the Vindication continues:

By which it appears that if Mr. Hemphill had any objection to make against anything in the Confession or Catechisms, he should have particularly offered his objections, and submitted it to the judgment of the Synod, whether the articles objected against were essential and necessary or not: and accordingly, at the time of his adopting the Confession and Catechisms, he was called upon to propose his objections, if he had any; but he replied he had none to make, and that he had before subscribed the same in Ireland, as before hinted. . . . Nor is it any excuse that the Synod have not defined how many fundamental articles there are in the Confession, since they have reserved to themselves the liberty to judge upon each occasion what are, and are not, fundamental.¹⁴

Some ten points were listed against him. Webster says, "The commission having expressed surprise at his adopting the Confession, he replied, he had done so only so far as the fundamental articles were concerned. That he asked the commission how many articles they esteemed fundamental, and they said they could not tell. . . ."¹⁵ Trinterud says that Jonathan Dickinson answered, ". . . that when Hemphill made subscription he had registered no scruples, and that his sermons, being Arian and stolen also, were not in accord with what synod, the sole judge in such matters, considered to be the essential articles of the Confession. No individual had the right silently and privately to decide what was, and what was not, an essential of the Confession."¹⁶ The result was a reaffirmation and clarification by the Synod in 1736 of what it had intended in 1729 as follows:

That the Synod do declare that inasmuch as we understand that many persons of our persuasion, both more lately and formerly, have been offended with some expressions or distinctions in the first or preliminary act of our Synod contained in the printed paper, relating to our receiving or adopting the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, etc; That in order to remove said

¹⁴Quoted from the Vindication, 22-24, in Charles Augustus Briggs, *American Presbyterianism* (New York, 1885), 232-233.

¹⁵Richard Webster, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in America, From Its Origin Until the Year 1760, with Biographical Sketches of its early Ministers* (Philadelphia, 1857), 419.

¹⁶Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1949), 63.

offense and all jealousies that have arisen or may arise in any of our people's minds, on occasion of said distinctions and expressions, the Synod doth declare that the Synod have adopted and still do adhere to the Westminster Confession, Catechisms, and Directory, without the least variation or alteration, and without any regard to said distinctions. And we do further declare this was our meaning and true intent in our first adopting of the said Confession, as may particularly appear by our Adopting Act, which is as followeth: (Here appears the Adopting Act of the afternoon session, without the preliminary act of the morning.) And we do hope and desire that this our Synodical declaration and explication may satisfy all our people as to our firm attachment to our good old received doctrines contained in said confession, without the least variation or alteration, and that they will lay aside their jealousies that have been entertained through occasion of the above hinted expressions and declarations as groundless. This overture approved *nemine contradicente*.¹⁷

Attempts have been made to discredit the testimonies of 1730 and 1736, by suggesting that the personnel had changed, representing different parties in the church. Even if it be granted that there were changes of membership in the Synod, the fact remains that all of these actions were unanimous, and we find no record of those in attendance at any of the three Synod meetings being disturbed by the acts of Synod on this subject. As Hodge says, "A man must have a good deal of courage who would contradict all these men, when the matter in debate is what they themselves intended."¹⁸

Conclusion Regarding the Original Intent of the Synod

From all of this it appears that the Synod in adopting the Confession in 1729, and as it interpreted the meaning of that act in 1730 and 1736, intended to be adopting the Confession and Catechisms in their totality (with the understanding of certain portions of the twentieth and twenty-third chapters, which it declared in 1729), and in a strict construction of them. On the other hand, Dickinson's and the 1735 Synod Commission's reference to the possibility of Hemphill's express-

¹⁷*Minutes of the Synod of Philadelphia*, 126.

¹⁸Hodge, *Constitutional History*, I:157fn.

ing scruples about particular doctrines in the Confession indicates that the concept of stating scruples was permitted from the beginning. It was up to the Synod or Presbytery to determine whether such a scruple struck at the heart of the system of doctrine set forth in the Confession and Catechisms. The problem that the Presbyterian Church has had since that time is what the allowance of an exception means. This will be considered later.

The Old Side — New Side Division

There was a division of the church in 1741 that was healed in 1758. This was between the Old Side and New Side parties in the church. This disruption took place largely due to the loose polity practices of the New Side men in their zeal for evangelism. When a reprimand was proposed in 1741, the New Side refused to be so reprimanded, and separated themselves from the Old Side brethren. It is of interest to note that both the Old and New Side groups reaffirmed their adoption of the Westminster Standards. Thus, this division was not primarily doctrinal, or a matter of full or system subscription, but rather a matter of good order versus poor order, and evangelistic methods. When they reunited again in 1758, the Adoption of the Westminster Standards was again reaffirmed.

When the Synod of New York was formed in 1745, they agreed *inter alia* on the following plan and foundation of their synodical union.

1. They agree that the Westminster Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, be the public confession of their faith, in such manner as agreed unto by the Synod of Philadelphia, in the year 1729; and to be inserted in the latter end of this book. And they declare their approbation of the Directory of the assembly of divines at Westminster, as the general plan of worship and discipline.¹⁹

In 1751 the Synod of New York declared as follows:

The Synod being informed of certain misrepresentations concerning the constitution, order, and discipline of our churches, industriously spread by some of the members of the Dutch congregations, interspersed among or bordering upon us, with

¹⁹Hodge, *Constitutional History*, II:231.

design to prevent occasional or constant communion of their members with our churches; to obviate all such misrepresentations, and to cultivate a good understanding between us and our brethren of the Dutch churches, we do hereby declare and testify our constitution, order, and discipline, to be in harmony with the established church of Scotland. The Westminster Confession, Catechisms, and Directory for public worship and church government adopted by them, are in like manner received and adopted by us. We declare ourselves united with that church in the same faith, order and discipline.²⁰

The Synods of Philadelphia and New York came back together on May 29, 1758, on the basis of a plan of union having been considered and approved by both Synods. It was declared in this joint meeting that "both Synods continue to profess the same principles of faith, and adhere to the same form of worship, government, and discipline,"²¹ and the plan on the basis of which they united in one body under the name of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia provided *inter alia* as follows:

- I. Both Synods having always approved and received the Westminster Confession of Faith, and Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as an orthodox and excellent system of Christian doctrine, founded on the word of God, we do still receive the same as the confession of our faith, and also adhere to the plan of worship, government, and discipline, contained in the Westminster Directory, strictly enjoining it on all our members and probationers for the ministry, that they preach and teach according to the form of sound words in said Confession and Catechisms, and avoid and oppose all errors contrary thereto. . . .
- VI. That no Presbytery shall license or ordain to the work of the ministry, any candidate until he . . . declare his acceptance of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as the confession of his faith, and promise

²⁰Minutes of the Synod of New York, 245.

²¹Minutes of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia, 286.

subjection to the Presbyterian plan of government in the Westminster Directory.²²

The First General Assembly 1789

The First General Assembly in 1789 rewrote the parts of the Confession that had given difficulty in the act of 1729. They also rewrote Chapter XXXI and deleted a phrase from the Larger Catechism question 109. From that time, full subscription to all of the Confession and Catechisms of the church was expected.

The Old School - New School Conflict

The Plan of Union of 1801 that was entered into by the Presbyterian Church and the Congregational Churches of Connecticut brought a new development in the area of subscription. First, the Plan allowed for the seating of persons from congregations formed by a merging of Presbyterians and Congregationalists, into congregations, presbyteries, synods and general assembly, without the requirement of subscription. This was contrary to the position of the Presbyterian Church since 1729. One might ask how such an unconstitutional action could be adopted. It was done, no doubt, with every good intention of providing for a peaceable way of joining two bodies of Christians into one church as they moved west. It was not until the results of the Plan that the implications of the action were felt, due to the establishment of mixed congregations, mixed presbyteries, and mixed synods. When the demands were made for subscription, the question of what was involved was raised. A school of "loose" subscriptionists arose who argued that all that was being accepted was the system of doctrine, not the Confession and Catechisms themselves, as containing that system taught in the Scriptures. This, in effect, nullified the subscription to the Standards, since this "system of doctrine" was thus not defined.

It is not necessary for us to go into all of the history of the conflict between Old and New School Presbyterianism. The conflict came to its climax when the Old School party took firm control of the Assembly in 1837, and cut off all congregations, presbyteries, and synods that had been formed on the basis of the Plan of Union, without requiring subscription by ministers or elders. All of these bodies were judged to have been formed in an unconstitutional way, and thus deemed not

²²ibid.

properly a part of the church. This judgment was not made just on the constitutional point, but also involved a judgment by the Assembly that there was serious doctrinal error within the New School Presbyteries and Synods. Some 16 points of doctrine were condemned by the Assembly.

It has generally been held that the New School Church, with its loose subscription, led to the introduction of liberalism into the Presbyterian Church. Evidence for this may be seen in the next generations of the New School portion of the Church. It was in the seminaries that allowed the New School view to be taught, that liberalism and unbelief were introduced into Presbyterian circles. Princeton Seminary, on the other hand, which was committed to the Old School full subscription position, maintained its orthodoxy until the liberals gained control of the Assembly and moved to reorganize the Seminary to allow for liberalism to be taught there. This led to the founding of Westminster Seminary in 1929.

In addition to opening the way for the entrance of liberalism into the Presbyterian Church, George Marsden suggests that the New School, as it was at the time of the separation in 1837, was more like the modern broad evangelicalism of the 20th Century than modernism. He maintains that the New School is a root of the Bible Presbyterian Church movement as contrasted with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, which is seen as a continuation of the Old School Church.²³ If Marsden is right, then this may account for the fact that some of those with their roots in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod believe that the proper view of subscription is to the Reformed system of doctrine, not the subscription to all the teachings of the Confession and Catechisms. Even if this be the case, it must be recognized that in the joining by the RPCES with the PCA, and the reception by the PCA of the RPCES, was an acceptance of the stance of the PCA, and not a perpetuation of the distinctives of the RPCES.²⁴

²³George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970). See also, Marsden, "The New School Heritage and Presbyterian Fundamentalism" and "Perspective on the Division of 1937" in *Pressing Toward the Mark* (Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986).

²⁴This is not to say that all of those coming from the RPCES hold to the Reformed system subscription. Some of the strongest advocates of full subscription come from the RPCES background. Nor is it to say that all of those from PCA background are full subscriptionists. A number of the strongest advocates of the Reformed system subscription come from the PCA background. Both groups were made up of individuals who

This is not to deny the fact that the Joining and Receiving agreement says:

In receiving these denominations, the PCA recognizes the history of the respective denominations as part of her total history and receive their historical documents as valuable and significant material which will be used in the perfecting of the Church.²⁵

The RPCES brought her history and documents, though she was formally setting these aside for the actual position of the PCA in any matters in which there had been differences.

The Synod of the RPCES made this statement regarding the second ordination vow:

Synod recognizes that the second ordination vow assumes neither an *ipsissima verba* (every word) subscription nor the absence of any reservations (doubts or questions) nor the absence of possible honest disagreements. What it does assume is that the subscriber having honestly examined any and all reservations is willing to subordinate the same — without any wounding to his conscience — so as to pledge his support of the Standards. Furthermore, when honest disagreement with any article does exist, the subscriber is to make known in writing the exception(s) to the appropriate judicatory (presbytery/session) prior to the taking of the vow.²⁶

The RPCES understood itself as consistent on the matter of subscription with the position of Charles Hodge and the Old Princeton, and joined the PCA in the belief that there was no essential difference on this subject.

The Presbyterian Church in America and Subscription

The Southern Presbyterian Heritage

The Presbyterian Church in America came into being in 1973 to continue the heritage of the Southern Presbyterian Church. Part of that heritage was the fact that the Southern Church had consciously declared

differed on this issue.

²⁵*Minutes of the Ninth General Assembly*, 305.

²⁶Reformed Presbyterian Church, *Evangelical Synod, Documents of Synod*, 326.

herself to be an Old School Presbyterian Church. This meant that she held to full subscription to her Confession and Catechisms. The Southern Church had refused to continue discussions of reunion with the Northern Church, after its merger with the New School Church in 1870, on the ground that it had abandoned the Old School position.

In the North, the merger between the Old and New School Churches had been accomplished through a compromise that openly allowed either Old or New School views to be held and taught in the church. This may be seen from the first term of the reunion as adopted by the northern churches:

The reunion shall be effected on the doctrinal and ecclesiastical bases of our common standard; the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament shall be acknowledged to be the inspired Word of God, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice; the Confession of Faith shall continue to be sincerely received, 'as containing system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scripture;' it being understood that this Confession is received in its proper, historical — that is, the Calvinistic or Reformed — sense; it is also understood that various methods of viewing, stating, explaining, and illustrating, the doctrines of the Confession which do not impair the integrity of the Reformed or Calvinistic system, are to be freely allowed in the united church, as they have hitherto been allowed in the separate churches; and the government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church in the United States shall be approved as containing the principles and rules of our policy.²⁷

In 1870, the Southern Presbyterian Church, in response to invitations to enter into correspondence with the view of their uniting with the Northern Church, answered in part with the following statement:

Both wings of the now united Assembly (Old and New School Assemblies reunited in 1869 in the north) during their separate existence before the fusion, did fatally complicate themselves with the State in political utterances deliberately pronounced year after year, and which, in our judgment, were a sad betrayal of the cause and kingdom of our common Lord and Head. We believe it to be solemnly incumbent upon the Northern Presbyterian Church, not with reference to us, but before the Christian

²⁷*The Presbyterian Digest of 1898* (Philadelphia, 1898), 40f.

world and before our Divine Master and King, to purge itself of this error, and, by public proclamation of the truth, to place the crown once more upon the head of Jesus Christ as the alone King of Zion; in default of which the Southern Presbyterian Church, which has already suffered much in maintaining the independence and spirituality of the Redeemer's kingdom upon earth, feels constrained to bear public testimony against this defection of our late associates from the truth. Nor can we, by official correspondence even, consent to blunt the edge of this our testimony concerning the very nature and mission of the church as a purely spiritual body among men.²⁸

Not only did the Southern Presbyterian Church emphasize the spiritual mission of the church in their response to the Northern Presbyterian invitation, but they also emphasized the fact that they were distinctly Old School in theology, and lamented the union of the Old and New School Churches in the North on the basis of compromise under which that union was effected.

The union now consummated between the Old and New School Assemblies North was accomplished by methods, which, in our judgment, involved a total surrender of all the great testimonies of the Church for the fundamental doctrines of grace, at a time when the victory of truth over error hung long in the balance. The united Assembly stands of necessity upon an allowed latitude of interpretation of the Standards and must come at length to embrace nearly all shades of doctrinal belief. Of those falling testimonies we, are now the sole surviving heir, which we must lift from the dust and bear to the generations after us. It would be a serious compromise of this sacred trust to enter into public and official fellowship with those repudiating these testimonies and to do this expressly upon the ground as stated in the Preamble to the Overture before us, 'that the terms of reunion between the two branches of the Presbyterian Church at the North, now happily consummated, present an auspicious opportunity for the adjustment of such relations.' To found a

²⁸ *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1870*, 528 (hereafter cited as *Minutes, 1870*); also in *Digest of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States 1861-1965*, 392 (hereafter cited as *Digest*).

correspondence professedly upon this idea would be to endorse that which we thoroughly disapprove.²⁹

From these quotations, it is obvious that the Southern Presbyterian Church in 1870 saw itself as the true continuing body of the Old School Presbyterian Church that had come into being in 1837, after the expulsion of the New School Synods and Presbyteries.

This then is the heritage of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. This is what our forefathers sought to perpetuate in the establishment of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (hereafter PCUS). This is the position that those who look toward the establishment of a continuing Southern Presbyterian Church wish to perpetuate.

Another document from this period that reveals how strongly the early PCUS leaders felt on these issues is the "Pastoral Letter" that the General Assembly sent to its congregations in 1870, describing its understanding of the distinctive position of the Southern Presbyterian Church regarding the Old and New School controversy. In part it says:

Again, the Overture before us professedly founds upon the happy union just accomplished between the Old and New Schools, North. This is singularly unfortunate; for, in our judgment, negotiations through which this union was consummated, betrayed those sacred testimonies of a former generation, for the most precious and vital of the doctrines of grace. Our difficulty is not the mere fusion of these two assemblies into one. A similar diffusion took place, six years ago, between ourselves and the United Synod of the South. But the difference between the two cases is wide as the poles. The Synod of the South united with us upon the first interchange of doctrinal views, upon a square acceptance of the standards, without any metaphysical hair-splitting, to find a sense in which to receive them, without any expunging of whole chapters from the history of the past, with the sacred testimonies with which these are filled. It is not, therefore, the amalgamation of these bodies at the North, simply considered, which embarrasses us; but it is the method by which it was achieved — the acceptance of the Standards in no comprehensible sense, by which the United Assembly becomes a sort of a broad church, giving shelter to every creed, lying between the extremes of Arminianism and

²⁹Ibid.

Pelagianism on the one hand, and of anti-Nomianism and fatalism upon the other.³⁰

In 1898, the Southern Assembly began to move away from the full subscription position that it had held at the beginning.

The words 'system of doctrine' as applied to the whole body of truth contained in the Confession of Faith, being not ambiguous, but sufficiently definite and plain, the Assembly considers it unnecessary, and therefore, declines to give any further definition. Second, the use of the words 'system of doctrine' in the terms of subscription precludes the idea of necessary acceptance of every statement in the Standards by the subscribers, but involves the acceptance of so much as is vital to the system as a whole. Differences of opinion as to whether any divergences are or are not vital to the system, when of sufficient importance, should be determined judicially by the proper ecclesiastical courts.³¹

The importance of these questions is seen in the fact that the questions recurred during the history of the PCUS. In 1934, when the Assembly was still conservative, but already moving to the system view of subscription:

By "the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scripture," as used in our ordination vows, we understand that exhibition of the essential doctrines of Scripture arranged in logical and systematic order as the Scripture interpreted by the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. While the candidate for ordination receives and adopts the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms of the Church as containing the system of doctrine of the Confession is an integral part of that system or an essential doctrine of Scripture. (1) This interpretation is in accordance with the deliverance of the General Assembly of 1898. (2) The General Assembly cannot set forth "the fundamentals of this system of doctrine" as required in the ordination vows. It can, of course, declare what it conceives to be the fundamentals of this system. But it cannot determine abstractly, apart from regular judicial process, how the presbytery, under which our

³⁰*Minutes, 1870, 537f.*

³¹*Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1898, 223; Digest, 213.*

Constitution is charged with the duty of ordaining candidates, is to interpret this requirement in the regular discharge of its own functions. To attempt to do so would be in effect to amend the Constitution by extra-constitutional methods.³²

By 1934, the Assembly was defining the system as the basic fundamentals of the Gospel, no longer dealing with the Reformed distinctives:

The General Assembly hereby declares that it regards the acceptance of the infallible truth and divine authority of the Scriptures and of Christ as very and eternal God who became man by being born of a virgin, who offered Himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us to God, who rose from the dead with the same body with which He suffered and who will return again to judge the world as being involved in the ordination vows to which we subscribe.³³

The 1947 General Assembly called this "merely an 'in thesi' deliverance, interpreting a part of the content of the ordination vows without any intention of changing the whole substance of them."³⁴

By 1972, the Assembly raised the question of just how desirable it was to maintaining a theological unity in the church. "Meantime the Presbyterian Church in the United States operates with a detailed Confession, the 'fundamentals' of which are interpreted with a considerable latitude."³⁵ The reason for reciting this history is to point up the urgency for the PCA to deal with these matters. The drift into liberalism of the PCUS came, in part, because of a loose view towards the subscription vow. If the PCA is to remain united, and to remain true to the faith, she needs to say clearly what she expects of her officers when they are called to "receive and adopt" the Confessional Standards of the Church "as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures." The intent of the Continuing Church movement was to return to the historic Southern Presbyterian position, which was that of subscription to the Westminster Standard, as expressed in the 1870 and in 1898 General Assembly deliverance, cited above. If there are those who have forgotten their original purpose or those who have come to us from the outside who do not agree with this original position of the

³²*Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, 1934, 32; *Digest*, 213-214.

³³*Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, 1939, 37, 71; *Digest*, 214.

³⁴*Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, 1947, 45; *Digest*, 214.

³⁵*Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, 1972, 199.

church, then it may be seriously asked, "Why are they a part of us now?"

Judicial Cases

This is also seen in the way in which the PCA General Assembly has handled judicial cases. The Assembly has, in all but one or two of the judicial cases, held strictly to its Constitutional Documents as the basis of settling the matters under question. As recently as the 1991 Assembly, a case was settled that indicated that the doctrines of the Definite Atonement and of Infant Baptism were necessary for all officers to hold in the PCA.

Her Declared Position Regarding Subscription

The Tenth General Assembly of the PCA, while not adopting the study paper of the Committee on Judicial Business which was sent down to presbyteries, sessions and Boards of Deacons for study, specifically declared herself to be a full subscription church in the following action:

Q.1. Does the second ordination vow require the Presbyterian Church in America church officers to embrace as Bible truth each and every statement in our confessional standards?

A. When an officer of the Presbyterian Church in America subscribes to the Confessional Standards, he is declaring them to be the confession of his faith with reference to doctrine, worship, and government, recognizing that the Word of God written is the only infallible, inerrant, unamendable rule of faith and practice.

Q.2. If not, then what statements in the confessional standards are to be recorded as 'fundamentals of the system of doctrine,' which, if a man should fail to embrace them, would disqualify that man from holding office in the Presbyterian Church in America.

Q.3. May a man be lawfully received/ordained/installed within the Presbyterian Church in America who rejects either implicitly or explicitly any of the following doctrines, and if so, which?

A. Answer to Q. 2 and Q. 3. It would be unwise, improper and unconstitutional for the General Assembly to determine abstractly apart from the proper processes afforded by our constitutional standards what would disqualify a man from holding office in the Presbyterian Church in America. The

constitution provides that the standards of our Church may be modified if it should be proved from the Word of God, our only inerrant and unalterable guide to faith and practice, that the standards are in any way not in agreement with that Word. Also, as the result of proper judicial processes, judgments may be made which determinately interpret what may or may not be in accord with our standards. Any other procedure of setting forth or compiling a list of essential or nonessential doctrines would, in effect, amend the standards by an unconstitutional method. The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms are already held by our church as "standard expositions of the teaching of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice" (BCO 29-31) and all officers and candidates once in the Presbyterian Church in America are required to adopt our standards sincerely and without mental reservation (WCF 22-24) as faithful expositions of Bible truth.

The approval of any man for office belongs, in the first place, to the court of jurisdiction (BCO 21-25). The Church has always reserved to herself the prerogative of determining what views shall not be in accord with the standards. No officer should presume to have the right of making a self-evaluation regarding the conformity of his view.

Any exception to the constitutional standards may have the potential of striking at the vitals of religion (see BCO 34-35), even one which some may consider to refer to an obscure or very technical point of doctrine. A system of doctrine is made up of constituent parts, so that a variation in one of these parts may logically effect a change in the system as a whole. Any court of jurisdiction should therefore give careful consideration to any exception a man might reveal or take with regard to the constitutional standards before determining that an exception is or is not in conformity to the standards and/or proceeding to receive, ordain, and or to install him.

Q.4. If a man makes known to his session/presby-tery a fundamental change in his doctrinal views, what would be the appropriate action or actions of the session/presbytery in the case of a ruling elder, in the case of a deacon, or in the case of a teaching elder?

A. Should a man make known any changes in his doctrinal views, the procedure which the respective court of jurisdiction should follow would apply equally to a deacon, ruling elder, or

teaching elder. The court of jurisdiction should investigate the matter. Then its subsequent actions would be dependent upon the findings of its investigation. If the court should find that the exception is such as to warrant judicial process, the procedure as set forth in the BCO (see chapters 27-37) should be followed. Or, if the court of jurisdiction should find that the exception does not warrant judicial process, due minutes of the proceedings should be recorded noting the exception and the action of the court.

B. And that the Sub-Committee on Judicial Business be instructed to prepare an amendment to the Book of Church Order for consideration by the Eleventh General Assembly setting forth a procedure for ordinands as a part of their trials for ordination, to give written declarations of any scruples they might hold with regard to each article of the WCF and its Catechisms together with a requirement that presbytery enter into its records its evaluations of each scruple so stated as to its seriousness as a departure from the confessional articles.

Adopted³⁶

It is interesting to see how close this PCA position is to that of the earlier PCUS. From this action it is clear that in 1982 the PCA held to the full subscription of the ordination vows. This was the Assembly in which the Joining and Receiving of the RPCES took place, and thus the action recorded here was the action of the combined church. Exception was taken by the Presbytery of St. Louis to the study paper. Particular difficulty was found with that paper's expression that "the Confession and Catechisms assert nothing more or less than the very doctrines of the Word." An overture was sent to the next Assembly from St. Louis, which was referred to the Committee on Judicial Business. Also assigned to the Judicial Business Committee was the task of settling how exceptions to the Standards are to be handled. To date, this matter has not been fully settled by the Assembly. The 14th General Assembly said that any teaching of exceptions must not be done in such a way as would disturb the peace and purity of the church.³⁷ Not all were satisfied with this conclusion, and hence this discussion continues.

³⁶*Minutes of the 10th General Assembly*, 103.

³⁷*Minutes of the 14th General Assembly*, 126.

The Handling of Exceptions

The question must be answered as to how the exceptions are to be treated. We shall now seek to set forth the implications of each of the viewpoints as we see them.

Not to Allow Exceptions

First, one could hold that no exceptions should be allowed. When one subscribes to the confession of a church, he adopts that confession as his own, and will not teach or practice that which is contrary to this confession. He determines, by the help of God, that he will seek to be true to the faith both in his teaching and in his life. This is the position that the full subscriptionist prefers, and that the church seemed to be calling for in 1736 and again in 1789. It is not the only position compatible to the full subscription position.

Exceptions Do Not Permit Teaching Contrary to the Standards

Provision was made from the first Adopting Act for men to state their scruples to the examining Presbytery. The Presbytery then had the duty of determining whether the point of the exception was of such a nature as to exclude the candidate from the Presbyterian ministry. For those allowed to be ordained with exceptions, the question remains as to what this allowance permits. Is he permitted to teach his view, which is not in accord with the Standards of the Church, or is he required to teach the position of the church?

The strict full subscriptionist maintains that the allowance of the exception is not an agreement that it is not contrary to the system of doctrine or the allowance for the individual to teach against the doctrines of the church. If the candidate desires to be a Presbyterian minister, he must be willing to submit himself to the brethren, and teach only what the church has adopted as its position. If he cannot do this in good conscience, then he should seek a fellowship where he is not under such a structure. Samuel Miller of a century ago, wrote regarding this question:

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. . . . 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.

From the view which has been presented of this subject, we may decide how an honest man ought to act, after subscribing to a public creed. He will feel it to be his duty to adhere sincerely and faithfully to that Creed, in public and in private; and to make it his study to promote, by all means in his power, the peace and purity of the body with which he has connected himself. And if he should, at any time, alter his views concerning any part of the Creed or order of the Church in question, it will be incumbent on him to inquire, whether the points, concerning which he has altered his mind, are of such a nature as that he can conscientiously be silent concerning them, and 'give no offense' to the body to which he belongs. If he can reconcile this with an enlightened sense of duty, he may remain in peace. But if the points concerning which his views have undergone a change, are of so much importance in his estimation, as the he cannot be silent, but must feel himself bound to publish, and endeavor to propagate them; then let him peaceably withdraw, and join some other branch of the visible Church, with which he can walk harmoniously.³⁸)

³⁸*The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions: addressed particularly to candidates for the ministry* (Greenville, SC, 1987), 102-104.

The ordinand, who takes exception to a particular teaching of the Confession or Catechisms, may be ordained by the Presbytery if it feels that the exception does not impinge upon the basic system of doctrine contained in the Standards. He is not, thereby, permitted to teach contrary to the Standards. He should teach the view of the Standards so as not to disturb the church by teaching contrary to her Standards. If one is not thus able to subject himself to the brethren, he should seek some other communion where he has greater liberty.

The Confession and Catechisms of the church are its creed, not some undefined system of doctrine — not even an undefined Reformed system of doctrine. The liberals in the mother churches to the PCA, all of whom were loose subscriptionists, all claimed to hold to the system of doctrine, but not to the Confession and Catechisms themselves. By not defining the system, they were able to affirm this and not be brought under discipline when they taught something contrary to the Confession or Catechisms. If we permit men to take exceptions to the Confession and Catechisms, and then allow them to teach their exceptions, the church will become less and less unified on its doctrinal position. It will become increasingly more and more difficult to discipline those who teach error. The church in its creed, namely, the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, has declared what it believes is the proper interpretation of the various doctrines covered therein. This is the view that the church expects her ministers to teach and uphold. If a man desires to be a minister in the PCA, he must be willing to submit his personal teaching and practices to the church, even though he feels that the church is not correct at the particular point in question. If he cannot do so, then he should seek another fellowship.

The writers of the Confession and Catechisms were very wise in not settling all possible theological questions on which the Bible is not explicit. For example, the Standards do not settle the matters of stupa- or infralapsarianism or of the nature of the imputation of Adam's sin or of millennialism. Happily, the Westminster divines left these as matters for the individual conscience, and we are not bound by a particular view on them by our subscription to the Standards.

John Macpherson of Scotland, in his *Commentary on The Westminster Confession of Faith* sets forth this position as pointedly as anyone. He applies it to the membership of the church, which is more than the American Churches require, but what he says is applicable to our subscription requirement for all officers:

The members of the church receive the Confession as the statement of the truth contained in Scripture, and not as a document in itself authoritative apart from its scriptural ground. In entering into the communion of a church holding by any particular Confession, we not only agree to maintain the doctrinal positions therein contained, as the members of an association promise to observe the adopted rules, but we further make the affirmation that we hold the statement of doctrine in that Confession to be in accordance with the truth of Holy Scripture. To appeal from the Confession to Scripture on doctrinal points in the way of repudiating the confessional statement in favor of the scriptural, involves the abandonment of that communion of which the Confession is the bond. If any particular doctrine has been carefully formulated in the Confession, our adoption of that Confession is an expression of our belief that the doctrine thus formulated is the very truth revealed in Scripture. We must not therefore suppose that by calling our Confession of Faith a subordinate standard, we give ourselves liberty to set its exposition of doctrine aside in favor of any other interpretation of Scripture passages bearing on that doctrine. If we feel compelled to do so, we repudiate the Confession as a standard altogether.³⁹

Samuel Miller, in the same passage quoted previously, introduced the question of acceptable exceptions in this way:

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 view? 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

³⁹*The Westminster Confession of Faith, with Introductory Notes* (Edinburgh, 1882),

means. I know of no other mode of proceeding in such as case as this, which Christian candor, and a pure conscience will justify, than the following: Let the candidate for admission unfold to Presbytery, etc.

The spirit of our subscription is one of submission to the brethren, but even more it is one of submission to the Word of God. This has historically been the spirit expressed in Reformed and Presbyterian confessions. The Scots Confession of 1560 declared in its preface:

. . . if any man will note in our Confession any chapter or sentence contrary to God's Holy Word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake to inform us of it in writing; and we, upon our honor, do promise him that by God's grace we shall give him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from Holy Scripture, or else shall alter whatever he can prove to be wrong.

Likewise the First Confession of Basel (1534) concluded:

Finally, we desire to submit this our confession to the judgment of the divine Biblical Scriptures. And should we be informed from the same Holy Scriptures of a better one, we have thereby expressed our readiness to be willing at any time to obey God and His Holy Word with great thanksgiving.

Possible Solutions

These last two are the two primary positions that may be held regarding exceptions. Some sort of compromise between the two might possibly be worked out, if the proponents of these views are unable to convince the other of the validity of their view. For example, it might be possible to permit the teaching of other views if the vote of the Presbytery to allow it is at least a three-fourths vote, or to forbid the teaching of an exception if a majority of Presbytery voted to prohibit it. Along with this, one might take the position of Charles Hodge, who allowed some leeway for the ordinary minister, but did not allow it for those teaching in seminaries. Hodge distinguishes between the various vows taken in the Presbyterian Church.

The Church makes a clear distinction between the terms of Christian communion, of ministerial communion, and the condition on which any one is to be admitted to the office of professor in any of her theological seminaries. For Christian

communion, she requires competent knowledge, and a credible profession of faith and repentance; for ministerial communion, the adoption of the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Confession; for admission to the office of a professor, she expects the promise, 'not to teach anything which directly or indirectly contradicts anything taught in the Confession of Faith, Catechisms, or Form of Government of this Church'. . . What ever a professor's private convictions may be as to anything not included in the system of doctrines, he is bound to avoid going counter to the standards of the Church whose servant he is.⁴⁰

The problem that we see with this is the fact that there may presently be men teaching in seminaries, who hold to the looser view of subscription, and for whom it would be a matter of conscience to be placed under the full position. If the Assembly were to adopt this position, then it would be a matter of each Presbytery to consult with those already in teaching posts, and to impose upon them the strict construction of the vows. A man would be expected to be in subjection to his brethren.

For the PCA, the adoption of this 19th century precedent would mean that each man teaching in any seminary would have to take the full subscription position. For denominationally-controlled seminaries, this matter could be supervised by the seminary. On the other hand, for men teaching at independent seminaries, the Presbytery would have to monitor the matter. Westminster, Reformed, and Greenville Seminaries include in the professorial vow the following language:

And I do solemnly promise and engage not to inculcate, teach, or insinuate anything which shall appear to me to contradict, contravene, either directly or impliedly, any element of that system of doctrine . . .⁴¹

Conclusion

For the PCA to continue without seeking to come to some sort of solution to this matter courts the danger of division. Such a division

⁴⁰Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity*, 327.

⁴¹*Catalogue of Westminster Theological Seminary, 1979-1980*, 8; *Reformed Theological Seminary Catalog, 1971-1972*, 10; *Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, The Catalogue, (1992-1994)*, 21.

came in 1837, and again in 1936 in the PCUSA and in 1973 in the PCUS. Admittedly, the grounds for these divisions were deeper than just the matter of creedal subscription. To go on with the increasing of tensions over the issue would be to act most unwisely, and to ignore our history. It is incumbent on us to learn the lessons of history, and to seek to resolve this problem that has plagued the American Presbyterian church, especially since the rise of New School Theology in the last century.

THE OLD SCHOOL - NEW SCHOOL DIVISION

The Plan of Union

In his *History of the New School*, Samuel Baird brings out the fact that there was a Presbyterian element in the New England Congregationalism that was never able to gain the ascendancy. In particular, the Connecticut churches viewed themselves as essentially Presbyterian, though they did not break with the Congregationalists over the polity. The result was there was a felt affinity for the Presbyterian Church on the part of many New Englanders. Thus, as the new western territories were being opened in Western New York and Ohio, following the American War for Independence, a proposal was made to allow for the Presbyterians and Congregationalists to jointly establish churches, and have free interchange between the two bodies. This resulted in what was called "The Plan of Union with the Association of Connecticut" which was adopted in 1801. The purpose was stated in the following preface:

Regulations adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, and by the General Association of the State of Connecticut, with a view to prevent alienation, and to promote union and harmony in those new settlements which are composed of inhabitants from these bodies.⁴²

All would agree that this is a good purpose, but as we look at the regulations themselves, we see that it involved a compromising of the biblical teaching on polity. Since the Plan consisted of just four paragraphs, the entire text is given here:

⁴²Samuel Baird, *History of the New School*, 570.

1st. It is strictly enjoined on all their missionaries to the new settlements, to endeavor, by all proper means, to promote mutual forbearance, and a spirit of accommodation, between those inhabitants of the new settlements who hold the Presbyterian, and those who hold the Congregational, form of Church government.

2nd. If, in the new settlements, any church of the Congregational order shall settle a minister of the Presbyterian order, that church may, if they choose, still conduct their discipline according to Congregational principles, settling their difficulties among themselves, or by a council mutually agreed upon for that purpose. But, if any difficulty shall exist, between the minister and the church, or any member of it, it shall be referred to the Presbytery to which the minister shall belong, provided both parties agree to it; if not, to a council consisting of an equal number of Presbyterians and Congregationalists, agreed upon by both parties.

3rd. If a Presbyterian church shall settle a minister of Congregational principles, that church may still conduct their discipline according to Presbyterian principles, excepting that if a difficulty arise between him and his church, or any member of it, the cause shall be tried by the Association to which the said minister shall belong, provided both parties agree to it; otherwise by a council, one half Congregationalists and the other Presbyterians, mutually agreed upon by the parties.

4th. If any congregation consist partly of those who hold the Congregational form of discipline, and partly of those who hold the Presbyterian form, we recommend to both parties, that this be no obstruction to their uniting in one church and settling a minister; and that, in this case, the church choose a standing committee, from the communicants of said church, whose business it shall be to call to account every member of the church who shall conduct himself inconsistently with the laws of Christianity, and to give judgment on such conduct. That if the person condemned by their judgment be a Presbyterian he shall have liberty to appeal to the Presbytery; if he be a Congregationalist, he shall have liberty to appeal to the body of the male communicants of the church. In the fore case, the determination of the Presbytery shall be final, unless the church shall consent to a further appeal to the Synod, or to the General Assembly; and, in the latter case, if the party condemned shall wish for a trial by a mutual council, the cause shall be referred to such

a council. And provided the standing committee of any church shall depute one of themselves to attend the Presbytery, he may have the same right to sit and act in Presbytery as a ruling elder of the Presbyterian church.⁴³

That this was a well intended plan is generally conceded, but it certainly involved compromise of the principles upon which the Presbyterian Church was based. For example, in churches composed of both Congregationalists and Presbyterians, the Biblical office of elder, which both the Saybrook Platform of Connecticut and the Presbyterian Form of Government demanded, was set aside for a standing committee of persons, who were subjected to no examination, and made no pledge, or subscription either to the Confession or to its Form of Government. They were not called, tried or ordained to any office in the church, and yet they were empowered to sit as the sole judges in all cases arising in the church. Further, they were authorized to send delegates to the Presbytery, with power to sit and act on all questions that might come before that body.

Baird analyzes the reason that the Assembly could adopt such regulations that were so contrary to the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church as follows:

For, the fathers of our Church, having so recently been accustomed to see the General Synod exercise powers, unrestricted by a constitution, were not yet able to realize that the General Assembly was bound to conform to the provisions of the Constitution, which the Church, through the General Synod, had established, for her own protection and the ordering of all her courts, higher and lower.⁴⁴

Baird goes on to comment as follows:

The imprudence of allowing such a breach in her walls, as that involved in the Plan of Union, might have been expected to arrest a more prompt attention, and secure its rejection. But the Assembly was seduced by the siren of union and peace. The Plan was adopted, and the way thus prepared for corrupting the doctrines of the Church, the utter defacing of her order, and the

⁴³*Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1801, 124; Baird's Digest, 570.*

⁴⁴Baird, *History of the New School, 159.*

introduction of protracted controversy and strife, and final schism.⁴⁵

Palmer also had a pertinent warning for us to consider whenever we may be tempted to compromise our principles for, what appears to be, a good goal.

History does not afford a better illustration of the evil wrought by good men, whenever, from motives of policy, they swerve from principle. Their virtue lends a sanction to their schemes, while it does not stop the fatal results. This agreement was not only established by good men, but it originated in the sweetest and most godly intentions. . . . What more Christian object could be proposed than to facilitate a union between these discordant elements? (Presbyterian and Congregational) Unfortunately, this was not attempted by a process of natural fusion, each giving way and conforming to the other, as circumstances might dictate; but by an artificial convention, making a composite of both.⁴⁶

The Plan Put Into Effect

The result of the Plan of Union was the development in Western New York, and in Ohio, a number of churches, which were of the mixed character allowed by the Plan. Once established, these remained, even when the population had grown to the point where both Presbyterian and Congregational churches could have been established side by side. There should have been some natural way to have moved from this temporary measure back to the standard ecclesiastical polity. The fact is that this plan remained in tact until abrogated by the Assembly of 1837. The result was the establishment of churches, presbyteries and even synods on the basis of the Plan, instead of the Constitutional provision of the Presbyterian polity. Under the Plan, committeemen, who had never given any pledge of adherence to any symbol of the faith, were admitted to the function of eldership in the Presbyterian Church.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶B.M. Palmer, *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond, VA, 1857), 191-192.

Departures from Biblical Polity — Voluntary Societies

Before tracing how the church developed under the Plan of Union, we should first note other influences of Congregationalism on the Presbyterian Church at this time. Baird says,

The great controversy, the history of which is here traced, concerned not only, the doctrinal purity of the Church, and the maintenance of the divine order of God's house. It, also, involved the evangelic office of the Church, itself, — her right and duty, with her own hands, to minister to the wants of the needy, and carry the gospel of salvation to a perishing world.⁴⁷

The Presbyterians, as they had first organized, saw the General Presbytery itself as the missions agency. It sent out missionaries to establish churches through the growing colonies. As the presbyteries multiplied and the synod was formed, the presbyteries continued to be active in sending missionaries into destitute areas. We have already seen this in connection with both the Old Side and New Side presbyteries that sent men into the South. In 1802, the Synod of Pittsburgh called itself "The Western Missionary Society" and appointed a Board to supervise the sending of missionaries to the Indians of the area. The Synod of the Carolinas began similar missions to the Indians, creating a Commission to attend to this business. In 1802, the General Assembly, which had been handling the business of missions directly, appointed a standing committee on missions, that was renewed each year. This Committee was designated a Board of Missions in 1816, with the whole business of missions assigned to it subject to the annual review and control of the Assembly.

In 1805 the Rev. Ashbel Green proposed that there be an Assembly Committee on Education of Candidates for the ministry. One of the results of this request was the establishment of the Assembly's Seminary at Princeton. With the concurrent development at this time of the Hopkinsian doctrines in New England, there was a dissatisfaction with Princeton, and thus in 1815 the American Education Society was organized in Boston. This Society was vigorous in seeking to control education in the Presbyterian Church. With the efforts of the Assembly to establish a Board of Education in 1818, a parallel society was established in New York, which refused to cooperate in the erection of an Assembly Board. The design of the New York Board was to direct

⁴⁷Baird, *History of the New School*, 159.

the candidates for the ministry to the New England Seminaries, and not to Princeton. Baird quotes the final review by the Philadelphia Board in its negotiations with the New York Board in very telling words:

. . . to hear our brethren plead difference in theological views, as a reason for limiting the object. — And have matters come to this pass, that members of the same Church cannot associate, in assisting young men in their theological education? Why can they not associate? Is not the Confession of Faith a basis wide enough for us to walk together, in peace? All the ministers and elders belonging to this Board have professed ‘sincerely to receive and adopt the Confession as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.’ And the ministers and elders belonging to the other Board have made the same profession. We are willing to go, heart and hand, with our brethren, in supporting the doctrines contained in our Confession. Are they willing? . . . If they are afraid to trust the matter in the hands of the supreme judicatory of our Church, this Board have more confidence in the wisdom and integrity of that venerable body.⁴⁸

Though the Assembly formed a Board in 1818, it lacked any powers, and so the voluntary societies worked most diligently during this time. In the meantime Auburn Seminary was formed to propagate the New England theology. The seeds of this thought were introduced in East Tennessee by the Rev. Hezekiah Balch, who though condemned by the Assembly in 1798, had continued to propagate his views as president of Greenville College. In 1819, the Synod of Tennessee was determined to found a seminary under the leadership of the Rev. Gideon Blackburn, who also held to the New School theology.

A board for foreign missions was formed with the Dutch Reformed Church and the Associate Reformed Churches in 1817. An independent Board, called the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions which was a voluntary society, operated in direct competition to this Board. Eventually the Presbyterian Church merged its board with the ABCFM, thus losing any church-controlled agency for foreign missions.

From this brief survey, it can be seen that the voluntary societies were carrying on much of the work that belong to the church as the

⁴⁸Baird, *History of the New School*, 289-290.

church. In fact, the church had abandoned its privilege and responsibility in the area of foreign missions. Its own work of education was being undermined by the voluntary societies, which refused to cooperate with the Assembly's education programs, due to a difference in theology.

The Church that Developed Under the Plan

Having seen something of the development of the voluntary societies over against the church's own agencies in its carrying out the great commission, let us now return to see how the church fared under the Plan of Union. In order to get some concept of the way in which the situation developed, we shall summarize the rise of presbyteries and synods out of this Plan. As early as 1808, the Middle Association was received by the Synod of Albany with 21 churches, all congregational, and Presbyterian in name only. In 1809, this Presbytery was divided into two presbyteries, both of which planted themselves in their written constitutions on the Plan of Union. In 1812, these together with the Presbytery of Geneva, were constituted the Synod of Geneva. In 1821, the Synod of Genesee was erected out of four presbyteries from the Synod of Geneva, which the Plan of Union was recognized as paramount to the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church. In 1829, the Synod of Utica was formed on the same basis. Thus in twenty-eight years, three Synods were erected in western New York state, all made up of congregational elements, and citing the Plan of Union as their basis. The same was true in Ohio, where in 1825, the Synod of the Western Reserve was erected, which also cited the Plan of Union as its charter. When we recognize the fact that these presbyteries and synods were based, in writing, on the Plan of Union, we can see how in 1837, they were simply declared as having been unconstitutionally erected, and thus should not be recognized as a part of the Presbyterian Church. By 1831, the majority at the Assembly were New School people. They controlled the Assembly through 1836. The South, which was not largely affected by the New School thought except in East Tennessee became aroused, and rallied to send commissioners to the 1837 Assembly.

Doctrinal Deviations - New England Theology

Despite the fact of this breakdown of Presbyterian order and polity, the more important matter of concern was the fact that out of New England there had arisen a new theology, which was no longer true to

the Reformed Faith of the Westminster Standards. Dr. B.M. Palmer in his biography of Thornwell, devotes a chapter to the Old School — New School Split in the church. He observes, "In the history of the Church, laxity in doctrine is always sure to accompany contempt of discipline and order."⁴⁹ He further asserts,

The cardinal issue, in the whole dispute, was that of a strict or a lax construction of the acknowledged standards; since all the deviation from sound doctrine claimed to be *salva fide*, and therefore within the limits of the Confession of Faith: and the authority of the Form of Government was held not to be infringed in the practical administration of Church affairs. The evidence, however, is cumulative, that, up to the beginning of the present [19th] century, through a period of nearly one hundred years, no subscription of the Westminster Confession was tolerated which did not accept it in its entirety. The ingenious artifice of receiving it only for 'substance of doctrine.' was the invention of a later and more degenerate age.⁵⁰

He then proceeds to set forth his proofs for this statement, which we shall summarize briefly here:

1. Adopting Act 1729 - a formal and judicial promulgation of these Standards to be necessary as test of orthodoxy.
2. After agitation produced by proposal of the Adopting Act, there was a unanimity. The adoption was of all of the articles of the Confession, except the clauses to which all took exception, having to do with the authority of the civil magistrates over the church. Hodge says, "as these clauses are no longer in the Confession, there is not an article or expression in that formula to which these men did not assent. Such was the latitudinarianism of those days."

In 1836, the Synod declared herself, without any equivocation:

The Synod doth declare that the Synod have adopted, and still do adhere to, the Westminster Confession, Catechisms, and

⁴⁹Palmer, *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 194.

⁵⁰Palmer, *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 182.

Directory, without the least variation or alteration, and without any regard to said distinctions,⁵¹

alluding to certain expressions in the preliminary act to the Adopting Act.

3. The enforcement of the strict subscription on all entrants into the ministry. The Synod in 1730 passed the following:

Whereas, some persons have been dissatisfied at the manner of wording of last year's agreement about the Confession, etc., supposing some expressions not sufficiently obligatory upon entrants, the Synod do now declare that they understood these clauses, that respect the admission of entrants or candidates, in such a sense as to oblige them to receive and adopt the Confession and Catechisms, at their admission, in the same manner, and as fully, as the members of the Synod did that were then present.⁵²

The Synod made it mandatory that the Synod inquire of each Presbytery annually as to their compliance with this requirement. Hodge says, "There is not the slightest evidence that any of the presbyteries ever admitted, during the period under review, any minister who dissented from any of the doctrinal articles of the Confession of Faith."⁵³

4. The language used in regard to adopting the Form of Government is in contrast to that used in the adoption of the Confession and Catechisms. "The Synod do unanimously acknowledge and declare, that they judge the Directory for Worship, Discipline, and Government of the Church, commonly annexed to the Westminster Confession, to be agreeable in substance to the Word of God, and founded thereupon. . . ."⁵⁴

In 1786, the Synod explained its language regarding the Form of Government:

⁵¹Hodge, *Constitutional History*, I:183.

⁵²*Records of the Presbyterian Church*, 96.

⁵³Hodge, *Constitutional History*, 197.

⁵⁴*Records of the Presbyterian Church*, 93.

The Synod also receives the Directory for Public Worship and the Form of Church Government, recommended by the Westminster Assembly, as in substance agreeable to the institutions of the New Testament. This mode of adoption we use, because we believe the general platform of our Government to be agreeable to the Sacred Scriptures; but we do not believe that God has been pleased so to reveal and enjoin every minute circumstance of ecclesiastic government and discipline, as not to leave room for orthodox churches of Christ, in these minutia to differ with charity from one another.⁵⁵

Palmer observes,

Here then, for the first time in our ecclesiastical annals, we meet with the relaxed phrase, '*agreeable for substance*,' which a later period sought to carry over into the Confession of Faith, but which is employed by these fathers expressly to discriminate betwixt the two. In regard to the Confession, the subscription is explicit and particular. It is not received for substance, but in all its articles, with a specified exception; whereas a latitude is allowed in the adoption of the Form of Government, it being comprehensively embraced only in its general principles. . . .⁵⁶

5. If there had been a disposition to abate the authority of the Confession, it would have been most natural that the division of 1741 would have revealed it. The fact is that both the Old and New Sides reaffirmed their subscription to the Standards. Again in 1758, the first act was to reaffirm the adoption of the Standards. Again in 1789, as the first Assembly was formed, the Confession as amended was declared to be a part of the Constitution of the Church. As Hodge says, "whoever heard of adopting a Constitution for substance? Is the Constitution of the United States thus adopted or interpreted? It is, on the contrary, the supreme law of the land; and all who take office under it are bound to observe it, in all its parts."⁵⁷

⁵⁵Records of the Presbyterian Church, 519.

⁵⁶Palmer, *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 185.

⁵⁷Hodge, *Constitutional History*, 218.

Trinterud in his *Making of an American Tradition* argues that the New Side was really a loose subscriptionist group. He is following Charles A. Briggs in this line of argument. Briggs and Trinterud would both favor the looser view themselves, and thus seek to buttress their position by aligning the New Side with them. It is interesting that the men of that generation did not take the position alleged by Trinterud, but were satisfied with the subscription of 1729.

6. The judicial cases from 1763 to 1810 show a rigid application of the Confession in repression of error.

Palmer concludes his summary of proofs with remarks that are applicable to every age.

It is important, as justifying the measures by which, after a temporary departure, she was reformed back to her original orthodoxy; and because the attempt will be renewed from age to age to escape from the obligation of an extended creed, by an ambiguous subscription of its articles.⁵⁸

*The Presbyterians in the South
as Related to the Old School — New School Controversy*

The Presbyterians in the South only gradually became involved in the conflict that was developing in the North. It appears that some of the Southern leaders such as John Holt Rice hoped to steer a middle course between the Old and New Schools. This may account for the fact that when the division later came to pass, that there were some Southern groups that separated, not for theological reasons, but out of sympathy with the New School people whom they thought had been mistreated by the Old School. William Henry Foote, who wrote in 1850 concerning the Church in the South in the early 1830s, said:

As yet the Southern clergy had taken little or no part in the vehement discussions carried on in the Northern and Eastern Presbyteries — about the nature and extent of the atonement — the ability and inability of man, natural and moral — the nature of sin and of imputation — the origin of revivals — viewed as metaphysical subjects, and argued upon as such, rather than

⁵⁸Palmer, *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 187-188.

gospel truths. . . . On these subjects as doctrines taught in the Bible with clearness and definiteness sufficient for salvation, and as well expressed in the Confession, the Southern ministers preached often, and plainly, and powerfully.⁵⁹

The Act and Testimony of the Old School in 1834

At the 1834 General Assembly, a memorial known as "The Western Memorial" brought the differences between the Old and New Schools to the floor of the Assembly. When this Memorial was turned down without any concessions, a conference was held when the Assembly was still in session, and the "Act and Testimony" was framed by Dr. R.J. Breckenridge. It was signed by 347 ministers, 1,789 ruling elders and 14 licentiates. Some five Synods and thirty presbyteries adopted it. Essentially this was a protest against the actions of the 1834 General Assembly, addressed to the churches at large. Regarding doctrine it read:

1. We do bear our solemn testimony against the right claimed by many, of interpreting the doctrines of our standards in a sense different from the sense of the Church for years past, whilst they still continue in our communion: on the contrary, we aver, that they who adopt our standards are bound in candor and the simplest integrity, to hold them in their obvious, accepted sense.
2. We testify against the unchristian subterfuge to which some have recourse, when they avow a general adherence to our standards *as a system*, while they deny doctrines essential to the system, or hold doctrines at complete variance with the system.
3. We testify against the reprehensible conduct of those in our communion, who hold, and preach, and publish Arminian and Pelagian heresies, professing at the same time to embrace our creed, and pretending that these errors do consist therewith.
4. We testify against the conduct of those, who, while

⁵⁹William Henry Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, (Philadelphia, 1850), 463.

they profess to approve and adopt our doctrine and order, do, nevertheless, speak and publish, in terms, or by necessary implication, that which is derogatory to both, and which tends to being both unto disrepute.⁶⁰

*The Assembly of 1837 - The Purging of the Church
The Old School Memorial*

The development of the new theology that was embraced by the New School has been carefully documented by Baird in his *History of the New School*. We shall not retrace this detailed history, but move on to the Memorial of the Old School Convention made in 1837 to the General Assembly and adopted by the 1837 General Assembly. In this Memorial, we find a listing of some sixteen points of specification of errors held by the New School. These specifications are listed here in their entirety along with the New School response. The memorial reads:

That we have not been rash and hasty, nor manifested a factious opposition, to errors and disorders, which were only of small extent, or recent introduction, is manifestly proven by the fact that these evils have been insidiously spreading through our Church for many years — and that they have at length become so mature, and so diffused, as not only to pervade large portions of the Church, but to reign triumphantly over the body itself, through successive General Assemblies. On the other hand, that we have not been wholly faithless to our Master and to truth, we appeal to the constant efforts of some, through the press and pulpit — to the firm and consistent course of some of our Presbyteries and Synods — to the faithful conduct of the minorities in the Assemblies of 1831-1834, and 1836 to the Act and Testimony — to the proceedings of the Conventions of Cincinnati in 1831, and Pittsburgh in 1835, and to the noble Assembly of 1835.

We contend, especially and above all, for the truth, as it is made known to us of God, for the salvation of men. We contend for nothing else, except as the result or support of this inestimable treasure. It is because this is subverted that we grieve; it is

⁶⁰Baird, *History of the New School*, 674-675.

because our standards teach it, that we bewail their perversion; it is because our Church order and discipline preserve, defend, and diffuse it, that we weep over their impending ruin. It is against *error* that we emphatically bear our testimony, — error dangerous to the souls of men, dishonoring to Jesus Christ, contrary to his revealed truth, and utterly at variance with our standards. Error, not as it may be freely and openly held by others, in this age and land of absolute religious freedom; but error, held and taught in the Presbyterian Church — preached and written by persons who profess to receive and adopt our scriptural standards — promoted by societies operating widely through our churches — reduced into form, and openly embraced by almost entire Presbyteries and Synods — favored by repeated acts of successive General Assemblies, and at least virtually sanctioned, to an alarming extent, by the numerous Assembly of 1836.

To be more specific, we hereby set forth in order, some of the doctrinal errors against which we bear testimony, and which we, and the churches, have conclusive proof, are widely disseminated in the Presbyterian Church.

Specifications of error in the Memorial

1. That God would have prevented the existence of sin in our world, but was not able, without destroying the moral agency of man; or, that for aught that appears in the Bible to the contrary, sin is incidental to any wise moral system.
2. That election to eternal life is founded on a foresight of faith and obedience.
3. That we have no more to do with the first sin of Adam than with the sin of any other parent.
4. That infants come into the world as free from moral defilement as was Adam, when he was created.
5. That infants sustain the same relation to the moral government of God in this world as brute animals, and that their sufferings and death are to be accounted for, on the same principles as those brutes, and not by any means to be considered as penal.
6. That there is no other original sin than the fact that all the posterity of Adam, though by nature innocent,

- or possessed of no moral character, will always begin to sin when they begin to exercise moral agency; that original sin does not include a sinful bias of the human mind, and a just exposure to penal suffering; and that there is no evidence in Scripture, that infants, in order to salvation, do need redemption by the blood of Christ, and regeneration by the Holy Ghost.
7. That the doctrine of imputation, whether of the guilt of Adam's sin or of the righteousness of Christ, has no foundation in the God, and is both unjust and absurd.
 8. That the sufferings and death of Christ were not truly vicarious and penal, but symbolic, governmental, and instructive only.
 9. That the impenitent sinner is by nature, and independently of the renewing influence or almighty energy of the Holy Spirit, in full possession of all the ability necessary to a full compliance with all the commands of God.
 10. That Christ does not intercede for the elect until after their regeneration.
 11. That saving faith is not an effect of the special Holy Spirit, but a mere rational belief of the truth, or assent to the word of God.
 12. That regeneration is the act of the sinner himself, and that it consists in a change of his governing purpose, which he himself must produce, and which is the result, not of any direct influence of the Holy Spirit on the heart, but chiefly, of a persuasive exhibition of the truth analogous to the influence which one man exerts over the mind of another; or, that regeneration is not an instantaneous act, but a progressive work.
 13. That God has done all that *he can do* for the salvation of all men, and that man himself must do the rest.
 14. That God cannot exert such influence on the minds of men, as shall make it certain that they will choose and act in a particular manner, without impairing their moral agency.
 15. That the righteousness of Christ is not the sole ground sinner's acceptance with God; and that in no sense does the righteousness of Christ become ours.
 16. That the reason why some differ from others in regard

to their reception of the Gospel is, that they make themselves to differ. It is impossible to contemplate these errors without perceiving, that they strike at the foundation of the system of Gospel grace; and that, from the days of Pelagius and Cassian to the present hour, their reception has uniformly marked the character of a Church apostatizing from "The faith once delivered to the saints," and sinking into deplorable corruption.⁶¹

The Excision Acts of the Assembly

Baird observes,

The characteristic features of the New School, from its origin had been, dislike to the strictness of the theology of the Confession, and to the system of government therein set forth; and consequent coldness or hostility to the seminaries and Boards of the Church, in preference for the voluntary societies and seminaries.⁶²

How could the Assembly extricate itself from the entangling alliance that had been made with the Connecticut Association? Having judged that the various presbyteries and synods that had been created on the unconstitutional grounds of the Plan of Union, were thus improperly formed, the Assembly simply abrogated the Plan of Union and excinded the presbyteries and synods constituted under it.

The Assembly proceeded to the order of the day, viz. that part of the report of the Committee on Overture No. 1, which relates to the "Plan of Union" adopted in 1801. The report was read and adopted in part, as follows, viz.

In regard to the relation existing between the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches, the committee recommended the adoption of the following resolutions:

1. That between these two branches of the American Church, there ought, in the judgment of this Assem-

⁶¹Baird, *History of the New School*, 674-675.

⁶²Baird, *History of the New School*, 539.

bly, to be maintained sentiments of mutual respect and esteem, and for that purpose no reasonable efforts should be omitted to preserve a perfectly good understanding between these branches of the Church of Christ.

2. That it is expedient to continue the plan of friendly intercourse, between this Church and the Congregational Churches of New England, as it now exists.⁶³
3. But as the "Plan of Union" adopted for the new settlements, in 1801, was originally an unconstitutional act on the part of that Assembly — these important standing rules having never been submitted to the Presbyteries — and as they were totally destitute of authority as proceeding from the General Association of Connecticut, which is invested with no power to legislate in such cases, and especially to enact laws to regulate Churches not within her limits; and as much confusion and irregularity have arisen from this unnatural and unconstitutional system of union, therefore, it is resolved, that the Act of the Assembly of 1801, entitled, a "Plan of Union," be, and the same is hereby abrogated. (Yeas, 143. Nays, 110)⁶⁴

After various protests and responses are recorded, and the reports of committees representing the majority and the minority to consider means of separation, the Assembly took the following actions regarding Synods erected under the Plan of Union:

TITLE 4 THE SYNODS OF THE WESTERN RESERVE, UTICA, GENEVA, AND GENESEE, DISOWNED

Resolved, That, by the operation of the abrogation of the Plan of Union of 1801, the Synod of the Western Reserve is, and is hereby declared to be no longer a part of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Yeas, 132. Nays, 105.⁶⁵

⁶³*Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, 1837, 419.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 421.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 440.

(b) *Be it resolved* by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America,

1. That in consequence of the abrogation of this Assembly of the Plan of Union of 1801, between it and the General Association of Connecticut, as utterly unconstitutional, and therefore null and void from the beginning, the Synods of Utica, Geneva and Genesee, which were formed and attached to this body under and in execution of said "Plan of Union," be, and are hereby declared to be out of the ecclesiastical connection of the Presbyterian Church of the United States in America, and that they are not in form or in fact an integral portion of said Church.⁶⁶

The Pastoral Letter to the Churches

The Assembly adopted a letter to its churches, which was framed by Dr. Alexander.

Dear Brothers — As the doings of the present General Assembly have been of unusual character, and such as may produce important consequences, we think it proper to lay an abstract of our decisions and the reasons of them before the Churches under our care. Discerning men have perceived for a number of years, that the affairs of our beloved Church were hastening to a crisis; and when the members of the present Assembly came together, the state of the parties was such as to make it manifest that a division of the Church was the most desirable object that could be effected. What are called the Old-school and New-school parties are already separated in fact; in almost every part of our country where those parties exist, they have less ministerial or Christian communion with one another than either of those parties have with Christians of over denominations; and they are so equally balanced in point of power, that for years past it has been uncertain, until the General Assembly was fully organized, which of these parties would predominate in that body.

⁶⁶Ibid.

From these circumstances, as well as from other things not necessary to mention, it is known to our brethren, that the floor of our highest judicatory as well as of our Synods and Presbyteries, has, for years present scenes of contention and strife, such as many of us never expected to witness in the Presbyterian Church, and such as are highly disgraceful to our Christian character. This spirit of contention deprives the Church of all power for maintaining the purity in our pulpits or presses, which would conduce to the edification of the body of Christ; and until the parties are separated and formed into different denominations, there is no ground of hope that these contentions can be terminated.

On reviewing the causes from which our troubles have arisen, another plan presented itself to the view of the majority, which appeared better calculated to effect, in a peaceable manner, that division of the Church which all seemed to consider as a matter of indispensable necessity. The contentions which distract the Church evidently arose from the Plan of Union formed in 1801, between the General Assembly and the Association of Connecticut. This plan was indeed projected and brought into operation by some of the wisest and best men that the Presbyterian Church has ever known, and it evidently originated from the purest and most benevolent motives. It has, however, been disastrous in its effects. We mean no disrespect to the Congregationalists of New England, as such; indeed there is no denomination of Christians beyond the pale of our own Church whom we esteem and love more sincerely; and yet we believe that the attempt, by this Plan of Union, to bring Congregationalists and Presbyterians into the same denomination, has been the principal cause of these dissensions which now distract and rend the Church.

We allude to these circumstances, merely for the purpose of explaining the only remedy which appears applicable to our present troubles. The Plan of Union adopted in 1801, was evidently unconstitutional in its nature, and of a tendency to subvert the institutions and distinctive character of and tendency to subvert the institutions and distinctive character of the Presbyterian Church; and such being the fact, it was certainly the duty of the present Assembly to abrogate said Plan, and to

declare it void from the beginning. From this act of abrogation, and from the declaration that it was void from the beginning, it would necessarily follow, that the Churches, Presbyteries, and Synods formed under said Plan, were of course not to be considered as parts of the Presbyterian Church. From this view of the subject it appears, that the *separation*, so necessary for the well being of the Presbyterian Church, exists already, and that we have nothing to do but to act on the facts of the case to secure our tranquility.⁶⁷

In the first place, we have said that the act of Union of 1801, was unconstitutional. It will be admitted that the most fundamental and sound parts of the constitution of any community, are those parts which form the legislative and judicial councils of the community, and designate the qualifications of the members of said councils. These are parts of the government, in all societies, deemed too sacred to be touched by any authority, excepting that which can make and unmake the constitution at its pleasure. Should any authority in the United States assume to introduce into the State legislatures or Congress, men not constitutionally qualified, and who were subjects of another political power, the alarm would be given at once that a most violent outrage had been inflicted on our governments and our rights. And although we say it with respect, yet we *must say*, that this was the very thing which the act of 1801 effected in the constitution of the Presbyterian Church. By *that act*, committeemen belonging to the Congregational Church, and under its government, were introduced into our Presbyteries, and by the subsequent execution of the act, into our Synods and our General Assembly. Men who were under the authority of a body without our church, exercised the highest power of the church. This was a most palpable infraction of our constitution.

Analysis and Results

George Marsden lists the possible causes for the division. He says, "Since the division was engineered by the Old School, the declarations of that party that the doctrinal questions were primary should be accepted unless it can be demonstrated and there was some other more

⁶⁷Ibid.

basic underlying cause."⁶⁸ He then lists the interrelated issues that were bound up with the theological issue: 1. the meaning of confessionalism, 2. Presbyterian polity, 3. the relation of the church to the voluntary societies of the "Evangelical united front," 4. methods of revivalism, 5. theology itself and 6. slavery. It is interesting to note that he puts theology as number five in the list.

We shall look at each of these, as Marsden has analyzed them. The New School argument was that the Presbyterian subscription was loose and allowed for latitude of doctrinal views. They charged that rigid subscriptionism undermined the Bible as the church's sole authority. The Old School, on the other hand, gave their testimony against this appeal to the Bible in this way, as a means of covering erroneous views in their "Act and Testimony" of 1834:

1. We do bear our solemn testimony against the right claimed by many, of interpreting the doctrines of our standards in a sense different from the general sense of the church for years past. . . .
2. We testify against the unchristian subterfuge to which some have recourse, when they avow a general adherence to our standards as a system, while they deny doctrines essential to the system, or hold to doctrines at complete variance with the system. Act and Testimony in Baird.⁶⁹

Marsden argues that the moderate Old School men at Princeton, had allowed for a looser subscription in connection with Hopkinsinian views in 1818. He cites Hodge as having said, "It is not enough that a doctrine be erroneous, or that it be dangerous in its tendency, if it be not subversive of one or more of the constituent elements of the Reformed faith, is not incompatible with the honest adopting of the Confession."⁷⁰

As far as the polity matter is concerned, Marsden seems to side with the New School over against the Old, when the latter purged the church of those synods and presbyteries that had been formed under the unconstitutional Plan of Union. It certainly was a radical action. Not only were the presbyteries and synods that had been affected by New

⁶⁸George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 67.

⁶⁹The "Act and Testimony" as found in Baird.

⁷⁰From *Princeton Review*, Index Volume, 1825-1868 (1869): 22, cited by Marsden, *Evangelical Mind*, 69.

England theology removed, but there were those in the South who also left. Several presbyteries in Mississippi, who were not at all affected by this theology, felt this was an arbitrary act of the Assembly, and they seceded from the Old School Church. Eventually these were received back into the Old School Southern Presbyterian Church during the course of the War between the States. The ground of their reception was the full subscription to the Westminster Standards. In other words, the New School theology did not get a real foothold in the South at this time, except in East Tennessee.

One must agree that the Old School should not have waited a third of a century to do this, but it must be admitted that the original design of the Plan had been well-intentioned. It was only as the out workings of this plan began to show the destructive tendencies in the Presbyterian Church that the Old School men rallied and purged the church. There is no question but that the Plan was out of accord with the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, and should never have been approved. It might also be observed that there is always a tendency toward moderatism so that nothing is done until the seriousness of the threat is clearly seen. Actually, it was almost too late for the Old School to be able to accomplish its purge. They did it only by a small majority.⁷¹

The Southern Church saw itself as directly descended from the Old School Presbyterian Church. One of the distinguishing characteristics of that church had been its emphasis on the spiritual nature of the church, and thus its refusal to intermix the social and political with the church. The New School denomination was largely to be found in the North and Middle West. The New School Church legislated against slavery before the War, and thus divided in 1857. The southern branch was known as the United Synod of the South. They joined the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America in 1864 on terms of the Old School Church. Thus the Southern Presbyterian Church remained essentially "Old School" in character.

In the North, on the other hand, the merger between the Old and New School Churches had been accomplished through a compromise that openly allowed either Old or New School views to be held and taught in the Church. This may be seen from the first term of the reunion as adopted by the northern churches:

⁷¹*Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1837, 479.*

The reunion shall be effected on the doctrinal and ecclesiastical bases of our common standard; the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament shall be acknowledged to be the inspired Word of God, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice; the Confession of Faith shall continue to be sincerely received, "as containing system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scripture"; it being understood that this Confession is received in its proper, historical — that is, the Calvinistic or Reformed — sense; it is also understood that various methods of viewing, stating, explaining, and illustrating, the doctrines of the Confession which do not impair the integrity of the Reformed or Calvinistic system, are to be freely allowed in the united church, as they have hitherto been allowed in the separate churches; and the government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church in the United States shall be approved as containing the principles and rules of our "policy."⁷²

In 1870, the Southern Presbyterian Church, in response to invitations to enter into correspondence with the view of their uniting with the Northern Church, answered in part with the following statement:

Both wings of the now united Assembly (Old and New School Assemblies reunited in 1869 in the north) during their separate existence before the fusion, did fatally complicate themselves with the State in political utterances deliberately pronounced year after year, and which, in our judgment, were a sad betrayal of the cause and kingdom of our common Lord and Head. We believe it to be solemnly incumbent upon the Northern Presbyterian Church, not with reference to us, but before the Christian world and before our Divine Master and King, to purge itself of this error, and, by public proclamation of the truth, to place the crown once more upon the head of Jesus Christ as the alone King of Zion; in default of which the Southern Presbyterian Church, which has already suffered much in maintaining the independence and spirituality of the Redeemer's kingdom upon earth, feels constrained to bear public testimony against this defection of our late associates from the truth. Nor can we, by official correspondence even, consent to blunt the edge of

⁷²*Digest of 1886*, ed. by William E. Moore (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1886), 71.

this our testimony concerning the very nature and mission of the church as a purely spiritual body among men.⁷³

Not only did the Southern Presbyterian Church emphasize the spiritual mission of the church in their response to the Northern Presbyterian invitation, but they also emphasized the fact that they were distinctly Old School in theology, and lamented the union of the Old and New School Churches in the North on the basis of compromise under which that union was effected.

The union now consummated between the Old and New School Assemblies North was accomplished by methods, which, in our judgment, involved a total surrender of all the great testimonies of the Church for the fundamental doctrines of grace, at a time when the victory of truth over error hung long in the balance. The united Assembly stands of necessity upon an allowed latitude of interpretation of the Standards and must come at length to embrace nearly all shades of doctrinal belief. Of those falling testimonies we are now the sole surviving heir, which we must lift from the dust and bear to the generations after us. It would be a serious compromise of this sacred trust to enter into public and official fellowship with those repudiating these testimonies and to do this expressly upon the ground as stated in the Preamble to the Overture before us, "that the terms of reunion between the two branches of the Presbyterian Church at the North, now happily consummated, present an auspicious opportunity for the adjustment of such relations." To found a correspondence professedly upon this idea would be to endorse that which we thoroughly disapprove.⁷⁴

From these quotations, it is obvious that the Southern Presbyterian Church in 1870 saw itself as the true continuing body of the Old School Presbyterian Church that had come into being in 1837, after the expulsion of the New School Synods and Presbyteries.

This then is the heritage of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. This is what our forefathers sought to perpetuate in the establishment of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. This is

⁷³*Minutes, 1870, 529; also in Alexander's Digest, 1888, 451; Digest, 1861-1965, 392.*

⁷⁴*Minutes, 1870, 529-530; also in Alexander's Digest, 1888, 452; Digest, 1861-1965, 392.*

the position that those who look toward the establishment of a continuing Southern Presbyterian Church wish to perpetuate.

Another document from this period that reveals how strongly the early PCUS leaders felt on these issues is the "Pastoral Letter" that the General Assembly sent to its congregations in 1870, describing its understanding of the distinctive position of the Southern Presbyterian Church regarding the Old and New School controversy. In part it says:

Again, the overture before us professedly founds upon the happy union just accomplished between the Old and New Schools North. This is singularly unfortunate; for, in our judgment, negotiations through which this union was consummated, betrayed those sacred testimonies of a former generation, for the most precious and vital of the doctrines of grace. Our difficulty is not the mere fusion of these two assemblies into one. A similar diffusion took place, six years ago, between ourselves and the United Synod of the South. But the difference between the two cases is wide as the poles. The Synod of the South united with us upon the first interchange of doctrinal views, upon a square acceptance of the standards, without any metaphysical hair-splitting, to find a sense in which to receive them, without any expunging of whole chapters from the history of the past, with the sacred testimonies with which these are filled. It is not, therefore, the amalgamation of these bodies at the North, simply considered, which embarrasses us; but it is the method by which it was achieved — the acceptance of the Standards in no comprehensible sense, by which the United Assembly becomes a sort of a broad church, giving shelter to every creed, lying between the extremes of Arminianism and Pelagianism on the one hand, and of anti-Nomianism and fatalism upon the other.⁷⁵

Some Conclusions and Observations

We continue to live with the differences raised by the Old School - New School controversy of the last century. For example, George Marsden feels that the New School should be seen as the precursors of the Bible Presbyterian Movement. The RPCES, of course, had its roots in this movement. The broad evangelical movement of the

⁷⁵*Minutes, 1870, 537-542; Alexander's Digest, 1888, 454-458.*

20th century has its roots in New School theology and practice.

In addition, New School thought opened the door for the rise of liberalism in the mainline Presbyterian churches. Along with this was the willingness of the New School Church to mix social and political issues into the life of the church. This emphasis has been seen particularly in 20th century liberalism. It is worth noting that all but Princeton Seminary allowed both Old and New School thought to be taught. The result was the decline of those seminaries into liberalism. The Southern Presbyterian Church in 1870 saw the New School position as opening the doors for departing from the Reformed faith and historic Presbyterianism.

New School theology was a move away from biblical Christianity and Reformed theology. In general, liberalism in this country was promoted in the seminaries that were associated with the New School. Union Seminary of New York is a classic case in point. In other words, the looseness in doctrine allowed by the New School opened the door for the inroads of liberalism and unbelief of the sort that led to the separation of 1936 under Machen in the North, and in 1973 of the PCA in the South.

The PCA, as the Continuing Presbyterian Church, was seeking to return to the Old School Presbyterianism of the earlier Southern Church. The joining and receiving of the RPCES, which, as Marsden says, had its roots in New School thought, was not an allowance of any New School views in the PCA, but they joined the PCA on its terms. One must admit that this has not always been recognized, and there is now in the PCA an element of New School thought that is not true to the original intent of the founding fathers of the PCA.

To ignore this fact and to allow New School thought a place in an Old School Church is to open the door for the deformation of the church. The Southern Presbyterians were not wrong in their judgment of their Northern brethren when they saw that a union that allowed both views was, in effect, the abandonment of Old School position. This is seen in the fact that despite the victory in the 1890s Briggs case, in which the PCUSA declared that biblical inerrancy was the orthodox position, within 30 years that same church had slipped to the Auburn Affirmation of 1923. In this affirmation, the basic fundamentals of the faith were denounced by some 1,193 ministers of the church. No disciplinary action was ever taken against them. This was followed by the loss of Princeton as an Old School seminary and the establishment of Westminster in 1929 to carry on that tradition. Finally, there was the excommunication of Dr. Machen, and the formation of the Presbyterian

Church of America, later the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. This is certainly a sad page in the history of Presbyterianism in America.

Unless the PCA takes efforts to stop the rise of New School thought within her borders, the future of this Church as an orthodox church may well be in question. The question may well be asked as to what should be done.

First, let the PCA return to her original position of being a continuation of Old School Presbyterianism. This means a clear cut commitment to the Reformed faith, not only in doctrinal affirmation, but also in our practice, which includes how we carry out the great commission, both at home and abroad, how we worship, and in every aspect of the church's life and witness.

It means a full subscription to the doctrinal standards of the church, which includes all of the doctrines set forth in them.

Regarding men who teach in seminaries, whether those seminaries are under the control of the church or not, they ought to be held accountable by their presbyteries to the full professorial vows. These vows require that faculty members commit themselves not to teach or insinuate anything contrary to the Westminster Standards. Seminaries under the control of sessions, presbyteries or the general assembly should be required to hold all of their faculty to this same standard. There is no ground for exceptions to the doctrines taught in our standards on the part of faculty members. If any faculty member has his personal differences, he must agree not to teach or insinuate anything against those standards. Unless we see a change in this area in our seminaries, we can hardly expect to see the kind of reforms needed by the church today, if she is to remain true to her heritage, and to the Reformed faith taught in the Bible and set forth in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.