**Where Have We Come From?**

A Call for Attitudinal Revival in the PCA

Dr. D. G. Barker

The election coming up this November seems to be more extreme than any in my lifetime. The Democratic left is committed to making the U.S.A. as socialist as possible, promising that such a turn to the left would be an automatic win for everyone. Those on the right counter those promises with a lesson from history: “Socialism has failed every time it has been tried.”

As I study the history of Presbyterianism in America – not just since the forming of the PCA but back to the 18th century - I have come to realize that the errors of our Presbyterian forefathers were not that much different from the ones we seem so ready to make today. As I pointed out in my previous paper, it is not the case that Presbyterianism is faced with such a unique set of issues and challenges that we must now regard our dear but old Confession with an ever-loosening hand. Actually, the contrary is our true situation. We are more alike than we are different from our forefathers in the faith. That is because the problem – and the choice - is never so much the *question du jour* as much as it is the *attitude du cœur.*

Reflecting on Presbyterian history in this country has led me to a further study of Presbyterianism in Europe, where the seeds of our system of church government first bloomed. And what I have found there can be summed up this way:

**Anything less than full subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith**

**has failed every time it has been tried.**

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It is his contribution to *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* that I call to your attention. Dr. Hall is a trustworthy resource on the history of subscription prior to and leading up to the Adopting Act of 1729 in the United States. “The 1729 Adopting Act, a critical event for American Presbyterianism … did not crop up *ex nihilo*. It had a rich pre-history and a context that assists us in understanding its meaning and intent.” (p. 3) I would put the thesis of his paper this way:

**1) that such an historical context demonstrates that relaxing ministerial subscription to the Confession, once started, cannot be stopped until it deteriorates and degrades the orthodoxy of the whole; and**

**2) that it must be the motivation – of the ministerial candidate first, but then also of the body of presbytery – to want orthodoxy to continue. That is essential and crucial to the body’s survival.\***

Through the mists of time, we can discern that the earliest records of Reformation creeds across Europe indicate a full subscription was required - even before the word “subscription”, itself, or its exact definition, was developed. “Formal adoption” and other similar-meaning words were imposed upon entire towns, as well as the individual ministers or elders. This, in fact, was Calvin’s goal in Geneva. It seems clear that the motivation for such early subscription was to make clear to one and all that unity was essential in their adamant rejection of Roman Catholicism.

**In England**

The earliest exercise in subscription was to the Thirty-Nine Articles. Originally, subscription to all the articles was absolute and exclusionary. But by 1719, things had changed. The question seemed honestly pondered: “What was the most irenic way to contend for orthodoxy, while simultaneously pleading for mutual understanding?” (Hall, p. 5) The Salters’ Hall Synod, which faced that dilemma, could not answer that question and, as a result, split badly into the Subscribers, the Nonsubscribers, and the Neutrals. The issue at hand was an accusation of Arianism in the ranks; but now there was no way to address it, let alone stop it. The dispute, as it turned out, was not limited just to doctrine, it also included something else - attitude.

*The Non-subscribing Presbyterian ministers showed a tendency toward the reception of new ideas, whatever these ideas might be; and, to adapt themselves to altering tastes, committing themselves to the current speculations and spirit of the times. This was the section that slowly found themselves drifting away from former moorings, though they neither intended nor admitted to themselves that they were doing anything else than protesting against narrow, illiberal, and bigoted notions. (Drysdale, History of the Presbyterians in England, 1889, p. 121)*

“Sadly, by 1735 the Westminster Shorter Catechism was revised toward Arminianism and Arianism, and thereafter, British Presbyterianism careened toward Unitarianism and rationalism.” (Hall, p. 6)

*Perhaps nothing in ecclesiastical history is more remarkable than the change which came over the Presbyterianism of England between the Westminster Assembly and the Revolution, in the transition from a jealous guarding of the complete truth, even to intolerance, in the former period to the broad and even latitudinarian charity which prevailed in the latter. (Drysdale, p. 513)*

*Presbyterianism in England did decline thereafter, with Presbyterian ministers soon acquiring a reputation as those who ‘preferred speculative liberty to Evangelical orthodoxy. … Uncontrolled liberty … insisted on this as their right.’ (Drysdale, p. 533)*

*Drysdale, the leading historian of British Presbyterianism, identifies the ‘question of ministerial subscription [as that over which] the English Presbyterians began to fragment.’ (Hall, p. 9)*

*For the great question among these anti-subscription Presbyterian divines of the [18th] century was not so much about any one specific doctrine or other, but it was the principle of* entire ministerial freedom of religious inquiry and profession*. … The absence of any provision for enforcing doctrinal unity beyond what was legally required by the Toleration Act, was a form of unrestrained liberty greatly relished by men embarking on a new departure in ecclesiastical life. … Christian doctrine degenerated into a mere set of scheme of ‘opinions’ … (Drysdale, pp. 519-20)*

**In Scotland and Ireland**

In Scotland, following the trials with the House of Stewart, Presbyterians were hardened in their confessional commitment. “Leonard Trinterud – an antagonist of subscription - … admits that in 1690 and in 1696, the General Assembly of Scotland allowed subscription to the Confession of Faith as a test of ministerial communion and further forbade anyone to ‘speak, write, preach, teach, or print anything whatsoever that would be contrary to or even inconsistent with, any view contained in the Confession.” (Hall, p. 10) But, within only one hundred years, commitment to a united church was considered *passé*. Citing Ian Hamilton’s “chronicling the decline of confessional orthodoxy among Scottish Presbyterians from 1730-1879”, Hall sums it up this way:

*[F]rom 1711 on, the General Assembly of Scotland required a strict subscription, … Hamilton discusses the early evolution of the pertinent ordination vow, illuminating how it eroded from unequivocal adoption of the WCF as ‘ones own’* [sic] *and as ‘believing the whole doctrine contained’ to an ambiguous and less specific adoption of the confession as containing a ‘general sense.’ Hamilton shows how this considerably weakened the doctrinal orthodoxy of the Scottish church by 1840. One of the real contributions by Hamilton is the documentation refuting the claim that prior to the 1840’s Scottish Presbyterianism accepted a latitudinarian approach to subscription. … Hamilton identifies the pathology of confessional relaxation in a sequence moving first from a general ambiguity over the ‘sense’ of the confession, to particular denials …, then on the failure in practice to discipline, onward to a zeal for union valued over purity, finally to actual revision of the confession and dilution of the subscription vow itself.” (Hall, p. 11-12)*

It must always be remembered that subscription is always done in order to guard the truth, while relaxation of subscription never truly has the same end in view. **In fact, granting exceptions never has any end in view!** Subscription is not meant to be an “end-all” in itself, it is only the lock on the door that all have agreed must remain shut.

“Still a word of caution is in order, lest we galvanize subscription into a golden calf. By itself, it will neither heal nor preserve. … Even under the best case scenario, confessional subscription must also be supported by the entire community, reinforced, and if lacking be disciplined.” (Hall, p. 15-16) Safe communion can function only if the door remains shut. If it is allowed to stay open – first at only a crack, but then swinging wider and wider – the purpose of the door becomes pointless.

**In Heart and Not Just Mind**

The conclusion is easy to recognize. Unity must first be expressed with a summation of doctrine. When Presbyterians look to the Westminster Confession of Faith, they have in their possession the absolute finest expression of doctrine the Church of Christ has ever composed. It is not simply a product of the times (the 1600s just prior to the Renaissance) or to the situation (England in a time of political and religious revolution), it is also the product of 1,600 years of struggle with the basics of the faith and the proper ways that those doctrines should be expressed. If changes are to be made to the confession, it should be done by the body and not at the individual determination of each and every single licentiate or ministerial candidate that comes along. Typically, those individuals are young, fresh out of a seminary experience and influence that may or may not respect the Westminster Confession, let alone teach it. The entire body must see the need for any and all changes, and vote as a body to commit to those changes.

But there is another expression of unity that must remain among the body. That is an attitude of submission - not just intellectual submission, but happy, willing submission - submission in the name of gaining ground for the gospel by holding out the same message throughout the denomination. A single presbyter may not particularly like the wording of one point here or there, but that should not be allowed to be grounds for taking an exception. The conscience must be burdened before an exception should be expressed. Taking exceptions on the surface may seem legitimate simply for the sake of doubt or question; but taking exceptions for those reasons can hide and even reward an intellectual ignorance or even a determined selfishness that will not fail to tear the denomination apart. The rule of thumb should be this simple: we do not wish legally to force or coerce anyone to embrace a confessional standard to which the rest of us have eagerly committed ourselves; we are just asking that, if you wish to join us, you must be willing to do the same.

This is actually quite critical. The attitude of the heart matters more than intellectual objections cogently and theologically expressed. The Reformed way of thinking does not lend itself to asking the question “why not?” – “Why can’t I believe differently on this? What’s wrong with holding to my personal view on this small area?” “Why shouldn’t we accept him under such a trivial exception?” “Why not let him teach his exception?” Instead, Reformed thinking is always protected and led forward by asking “why?” – “Why is it better for me to align myself not only with these brothers now but with the generations of Reformed Presbyterians upon whose shoulders we stand?” Why do I want to belong to this particular denomination?” “Why should I respect and consider the view of my forefathers as being superior to mine at this moment?” “What makes my submission the right thing to do for the sake of the gospel?”

It is also an attitude of the heart that complains that disallowing exceptions makes us all hypocrites; for, it is argued, we all violate the letter of the standards in some behavior or other. But that is not the attitude of Christian humility, that is pride demanding to be heard and tolerated. Pride looks upon the Moral Law of God and says “Oh well, no one is perfect. We might as well admit it. We all make up our minds how we are going to live our daily lives and then we design our own individual theology to suit.” Instead, Christian humility looks upon the Moral Law of God and receives it for what it is – the supreme authority over one’s life. Christian humility is constantly convicted of its sin, is continuously moved to repent of sin, and is faithfully forgiven that sin by Christ before the Father; and it regularly matures, striving to become more Christ-like in thought, word, and deed. Humility grows the Christian character; pride freezes that growth right where it is and allows character to degrade and deteriorate.

Presently, we have men routinely coming before us saying: ‘I will gladly be a part of this service of ministry with you, but first, let me be allowed this exception.’ That is analogous to asking ‘Please *let me first go and bury my father*.’ Who among us would even think to object to such a request? Who would be so cold as to say ‘follow us, and *leave the dead to bury their own dead*’ (Lk. 9:59-60)? What possible harm would there be to the unity of our testimony to give leeway to such a request? How obscene it would be for us to insist that such an exception as he is asking for is out of place in this day and age! Surely we would respond with the same expression of sympathy and fellowship as Ephron did to Abraham in Gen. 23. We would say: ‘such an issue does, indeed, come at a cost to our unity. But what is that between you and me? Bury your dead (take your exception).’ But Abraham did not ask for exceptional circumstances. He submitted and paid the price. We do not know what happened to the disciple who asked Jesus for his exception; but Abraham we now call the Father of the Faith.

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The list of David Hall’s books includes *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding; Savior or Servant? Putting Government in Its Place; Election Day Sermons; The Arrogance of the Modern: Historical Theology Held in Contempt; Holding Fast to Creation; Paradigms in Polity; The Millennium of Jesus Christ: An Exposition of The Revelation for All Ages; Welfare Reformed: A Compassionate Approach and A Heart Promptly Offered; The Revolutionary Leadership of John Calvin;* *The Legacy of John Calvin; Calvin in the Public Square; Calvin and Commerce; Preaching Like Calvin; Calvin and Culture; Tributes to John Calvin; Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes*; *Windows on Westminster; To Glorify and Enjoy God; Welfare Reformed: A Compassionate Approach; God and Caesar; and Jus Divinum; God’s Plan for Church Structure*. He has also been the co-editor of *Did God Create in 6 Days?;* and author and editor of *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*.

\*Dr. Hall responded to this article saying: “YOU have summarized things BETTER than I did. I wish I had put things as clearly and as succinctly as you. Fine work.”