

True and False Unity

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In our day, when there are dozens of Presbyterian denominations all of which, except perhaps the Church of Scotland, are splits or secessions from previous Presbyterian bodies, the issue of church unity is important and raises a crucial question. What is the basis or foundation of unity? Is it antiquity? That is, are we obligated to seek membership in the church that is the oldest or can trace itself back in time the farthest? If one answers yes, then one should seek membership in the Roman Catholic Church or perhaps the Eastern Orthodox Church. They existed for many centuries before the rise of Protestantism. But one may object, these church bodies deny justification by faith alone and worship idols. That is a good point. It tells us that antiquity or age is not the mark of the true church or the basis of church unity. The idea of antiquity and an institutional connection in the past is a Roman Catholic idea. Early theologians stopped thinking of the catholicity of the church in spiritual terms against heresy and antinomianism and instead externalized and embodied it in a visible institution—the church hierarchy or leaders. “The bishop, deemed to be in direct continuity with the apostles and in possession of the pure tradition, became the criterion of the true church. The universal church ceased to be logically prior and was considered to be historically prior to all local churches. It is not the local churches now that together form a unity; now the Catholic Church with its episcopate has priority. Local churches are parts of the whole and are true churches only for as long as they stick with that body as a whole and submit to it.”¹ We find a related error among the modern Steelites, who teach that one cannot have a lawfully constituted church unless one makes a historical and institutional connection to the last faithful church. In other words, faithfulness in doctrine and life is not enough for the well-being of the church, there must also be a historical-institutional connection to the past. This historical-institutional connection is not only unprovable biblically but is historically impossible unless one arbitrarily stops at John Knox or perhaps John Calvin. It is a perversion of the biblical idea of testimony bearing.²

In addition, one should note that Lutheranism (the Reformation under Luther began in 1517 and he was excommunicated by the Pope in 1520) predates the rise of the Reformed church under Zwingli (his first crucial disputation occurred in 1523 and his first publication was 1525 [*Commentary on True and False Religion*]), yet Lutheran churches and Reformed churches have remained separate to this day. No one doubts whether or not Luther and Zwingli were true Christians. The Lutheran and Reformed churches did not unify because of doctrinal differences and differences regarding worship and the sacraments. Moreover, the Anglican or Episcopal Church (the Church of England) predates Presbyterianism in both England and Scotland. It began in 1534 (*Anglicana Ecclesia*). Presbyterianism in Scotland arose in the 1550s. Even though the early Anglican churchman explicitly adopted justification by faith alone, the Presbyterians refused to join the older body because of Erastianism and differences over church government and worship. Thus, we see that Reformed and Presbyterian churches have always placed adherence to the truth above antiquity as a basis for church unity. They recognize that a church can be true as to being but be corrupt to a degree as to well-being, to the point of meriting separation. One does not have to regard a church as apostate or heretical to justify separation. There can be errors on subordinate points of church government, worship and doctrine that are serious enough to merit separation. If one rejects this assertion, then there is no biblical reason for

¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 4:282.

² Arbitrarily positing an institutional connection is not what connects us to our faithful forefathers, it is an adherence to the truth (“the faith...once delivered to the saints,” Jude 3).

Presbyterians to be separate from Anglicans or the Reformed Churches on the continent to be separate from the early Lutheran bodies that held to justification and rejected free will.

In rejecting the Romanist concept of church unity, Protestants understood that a faithful adherence to the Word of God was a central mark of the true church.³ They also understood that no one has an infallible interpretation of the Word and that divisions in the church of Christ are caused by sin. Thus, working together as a body, they sought unity by producing detailed creeds and confessions. They recognized that while all professing Christians may affirm that the Bible is the Word of God, there are many different views of church government, the sacraments, the doctrine of salvation, the meaning and extent of the fall, church discipline and so on. They understood that unity can only be found in adherence to the truth and, thus, Scriptural doctrines must be explained, defined and

³ When we examine the Bible, we will note that there is one primary mark of a true church and two other marks that are dependent on and naturally follow the first mark. The primary mark of a true church is the pure preaching and profession of the Word. A true church must teach true apostolic doctrine. It must preach the pure doctrine of the gospel. The two secondary marks are the lawful administration of the sacraments and the proper exercising of church discipline. Why do we identify true apostolic doctrine or the pure doctrine of the gospel as the primary mark of a true church? The first reason is that biblical teaching or doctrine is necessary in order to define the sacraments and their proper use, as well as define what is sinful and deserving of church discipline. If one is in a church in which true doctrine is believed and taught, then the fruit of such a belief and teaching will be exhibited in the two other marks. A second reason is that a church which ceases to preach the true gospel immediately becomes a false church. But a church can exist for a time without the sacraments, as was the case of the Israelite church which neglected circumcision in the wilderness for forty years (Josh. 5:4-7). Further, a church which corrupts discipline can exist for a time before it becomes totally apostate.

Regarding the marks of the church in Reformed theology Berkhof writes, “Reformed theologies differed as to the number of the marks of the church. Some spoke of but one, the preaching of the pure doctrine of the Gospel (Beza, Alsted, Amesius, Heidanus, Maresius); others, of two, the pure preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments (Calvin, Bullinger, Zanchius, Junius, Gomarus, Mastricht, à Marck) and still others added to these a third, the faithful exercise of discipline (Hyperius, Martyr, Ursinus, Trelcatius, Heidegger, Wendelinus)” (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941], 576). The Confession of Augsburg (article 7), the French Confession (article 28), the Confession of Saxony (article 11) and the confession of Wirtemberg (article 32) all list two marks: the pure teaching of the gospel and the right use of the sacraments. The Belgic Confession (article 29) and the Scottish Confession list three: the pure preaching of the gospel, the lawful administration of the sacraments and the proper use of ecclesiastical discipline. Both of these confessions, however, give the preeminence to the first mark by saying that all things (including the sacraments and discipline) must be done in accordance with God’s Word. The Westminster Confession (25:2) and the Larger Catechism (62) both wisely focus all attention on the one primary mark—the profession of the true religion (i.e. apostolic Christianity). John Calvin and various Scottish theologians (when discussing what constitutes a true church) liked to make a distinction between the church as *to being* and the church as *to well-being*. A church such as the Roman Catholic Church could be called a church as to being because of the remnant of biblical doctrine and the true Christians in her midst; yet, be called a false church as to well-being because of apostasy in doctrine and worship.

The modern Steelites have perverted this doctrine by *apparently* teaching that they are the *only* true Presbyterian Church as to *well-being*, while all other bodies are false churches as to well-being, (If I am misrepresenting their position, then I ask them one simple question: “Are there *any other* Christian communions in existence on planet earth that you recognize as a true church as to well-being?” If they do not give you an answer, then ask: “Which Steelite group is the only true church as to well-being? Is it the semi-charismatic, anti-headcoverings Steelites? Is it the kinist Steelites who require headcoverings in public all the time? They would do well to submit to the Westminster Standards which say, “And particular Churches, which are members thereof [of the universal church], are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them” (*Confession of Faith*, 25:4). In other words, there are *degrees of well-being* and purity in them and one is not justified in categorizing every Protestant Bible-believing church with a few errors that are not damnable heresies false as to well-being which *implies* total apostasy. Different communions, like individual believers, have different levels of sanctification. There are errors that merit separation that do not render a church apostate or a completely false church as to well-being. The Steelites, on this topic, have adopted the logical fallacy of black and white. While one is biblically obligated to attend the most faithful church one can find and one must *not* attend a church that causes him to violate his conscience (e.g., uninspired hymns, musical instruments, Xmas, corrupt view of this Genesis 1 and 2, etc.), this does not mean that such churches must be regarded as no churches at all. They are corrupt, but are not in the same category as Romanism or modernism. Calvin and Knox certainly did not advocate such Steelite nonsense.

systematized *correctly* so that the body is unified in the truth.⁴ To set aside doctrine in the practices of worship and piety as defined by Scripture is to have a church containing diametrically opposed beliefs and practices. It is unity in name only. It is a false institutional external unity. Anyone who preaches unity at the expense of doctrinal integrity, faithfulness to church creeds and confessions or adherence to the truth (ironically) is being schismatic. They want to depart from the church's doctrinal attainments of the past for the sake of a pragmatic, false, worldly unity in the present. As Samuel Miller writes,

If all sorts of unscriptural opinion, except the extreme of heresy, should be freely countenanced by any of our judicatories; if that refusal to censure any form of doctrinal error, short of palpable Unitarianism, which would seem to be the plan of some brethren, should be adopted as the prevalent policy; it will be impossible much longer to keep the church together. Or rather, it will not, much longer, be *worth* keeping together. For it will cease to be what the Church was constituted and intended to be, from the beginning: a "witness for God," in the midst of a corrupt and ungodly world – a witness for the truth as well as the order of his family.⁵

The PCUSA did not heed Miller's warning and became apostate by the late 1920s.

When we speak of a strict adherence to creeds and confessions as a basis for union, we recognize that *only* the Scriptures are the final or ultimate standard for faith and life and that uninspired standards are subordinate and secondary rules. As such, they can be changed and fine-tuned if the church thinks they can be made more faithful to Scripture. While human statements of faith, requirements for membership and covenants are *not inspired* or *infallible*; nevertheless, they bind the conscience of Christians *if and when they agree with the Word of God*. If someone says, "Jesus is fully man without sin, and also fully God," we must believe it and confess it, for it accurately reflects Scripture. As Rutherford notes, "A confession of faith containing all fundamental points is so far forth the word of God as it agrees with the word of God and obliges as a rule secondary, which we believe with subjection to God, speaking in His own word, and to this platform we may lawfully swear."⁶

In a defense of terms of communion Reformed Presbyterian churchmen in 1801 ably explained the necessity of creeds and confessions:

But if the Scriptures must be made the terms of communion, at first instance, or without any explanation and statement of truths, in our own language, we shall soon find ourselves obliged to admit persons of diametrically opposite faith and practice. Explanation is surely necessary. And our public creeds and terms of communion were never viewed in any other light, even by those who have been most warmly attached to them, than as subordinate helps for our right understanding and applying the Scriptures. We never formed the remotest thought of substituting them in the place of the Bible, or putting them on a level with it; but when they are evidently "founded upon and agreeable to the Word of God" – the manner in which all our subordinate standards are uniformly qualified – we reckon it our duty to adopt them and faithfully to adhere to them. It is observable that almost all modern objections against public creeds, confessions, and explicit terms of communion, take it for granted that all these confessions and the Word of God are at variance with each other. They suppose the one to require what

⁴ The adherence to different incompatible views not only necessitated detailed creeds, confessions and catechisms but also necessitated the adding of descriptive adjectives to the noun "church" when describing the different Protestant communions. Although these adjectives (e.g., Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Presbyterian) are *adiaphora*, they were deemed necessary due to circumstances both for convenience (it makes it easy for people to find what they are looking for in order to avoid what they regard as less faithful churches as to well-being) and for maintaining uniformity or true unity. While Presbyterians love Luther on justification and many other issues, the Lutheran view of the Lord's supper, worship and church and state (the two kingdoms theory) is unscriptural and merit separation even though we regard Bible-believing non-Arminian Lutherans as true Christians.

⁵ Samuel Miller, *Doctrinal Integrity: The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions and Adherence to Our Doctrinal Standards* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage, 1989 [1841]), 75-76.

⁶ Samuel Rutherford, *A Free Disputation against Pretended Liberty of Conscience*, 25.

the other forbids: and hence, they state the question, Whether we should obey God rather than men? But if God and men require, substantially the same thing, where is the inconsistency of obeying both in their own place? A warm zeal for the Holy Scriptures and a strong attachment to sound creeds and terms of communion, are so far from implying any contradiction, that the one necessarily involves and loudly proclaims the other. He who, in time of danger, uses the best means in his power for the defense and protection of the injured, certainly proves the best friend. While many are perverting the Scripture to their own and others' destruction, we should do the most we can have them pure and entire.⁷

Having established that historic Protestant communions have made, adopted and used creeds and confessions as set boundaries for membership, communion and unity, we need to examine how biblical creedalism has been perverted and distorted by modern Presbyterian denominations to the point where they are no longer set boundaries. There are two basic violations regarding the use of public creeds.

Loose Subscriptionism and Its Effects

First, there is loose subscriptionism. This is essentially the idea that creeds or confessions must only be sworn to in a general-equivocal manner and that all sorts of exceptions to the Standards are permitted. In other words, the Standards are, at best, only a loose approximation of the truth. This view of creedalism is presently held in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in America and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. Consequently, within these small conservative Presbyterian denominations, one can find radically different views on *sola Scriptura* or the regulative principle of worship; the creation account in Genesis; the meaning and efficacy of the sacraments; eschatology; the abiding validity of the Old Testament moral case laws; the role of women in public worship; covenant theology; the abiding sanctity of the Christian Sabbath; the ordination of women (e.g., women deacons); and even justification by faith alone (e.g., the Federal Vision). In these denominations, one can find ministers and elders with diametrically opposed positions on certain issues that explicitly contradict each other and even the Word of God as well (e.g., the six literal day creationism of the Westminster Standards is incompatible with the day age theory, the framework hypothesis, the gap theory and theistic evolution). The whole point of this kind of creedalism is to allow doctrinal pluralism. There are number of problems with this perversion of confessionalism.

(1) Such practices are essentially dishonest, for a vague equivocal adherence to the Confession is not a real, fixed, solid standard. A measuring stick made out of putty that can be stretched or shrunk at will is not very useful. Loose subscriptionism leads to bureaucratization, pragmatism and, historically, declension over time. It also frequently has led to injustice in church courts as churchmen refuse to uphold the solid, biblical, comprehensive Westminster Standards and instead arbitrarily (based on personal feelings, views or pragmatic considerations) impose judgments that are essentially autonomous and/or self-serving.

The standard is really: which school of thought has the votes on committees at the synod or general assembly and/or an agreement to not have any fixed standard on a particular issue. Churchmen disregard many doctrinal attainments of the First and Second Reformation by disregarding their creedal achievements' *external* authority; and, to a large extent, the covenanted Reformation that tied certain nations and all Presbyterians to their achievements in doctrine and practice for an essentially *internal* authority (human autonomy based on the anti-Christian presuppositions that the Scriptures are not

⁷ The Reformed Presbytery, *An Explanation and to Defense of the Terms of Communion, Adopted by the Community of Dissenters; Together with an Introduction, Containing Some Remarks on the Propriety of Terms of Communion in General. The Whole Intended to Obviate Some Modern Objections, and To Satisfy the Minds of Those Who Are Willing To Be Formed on this Subject* (Pottstown, PA: Covenanted Reformed Presbyterian, 2015 [1801]), 5-6.

perspicuous or necessarily logical and comprehensible). Thus, although modern conservative Presbyterian denominations denounce “modernism,” they have, nevertheless, been infected with it in many ways.

When crucial sections of the Westminster Standards are ignored or completely redefined in a manner that contradicts the plain historical meaning of the Standards, this always leads to a shift in authority from the original intent of the Standards to an unwritten, historically relative, arbitrary standard. Every organization is going to have some sanctions. So it is never a question (in the long run) of sanctions *versus* no sanctions. What happens over a period of time is that the anti-confessional non-historical interpretation of the Confession becomes the status quo. Soon, discrete sanctions are used against strict confessionalists (e.g., they are refused pulpits, teaching jobs, committee assignments and are shunned and have evil motives assigned to their theological positions [e.g., so-and-so is legalistic and unloving because he is against celebrating Christmas; or, so-and-so only cares about theology not people; or, so-and-so wants to build walls, not bridges]).

(2) Loose subscriptionism leaves Christian families in churches (both members and visitors) vulnerable to many serious corruptions, for with loose subscriptionism one does not really know what kind of pastor and elders a church has until that particular local church is attended. Will the church’s leaders reject the biblical view of the early chapters of Genesis? Will they believe in and uphold the regulative principle of worship? Will they have a sacramentalist understanding of the holy supper? Will they uphold the sanctity of the Christian Sabbath? Will they use pictures of Christ in Sabbath classes? Will they be infected with the Federal Vision? Will they be advocating feminism? Will they uphold the validity of God’s moral law? Reformed churches should not be like a box of chocolates where one has to bite and taste each one to tell the difference between the bitter and the sweet.

Churches that say they adhere to the Westminster Standards when they really do not are guilty of violating the ninth commandment. It is akin to the used car salesman who turns the odometer back and puts a thin layer of paint over areas of rust. What is occurring today is fraud on a massive scale. If churches believe in four different views of creation or three different views of worship or no longer believe in the perspicuity of Scripture,⁸ then they should change their standards to reflect that reality. Speaking of the common perversions of the meaning of the creation narrative that are accepted in Reformed denominations today, Gentry writes, “[W]hen we witness the attempt at re-interpreting the clear language before us, deep and serious concerns boil up. Where will this methodology lead? What elements within the Confession are safe from the re-interpretive hermeneutic? And for how long are they safe once this interpretative approach is unleashed?”⁹

The acceptance of loose subscriptionism forces churchmen to justify decline, error and sin. This

⁸ Not only is the perspicuity of Scripture denied but also the historic Protestant view of hermeneutics. While orthodox theologians have understood that there are some difficult sections of Scripture where different interpretations are inevitable (e.g., the apocalyptic, highly symbolic sections of Revelation), modern pluralistic scholars are increasingly treating straightforward didactic and narrative passages as open to *different*, yet legitimate views. For example, the OPC sanctioned a number of unorthodox views on the creation narrative and placed them on the same level with the Confession's six-day creationism, *even though they disagree with Scripture and each other*. People who question this unbiblical and irrational nonsense are told to have a “hermeneutic of trust.” “This ‘hermeneutic of trust’ is based on the postmodern principle that there are no fixed governing rules for interpreting the Bible and establishing doctrine, just the preferences of various interpretive committees” (Paul M. Elliott, *A Denomination in Denial: An Evaluation of the 2006 Report of the Committee To Study the Doctrine of Justification of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* [Westminster, MD: Teaching the Word, 2006, 11]). Thus we see that the acceptance of pluralism produces a multiplicity of views and multiplicity of views requires a justification. The justifications of error can be based on the bad exegesis of Scripture, but are usually based on pragmatism and *arbitrary* assertions that flow from *human autonomy*. For example, although Christmas has always been regarded as a “holy day” (after all, it takes the name of Christ), Presbyterians who want to violate the second commandment simply, by *human fiat*, declare it to be a *secular day*.

⁹ Ken Gentry, Jr., “In the Space of Six Days: On Breaking the Confession with the Rod of Irons,” *Chalcedon Report* (Vallecito, CA: April 2000), 17.

perhaps is one reason denominations have (generally speaking) not been honest and changed their standards to reflect the reality of what they believe and allow. The biblical view is set forth by the early Reformed Presbyterians: “That the Church’s testimony should be clearly stated, in defense of truth and holiness, and should also be faithfully pointed, not only against all error and immorality, but, in a special manner, against those errors and immoralities which more remarkably prevail where Providence hath ordered her lot” (*An Explanation and Defense*, 12). In other words, a church’s testimony should become more detailed and better over time (this is simply a natural aspect of corporate sanctification); and the church’s testimony must deal with the pressing problems, sins, defections and errors that arise in its own day. What the early faithful Covenanters advocated is the exact opposite of what is being practiced today among loose subscriptionists, who are in reality pluralists. As declensions in doctrine and practice arise, they are rarely refuted and handled with biblical discipline. Instead they are incorporated, justified and defended. This is the exact opposite of corporate sanctification.

Many people have a common idea that loose subscriptionism is somehow more compassionate, loving, brotherly, friendly and conducive to union. But how can this be when pluralism involves the acceptance of sin and doctrinal errors? Does not true love involve keeping the commandments of God and being honest with one another? Does not Christian love reach out to others to rescue them from sin and error? Those who confuse love with pluralism have unwittingly adopted a worldly, humanistic, antinomian concept of love. Such thinking led the mainline Protestant denominations to apostasy and the doctrine of demons.¹⁰

Gary North has an excellent illustration which tells us that loose subscriptionism is both unloving and exceptionally dangerous. He writes,

The age-old debate between a strict interpretation of a standard and a loose interpretation was a big part of the Presbyterian conflict. To understand what was involved, consider a speed limit sign. It says “35” (either miles per hour or kilometers per hour). What if a man drives 36? Will he be ticketed by a policeman? Probably not. The policeman has limited amounts of time to pursue speeders. He has to chase the speeder, ticket him, and perhaps appear in court to defend his actions. In a world of limited resources, a person who speeds by driving 36 in a 35 zone is probably going to get away with it; the safety of the public is dependent on stopping activities of those other, life-threatening speeders. Only if the community is willing to hire many, many policemen and judges can it afford to ticket speeders who drive 36.

Now consider someone who drives 55 in a “25” speed zone for young school-age children. Will a policeman pursue him? Without question. That speeder is putting children at risk. That speeder is a serious lawbreaker. To refuse to pursue him, a policeman would be abandoning the very essence of law-enforcement. His own job would probably be at risk for malfeasance. A city that will not bring employment sanctions against a traffic policeman who steadfastly refuses to pursue such speeders is saying, in effect: “Our posted signs mean nothing. Drive as fast as you want, day or night.” In other words, “Young children had better look out for themselves; we will not do it for them.”

Strict subscription, like speed limits, is designed to protect the vulnerable person who is under the protection of the law. As surely as a seven-year-old child walking to school is protected by a speed limit sign *and a court system prepared to enforce it*, so is a resident in a country protected by the strict interpretation of a written civil Constitution *and a court system prepared to enforce it* and so is a Church member protected by strict subscription to a confession of faith *and a court system prepared to*

¹⁰ Thomas M’Crie writes, “[L]et us not be unjust in seeking to be liberal. Genuine moderation and candor are not to be confounded with indifference and lukewarmness. Religion is of paramount importance, and we ought not to wonder that those who are in earnest about it should display a warm and fervent zeal in the cause. They do not feel themselves at liberty to make the same sacrifices to peace in the ‘matters of the LORD,’ which they may be warranted and willing to make in their own. They must ‘buy the truth, but not sell it’ (Prov. 23:23). True religion is an entailed inheritance, which they are bound to preserve and transmit unalienated and unimpaired to their posterity...” (*The Unity of the Church* [Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage, (1821) 1989], 47-48).

enforce it.

Two conclusions follow: (1) law without sanctions protects no one; (2) law interpreted by loose construction protects no one predictably. This is as true in ecclesiastical matters as it is in highway safety matters.

The child is under the protection of the law, the posted limit, the police, and the court, even though he did not publicly swear an oath of allegiance to obey the law. The speed limit sign is for his protection: the person at greatest risk from speeders. When he becomes a driver, he will be expected to obey the law.

In the Bible, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger are identified as the most vulnerable people in the community. The civil law is supposed to protect them. The minor or resident alien today is protected by the national Constitution, even though he did not publicly swear an oath of allegiance to it, as the person most at risk of government tyranny.

The visitor or the non-voting Church member is protected by the confession of faith, even though he did not publicly swear allegiance to it. It protects his soul from wolves in sheep's clothing: false shepherds. He will be expected to take public oath to uphold the confession if he ever becomes a church officer.¹¹

Full or honest subscriptionism helps people in two important ways. First, it serves as an identifiable sign that tells people what a particular church or denomination is all about. This is very necessary in an age of hundreds of denominations, heresies and errors. A body with full subscriptionism guarantees uniformity of orthodoxy and practice. Some pastors may be better preachers or scholars than others and some may be more pious and better at counseling. But all are safe and sound. One can visit a church in that communion in any part of the country and hear orthodox teaching and participate in biblical worship. Second, it serves as a wall of protection. It keeps heterodox or unsafe teachers, pastors and elders out of the church. With loose subscriptionism, the set boundaries of orthodoxy become porous, weak and undependable; unorthodox ideas can creep in. Such strange ideas are usually not confronted until someone complains or brings the preacher up on charges. Then, the presbytery has to decide if the teaching is bad or offensive enough to warrant some kind of sanctions. Historically, such decisions are often pragmatic and emotionally based. Objective exegetical ecclesiastical interpretations are in many cases replaced by subjective opinions that contradict the Word of God and the Standards.

(3) Loose subscriptionism destroys genuine unity by allowing many competing schools of thought on *settled* confessional matters. Outwardly, there is an institutional surface unity while, inwardly, there are competing factions within the church. As a result, one often hears the diverse descriptions of the various groups. There are the TRs (truly reformed, i.e. those who actually believe in the Standards); the sacramentalists (i.e. those who hold to the Federal Vision heresy, or those who believe in paedocommunion); those who believe in celebrative worship (i.e. charismatic style worship); those who hold a semi-dispensational view of the law and those who accept theonomy; those who favor high church liturgical worship; those who are six-day creationists and those who reinterpret Genesis in light of modern human science; etc. Loose subscriptionism leads to so many competing schools of thought (in areas already settled and agreed upon in a covenanted uniformity) that denominations must agree to allow all sorts of different or competing views, otherwise they will fall apart. Given this tragic situation, one could say that modern Presbyterianism (except for a few tiny Presbyterian bodies) is more congregational, or independent, than truly presbyterian.

Pluralism is very dangerous because, if it is going to work, those who are the most faithful (i.e. those who are called truly reformed or who are strict or full subscriptionist) must essentially agree not to attempt a thorough reform of the church. If the full subscriptionist really attempted reform consistent

¹¹ Gary North, *Crossed Fingers: How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1996), 10-11.

with the Standards and the covenanted uniformity of the Second Reformation in Scotland, he would constantly be bringing charges against those who were violating those Standards. This would not be tolerated and would be shut down rather quickly. It would violate a central tenet of pluralism and tolerationism which is: “don't rock the boat.” Thus, the conservatives learn to shut their mouths as they work to keep their individual church unstained from the declension around it. A full subscriptionist, at best, may make some efforts around the edges through publishing or conferences. But, in such cases, he is generally preaching to like-minded souls. When analyzing such a depressing situation, one must consider the fact that battles over needed reforms have, for the most part, already been fought and lost (e.g., the true regulative principle vs. the informed principle; exclusive psalmody vs. uninspired hymns; a cappella singing vs. the use of instruments; the Christian Sabbath only vs. the liturgical calendar and man-made holy days; ordained women deacons vs. only male deacons [Acts 6:3]; literal six-day creation vs. all sorts of the humanistic substitutes; etc.).

In addition, the communions that have adopted loose subscriptionism are guilty of covenant breaking; that is, forsaking the covenanted reformation of their spiritual forefathers. Unity must only be sought in the truth and our covenanted reformation united all Presbyterians around the truth. The modern Presbyterian paradigm of loose subscriptionism and unity and ecumenicalism built upon compromise in doctrine and worship essentially rules out covenanting and genuine reformation. It places such denominations in a position in which they basically have only one direction to go and that is downward towards apostasy (this has been the case thus far historically). As various communions accept and integrate new human traditions and deviations in doctrine, worship and government into their bodies, these corruptions are accepted constitutionally and declared to be non-negotiable, settled matters of the church. In other words, declension and corruptions in doctrine, worship and government are set in stone constitutionally and thus are, practically speaking, off-limits. Consequently, those who seek repentance and reformation can then be brought up on charges for “disturbing the peace of the church” or “contumacy.” The Bible describes this process as backsliding and syncretism.

The True Definition of Schism

For these reasons and more, the faithful Covenanters or early Reformed Presbyterians defined schism *not* as an *ecclesiastical separation* from those who broke the Covenants, departed from the Standards, refused to repent and enshrined their unfaithfulness and spiritual treachery in their constitution, but rather as *remaining* in such corrupt and unlawfully constituted bodies. Because the original Presbyterians defined the basis of union as adherence to detailed biblical creeds and confessions and even strengthened this union on a number of occasions with social covenants, those who departed from the Standards and thus rejected the covenants were regarded as schismatic. As John Anderson notes, “However much of our holy religion any body of Christians hold in common with others, and however many of them we may judge to be saints, yet while their distinguishing profession is contrary to the Word of God, communion with them, as a body so distinguished, is sectarian communion; as it implies a union with them in that which ought to be rejected by the whole Catholic Church.”¹²

This point is very important because people in larger corrupt Presbyterian bodies point the finger at the small groups of true Covenanters who reject doctrinal pluralism and tolerationism and accuse them of being schismatics. But this finger-pointing is really hypocritical since no Presbyterian body in America can claim to be an original church (e.g., the OPC is a *split* from the PCUSA; the PCA is a *split* from the PCUS which was a *split* from the PCUSA *over slavery*; the RPCNA originated from

¹² John Anderson, *Alexander and Rufus; or A Series of Dialogues on Church Communion*. (Pittsburgh: Singerly & Myers, [1820]), 11.

societies of people who rejected the Revolution Settlement Church of Scotland). The Covenanters have claimed to be the original Presbyterian Church but this claim has always rested on the definition of unity and what really constitutes schism as defined in the paragraphs above. No one (except perhaps the Church of Scotland) has a direct *institutional* link back to John Knox. There are probably Presbyterian church buildings in Scotland that have been in use by people called Presbyterians that go back all the way to the early 1600s. But the people who occupy them are liberals and not Christians, and thus are no more Presbyterian than the Baal worshiper who bowed to idols in the Temple at Jerusalem could claim to be true or faithful Jews.

But we are told, have you not read *Concerning Scandal* by James Durham? Does not Durham teach us that it is almost always unlawful to separate from a true church? This is a good question, but it is my contention that Durham is frequently misunderstood and abused. His book has been used to justify remaining in the PCUSA as well as the PCA and OPC. Are we to understand or interpret Durham as teaching that we are required to remain in a denomination that allows all sorts of exceptions to the Standards, that in its very constitutional documents advocates corrupt worship, false doctrine and the repudiation of our covenanted reformation? Durham is not at all advocating that kind of union.

We must keep in mind a few things about Durham's work if we are to avoid importing our own presuppositions regarding union into it. First, Durham was writing not long after a strong disagreement in the kirk which resulted in two parties in the Church of Scotland—the “Resolutioners” and the “Protesters.” The Resolutioners were those churchmen who favored the resolutions passed in the General Assembly (July 1651) which allowed corrupt (malignant) persons to serve and fight in the Scottish army with the hope of defeating Cromwell. It was a ruling based on pragmatism, not Scripture and history has proved that the Protesters were right and the pragmatic Resolutioners were wrong. Even though the Resolutioners were clearly wrong, this was not a case of churchmen habitually and constitutionally abandoning biblical worship, or the Christian Sabbath, or the creation narrative or the explicit teachings of the Westminster Standards.

Second, the style of Durham's work lends itself easily toward misunderstandings. There is a lot of excellent advice without a lot of detailed exegesis or concrete examples to clarify his points. While I am not denying that it is a Reformed classic that is highly useful, one simply needs to be aware that it is not hard to read one's loose, unscriptural ideas of unity into it.

Third, if one carefully studies Durham, one will see that he does not hold to the modern loose subscriptionist ideas of union at all. This will be seen in the following points.

(1) Durham taught that union cannot be maintained if it *directly* involves a Christian in sin or involves approving sin in others: “In what may involve a man in sin, or in the approbation thereof in others, there is no condescending [i.e. there can be no compromise], but what length may warrantably be gone, even to the utmost of duty, men ought to go for this end; so that nothing ought to be a step or march in condescension, but this, I cannot do this and sin against God; otherwise, one ought to be all things to others.”¹³

Durham recognized that churches are made up of sinners and that certain concepts of separation were unscriptural. For example, if a church has corruptions or there are people and even elders involved in sin and false teachings one must *not* leave, for “it is union and not division that is to be looked upon as the commanded means for the redressing of the same.”¹⁴ The Scriptural examples usually given for this argument are the disorders we find in Corinth regarding the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:18ff) and the lack of discipline we find regarding incest in the same church (1 Cor. 5:1ff). But Durham's point is not that the church must tolerate immorality or make exceptions for serious errors, but rather that union must be maintained and used to address such problems. He is rebuking those

¹³ James Durham, “The Scandal of Division among the Godly” in *The Reformation of the Church* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965), 365.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 362.

people who simply walk away from a church because of someone's defect or sin and do not use biblical procedures and church courts to address the situation. Christians are required to stay and follow all the biblical procedures for dealing with sin and error. People who fall into sin are given opportunities to repent and this takes time. Church courts must be respected.

People take Durham's argument and wrongfully conclude that immorality, corrupt worship and false doctrines must *permanently* be tolerated; that churches which have approved serious departures in doctrine, worship and ethics in their constitutions or binding books of church order cannot ever be left behind. But this is not what Durham is teaching at all. Neither is it supported by Paul or the Protestant Reformation. What if Paul wrote Corinth and ordered them to repent and they refused to repent and told Paul to mind his own business? What if they wrote a church constitution that allowed incest or drunkenness at the holy supper? Is Durham saying that it would be wrong to separate from a church that refuses to repent and even puts its gross errors and covenant breaking into their constitutions? No, of course not! Durham says that union *cannot* be maintained if it directly involves us in sin or if by staying we are approving of sin.

This point will be made easier to understand if we take it and apply it on a personal level. If a brother in Christ is guilty of some sin or unbiblical behavior that is so serious it cannot simply be overlooked in love, are we permitted to break off fellowship from such a person and shun him as a wicked apostate? No, not at all. He is to be treated with love and compassion and every biblical opportunity of retrieving him from his sin must be used. This involves all the steps of Matthew 18 and many prayers offered up on his behalf. If the person repents, he must be loved and accepted. He is not to be hated, mistreated or rejected in any way. He is to be given the benefit of the doubt unless he clearly proves his repentance is not genuine. But what if this person does not repent? What happens if all the steps of Matthew 18 are followed and he tells the session to go to hell? Then and only then, is communion and fellowship to be broken off. Similarly, when a church refuses to acknowledge serious errors in doctrine and worship and *obstinately refuses to repent*, it ceases to be a true church as to *well-being*, even though it is still a church as to being. In many of the early Protestant symbols, one of the marks of the true church is biblical church discipline. Therefore, if a church habitually and continuously allows Christmas, Sabbath-breaking, pictures of Christ, perversions of Genesis, incest (e.g., The RPCNA 1980 Testimony page 67), unlawful divorce and so on, it is corrupt as to well-being and separation is lawful. If one thinks that Durham would accept such things, he does not know Durham.

(2) The deathblow to the modern abuse of Durham is the simple fact that Durham was speaking about differences not already resolved by the Westminster Standards. In other words, if men disagree about a doctrine or practice already settled by the Westminster Standards, the person who disagrees with the rule of doctrine or practice *already laid down or resolved* by the Standards or orthodox councils must submit himself to that rule or the general councils. He writes,

...oftentimes in such debates as are amongst orthodox divines and ministers, it seemeth they might be removed if one party should condescend according to the qualifications and cautions formerly laid down; yea, it seemeth it were safer for the Church's good in such a case that either party should practically condescend to the way of the other, then that division should be kept up upon such grounds. For, 1. It is not supposed here that there is any matter of faith in question, amongst such, often there was full harmony in the Confession of Faith,... 2. There is no question for government simply, nor for Councils and canons, there also were acknowledged; none did disclaim the general Councils, nor their acts.¹⁵

¹⁵ Ibid, 368.

In the modern understanding of avoiding schism, the full subscriptionist and covenant keeper is told he must avoid separation by tolerating all sorts of deviations from the Westminster Standards. This belief, as we have noted, leads to loose subscriptionism and tolerationism on many important doctrines and practices. This view leads men to excuse errors in doctrine and worship and treat them as trifles. It leads to the rather modern and exceptionally dangerous idea that there are *acceptable sins* and *errors* in doctrine. All sorts of clever pragmatic arguments are made to justify the declension of these modern churches. But Durham argues that, while men must forbear with each other on minor points *not already settled*, over which there may be no way to exegetically resolve an issue or issues, churches should allow a certain measure of liberty due to a perceived lack of clarity in Scripture. But, on all other matters, men must subject themselves to their adopted creeds and confessions. This makes perfect sense given the fact that the Presbyterian churchmen of the Second Reformation period required *full subscription* to the Standards to be a church officer and required the adoption of the covenants. The vast majority of men in what are regarded as conservative Presbyterian bodies today would never have been ordained by the Second Reformation Church of which Durham was a part (he was licensed to preach in 1646 and died in 1658 at the age of 36). It is totally disingenuous to pretend Durham was like the pragmatists of today. In Durham's time, ministers who celebrated Christmas were defrocked and arrested by the civil magistrate. Men who rejected the regulative principle or the early chapters of Genesis or real wine in communion or the Christian Sabbath had to repent or they would have been removed.

All of this leads us to the conclusion that the early, faithful Covenanters were totally correct when they defined the schismatics as those who rejected the attainments of their spiritual forefathers in order to pursue a path of decline. They taught that it was immoral to move from a faithful, detailed standard of faith to a less faithful, less detailed standard. They understood that, if we establish communion with a corrupt declining version of Christianity, we do them much harm and no good, for we are hardening and confirming them in their infidelity and backsliding ways. Those who reject sections of the Standards for humanism, pragmatism, modern so-called science and episcopal concepts of worship are the true schismatics. As Andrew Clarkson said in 1731,

Great Noise this Church has made, and still does, about that little great Word SCHISM. But, as the Proverb runs, they give both the great Blow, and the loud Cry; they blame others For Their Own Fault: Presbyterian Dissenters are not, nor can be guilty of Schism, in peaceably separating from this Revolution Church; but that this Church, in separating from the Principles, Acts and Constitutions of the true reformed genuine Covenanted Church of Christ in Scotland (to which the foresaid Dissenters adhere and contend for) is guilty of SCHISM... The Scripture pressing Unity, till they make it appear, that the Unity they plead for is duly qualified according to those Scriptures, to wit, in the Lord, and in the Way of Truth and Duty; for all those Scriptures speak directly against this present Church, that has broken, and continues to violate our Covenants, the Conditions and Bonds of Unity.¹⁶

The Biblical Evidence

The view on church unity espoused by Protestant churches and faithful Presbyterians is thoroughly rooted in biblical teaching. As Clowney notes,

The New Testament grounds the church in God's revealed truth. The apostles established the church by preaching the Scriptures and their fulfillment. The fellowship of the church in the book of Acts exists among those who continue in the apostolic teaching (Acts 2:42). The growth of the church is described by Luke as the growth of the Word (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). The ministries by which the church is

¹⁶ *Plain Reasons for Presbyterians Dissenting from the Revolution Church in Scotland*, 176.

built up are ministries of the Word (Eph. 4:11). The apostolicity of the church, therefore, means that the church is built on the foundation of the apostolic gospel. All other attributes of the church derive from this.¹⁷

The Apostle Paul was obsessed with Christians and churches faithfully holding to the full system of truth revealed to them. A faithful church as to well-being is a church in uniformity with this system of truth. “I found it necessary to write to you, exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). We remain established in the faith when we believe, profess, propagate and contend for the true Christian religion without adding or detracting from it. In 2 Cor. 13:11, Paul gave us a central pillar of unity: “Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace.” Philip E. Hughes writes,

To “be of the same mind” does not mean that individual judgment and opinion should be set aside, but that as fellow Christians, with all their diversities of ability and temperament, they should be united in what is essential, namely, in the love and doctrine of Christ. It is Christian unity, not artificial uniformity or submission to the “mind” of an authoritarian official-dom, which binds together; and it is unity in depth arising from agreement in the *mind*, which in turn implies agreement in the *truth*. As Rom. 15:5 shows, this sameness of mind one with another is something which, human nature being what it is (even in the redeemed community where the “old man” ever lurks), Christians should look to God to grant, and which is qualified as being “according to Christ Jesus.” That qualification, indeed, demarcates the only genuine basis for Christian unanimity.

Closely associated with the foregoing is the exhortation to “live in peace.” Living in peace is, in fact, an outward consequence of the inward state of being of the same mind. The factions, envies, litigations, and disorders in public worship by which, as the earlier epistle testifies, the Corinthian church had been disfigured, and the disruptions induced by the intruding false apostle, were outward symptoms of inward disunity. Yet it is Christ’s followers who, above all other people, should be both inwardly and visibly at one with each in love and fellowship. The Christian’s warfare is with the enemy of souls and the powers of darkness, not with his fellow-believers.¹⁸

In Romans 16, in the midst of salutations, Paul had a thought about a danger to the church and thus suddenly gave the strong admonition: “Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them” (v.17). The doctrine which the churches in Rome had learned was the unified doctrine of the holy apostles. Paul’s command is not limited to the gospel; he is discussing a *system of doctrine*. The false teachers who were causing dissensions (*dichostasias*; The Greek word which early “to cut into two parts”) and offenses (*skandolon*; The Greek word originally referred to the part of an animal trap to which the bait was attached. Here it refers to an offense [i.e. an occasion to sin or a breach of conduct]) to be marked out or noted carefully in order to avoid or stay away from them. Paul is not telling Christians to avoid those who insist upon adhering to orthodox teaching and practice, though this is how the passage is used today. People now are warned to stay away from those who insist on full subscription to the Standards and the upholding of our covenants. The apostle is thus twisted into a modern doctrinal pluralist who wants to punish those who do not tolerate serious errors in doctrine and practice. Those who use the passage in this way turn the apostle’s warning upside down. Paul is telling them to avoid negative, unbiblical influences. We must keep an eye out for those who contradict the teaching of the apostles. Paul takes it for granted that there is a doctrinal and ethical standard that all Christians must follow and not contradict. It is preserved for us in the Word of God and is summarized and systematized in our subordinate standards.

¹⁷ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995), 102

¹⁸ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 487.

These errorists tear professing Christians out of the unity of the church by pulling them away from doctrinal orthodoxy. Their heretical and heterodox teachings act as alluring traps into which ignorant and deluded souls are caught.

Why is Paul's teaching so important? Because false doctrine and false practices act like a gangrene in the body of Christ. Tolerating error in the name of love, unity or compassion is like tolerating a dangerous infection or a form of cancer. To allow doctrinal errors and corruptions in worship is to place the whole body in danger. For this reason, when churchmen become so corrupt and compromised that they allow all sorts of serious errors in doctrine and practice and even begin mistreating full subscriptionists for being intolerant and unloving, one is called to separate to maintain fidelity to Christ and true unity as defined by Scripture. This is the most effectual way to promote real union because the motive is not pragmatism, self-interest, pride, or humanistic concepts of church growth but obedience to the will of God. Ironically, genuine union, Paul tells us, can only be promoted by separation, biblically defined.

When the apostle speaks of avoiding such teachers we must keep in mind, he is not teaching that individual Christians have the right to excommunicate teachers that are already ordained ministers in the church. He addresses this problem in Titus 3:10-11: "A man that is a heretic after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self condemned." The word "heretic" (Greek, *hairitikos*) in the apostolic era referred to one who caused division or a schism by advocating false doctrines or practices. The church courts should attempt to turn a person who adheres to scandalous false doctrine back to the truth on two separate occasions. "He does not mean any 'admonition' whatever, or that of a private individual, but an 'admonition' given by a minister, with the public authority of the church; for the meaning of the Apostle's words is as if he had said, that heretics must be reviewed with solemn and severe censure."¹⁹ If that person does not repent, he is to be cast out of the visible church by excommunication. The imperative *paraitou* "is used here in the sense of 'reject' or 'dismiss,' i.e. remove from the fellowship of the Christian community" (cf. 1 Cor. 5:11-13; 2 Thess. 3:14; Mt. 18:17-18).²⁰

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 342.

²⁰ George Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 355. "And this the word *paraitou* notes, or it properly signifies to be drawn out of the city as an outcast, or (applied to the church) cast a man out by excommunication, or to cut him off from the society of the church" (Thomas Taylor, *Exposition of Titus* [Minneapolis: Klock & Klock (1619) [1980], 531).

When a Christian is guilty of scandalous false teaching, Paul, speaking by divine inspiration, tells us plainly that words, arguments, statements and positive teachings are not enough when heretics are obstinate. Church discipline must be lovingly and firmly applied, otherwise the debates and theological battles will never come to an end (Gal. 5:15). After two solemn and sober warnings, heretics are to be cast out of the church. The shock of being deposed from church office may be used of God to turn them from their foolishness back to the genuine gospel or true doctrine which they were guilty of twisting. Further, the welfare of the church is protected. Church discipline is an act of love toward the one excommunicated (as Paul says, "that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" [1 Cor. 5:5]). We must obey Scripture which says in 1 Timothy 1:3, "As I besought thee... That thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine." If necessary, whole presbyteries may be censured by the general assembly or synod, vindicating those church officers who have dissented and complained in the Presbytery. If the synod or general assembly is guilty of scandalous errors in doctrine or practice or, as a set policy, refuses to discipline heretics, corruptions of worship and the sacraments, or rejects lawful covenant engagements, Christians are free to seek out a faithful body of believers. This is what the dissenters or faithful Covenanters did in 1690 when the whole revolution settlement church abandoned their covenant obligations. This separation was only done after two papers were presented to the assembly by the faithful Presbyterians' covenant representatives and these papers were rejected by the assembly. The faithful remnant of Covenanters could not join hands with a clear conscience or live in silent compliance with unrepentant covenant breakers. The Church of Scotland in 1690 became schismatic by openly and obstinately rejecting crucial doctrines and duties. Thus, for the sake of true biblical unity, the Covenanters separated themselves and testified against their serious defections from the truth. Did this mean that the faithful Covenanters regarded the Church of Scotland as no church at all? No. It simply means that they regarded that body as so corrupt as to well-being that separation was biblically necessary.

All of this agrees with Paul's instructions to Titus as to what must be done with false teachers. "Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and receivers, especially they of the circumcision: *Whose mouths must be stopped*, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake" (Tit. 1:9-11; cf. 12-16; 3:10-11). When the apostle says that their mouths must be stopped he uses a verb (*epistomizein*) which has the primary meaning of to "stop the mouth either with bridle or muzzle or gag."²¹ For Paul, it is not enough for Titus to write a position paper on why the false teachers are wrong. They must be silenced. They are no longer to be permitted to teach and if they persist, they are to be disciplined and even excommunicated if necessary. "When men are thus confuted by argument, overthrown with the sword of the Spirit, and overwhelmed by the power of the truth and still proceed to trouble the peace of the church and the faith of the saints, then the church may and must proceed by censure and admonition to enjoin them to silence; which if they will not hear, they ought by the church to be driven from the society of the faithful. If they prove gangrenous, they must be cut off."²²

Calvin's comments on this passage applies beautifully to the situation many Presbyterians find themselves in today. He writes,

A good pastor ought therefore to be on the watch, so as not to give silent permission to wicked and dangerous doctrines to make gradual progress, or to allow wicked men an opportunity of spreading them. But it may be asked, "How is it possible for a bishop to constrain obstinate and self-willed men to be silent? For such persons, even though they are vanquished in arguments, still do not hold their peace; and it frequently happens that, the more manifestly they are refuted and vanquished, they become the more insolent; for not only is their malice strengthened and inflamed, but they give themselves up to indolence." I replied, when they have been smitten down by the sword of God's word, and overwhelmed by the force of the truth, the Church may command them to be silent; and if they persevere, they may at least be banished from the society of believers, so that they shall have no opportunity of doing harm.²³

The apostle has the same instructions for young Timothy, as well as the Thessalonian believers. "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmising, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: *from such withdraw thyself*" (1 Tim. 6:3-5). "Paul forbids the servants of Christ to have any intercourse with such persons. He not only warns Timothy not to resemble them, but exhorts him to avoid them as dangerous plagues."²⁴ "Good ministers and Christians will withdraw themselves from such."²⁵ "[W]ith such men have nothing to do, avoid them in thy private converse, and cast them out of the church if their faults be public scandals, and they be contumacious." "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness" (2 Tim. 2:15-16; see 3:5, 13; 4:2-4). "Now we command you, brethren in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye would draw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received from us... And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15).

²¹ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker [1931] n.d.), 4:600.

²² Thomas Taylor, *Exposition of Titus* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock [1619] 1980), 174 – 175.

²³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 298.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, 156.

²⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6:828.

“Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:13).

It is these kinds of passages which caused the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1807 to condemn and testify against the error, “That it is lawful, in order to enlarge the church, to open a wider door of communion, by declining from a more pointed testimony, to one which is more loose and general.”²⁶ It also explains their biblical attitude toward the Westminster Standards as a term of communion:

The second Article of our Terms of Communion requires an owning of the doctrines contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. On this, also, we shall endeavor to give unto those who ask us a reason of the hope that is in us, with meekness and fear.

It is only after mature deliberation, carefully comparing them with the Word of God, and receiving full conviction in our own minds of their being wholly founded upon it, that we consider the Confession and Catechisms, or any other human composure whatever, as properly entitled to our belief, and deserving to be ranked amongst the subordinate standards of our church. But, after being convinced of their agreeableness to the infallible rule, we cheerfully receive them.

It is not with the remotest intention of supplying a defect in the Oracles of truth, which we ever consider as a complete rule in themselves; nor is it at all in the view of putting either the Confession, or any other book in the world, on a level with the Bible, that we adopt these explanatory standards; but purely to ascertain the true meaning of Scripture, help us to understand one another in our church-fellowship, and, through these mediums, to transmit a faithful testimony for truth, from generation to generation. Abundantly satisfied that they are remarkably useful for such purposes, we bless the Lord that ever we have had opportunity to adopt them.²⁷

The abandonment of an honest and open or *full* commitment to the Westminster Standards for loose subscriptionism is simply a fruit of the erosion of creedal commitment that resulted from the intrusion of Enlightenment thinking. Men, according to this view, cannot be expected to hold to such detailed standards, for that would violate individual liberty of conscience (humanistically defined). The liberal or “modernistic” churchmen held to the new (autonomous) way of thinking most consistently and thus everything in the Standards was questioned and allowed to be rejected (e.g., the inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures, the miracles, the virgin birth, the atonement or sacrificial death of Christ, the resurrection, the doctrine of hell, etc.). While the mainline churches, for the most part, left their creeds unamended, these theological landmarks were a dead letter and everyone knew it.

The conservative churchmen were shocked at the consequences of subjecting the Bible to autonomous human reason and the resulting rank unbelief and paganism masquerading as Christianity. But, instead of repenting of loose subscriptionism, they boiled the Christian faith down to a few fundamentals. The idea of creeds and confessions as landmarks detailing the church’s doctrinal sanctification in history that must be protected and used as terms of communion was not even considered because it had been abandoned so long ago; it was essentially a forgotten teaching. Instead, those who rejected modernism clung to the idea that orthodoxy should be defined as what is *minimally required* to be an evangelical Christian (e.g., the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the divinity of Christ, the atonement, the resurrection, the second coming, the Trinity, etc.). The Westminster Confession became something in conservative circles that only ministers were required to affirm, but this affirmation was only general or equivocal. It was not required for communicant members at all. They were interviewed by the session to determine if they held to enough of the few fundamentals to be deemed a true Christian.

²⁶ *Reformed Principles Exhibited: Part II. Being the Declaration and Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America*, (New York: Hopkins and Symour, 1807), 120.

²⁷ *An Explanation and Defense*, 24-25.

The original Covenanters or faithful Presbyterians held to full subscription, not only for church officers, but also for all *communicant* members. They understood that what is *minimally* required to be saved and what is required for communion or the well-being of the church *are not the same things*. This was the standard position of the church from the Council of Nicaea onward. Church covenants must extend to the communicant members because true unity and genuine fellowship cannot exist without judicial sanctions. Unity involves doctrinal uniformity of a comprehensive system of faith and this requires a public affirmation of a particular creed. Modern Presbyterians (with only a few exceptions) do not require a formal oath to a creed for communicant membership. The local sessions ask some questions at their own discretion. The prior testimony of Presbyterianism is not required at all. Some sessions are stricter than others, requiring a person at least to be a Calvinist. Local sessions have great liberty in forming their own standard of orthodoxy. Some admit Arminians; others admit Baptists; most admit those who do not accept the kingship of Christ or a biblical view of the civil magistrate. The prior lawful Presbyterian covenants are not required today for members or ministers even in the RPCNA. (The RPCNA has abandoned the old Presbyterian view of testimony bearing and covenanting. Covenanting is still part of their doctrinal standards but since it is *not required* of church officers, seminary professors, college teachers or church members, this adherence is only theoretical and romantic, not actual. The RPCNA has abandoned adherence to the Westminster Standards as a term of communion for the minimalist-fundamentalist view of the OPC and the PCA.) All of this tells us that modern Presbyterians, judicially and covenantally speaking, are congregational-independent and not truly Presbyterian or Covenanter. The higher courts of the church only step in when a local session's standards of communicant membership are regarded by some as too lax or are deemed too strict. Judicial sanctions are essentially local and are very flexible. If a higher court is required to step in due to a complaint, the Westminster Standards are not the standard for determining the outcome but whatever the presbyters happen to think at a given time, which is often arbitrary and pragmatic. Modern Presbyterianism is not only essentially congregational-independent, but also in reality *functionally* creedless. The lowest common denominator is the highest enforceable standard and even this is often applied by Presbyterian churchmen in an arbitrary, inconsistent manner. An essentially creedless membership and lowest common denominator, pluralistic Presbyterianism leads to rule by *unwritten* ecclesiastical traditions and *unpredictable* church bureaucrats. The reason that conservatives do so poorly in such corrupt circumstances is that they are functioning under a completely different paradigm. Without oath-bound negative sanctions tied to detailed creeds and covenants, judicial authority passes to pluralistic pragmatists. Thus, modern Presbyterianism contains the leaven of both congregationalism and prelacy. Without an oath-bound adherence to detailed creeds and real negative sanctions that uphold the confession, church sanctions become unpredictable. They are driven by things other than the standards.

This is how and why pluralism reigns in doctrine and practice. It explains how declension has come to dominate Presbyterian communions. If uninspired hymnody becomes popular among the people, they are not held to a lawful oath to uphold the Standards that explicitly reject such an unbiblical innovation. Instead, a Presbytery or Synod will rule that it is up to the local session to determine whether to use the commanded inspired Psalms or non-authorized uninspired hymns. Why is this done? Because the Standards are *not* the basis of union. Churchmen do not want to lose the people who vote and pay their salaries and thus come to a pragmatic compromise to attempt to satisfy people on both sides of an issue. It is an unbiblical cop out that places institutional unity and growth above the church's testimony or corporate sanctification in history. Without oath-bound negative sanctions over the laity, churchmen have been unable and unwilling to stop *popular* practices among the laity that are unbiblical and unconfessional (e.g., uninspired hymns, musical instruments in worship, the celebration of Christmas and Easter, feminism [this humanistic error has led to women voting in church elections, serving on church committees, women deacons, women speaking at presbytery and synod meetings,

women teaching men in Sabbath school and seminaries, women's presbyterials, the abandonment of head coverings in public worship, etc.] and so on). What becomes popular (that is, outside of what is deemed one of the fundamentals) is first tolerated, then adopted and finally defended as orthodoxy or orthopraxy. Consequently, those who fully hold to the Standards come to be held in the derision because they will not comply with the doctrinal relativism. They are viewed as unreasonable nitpickers who are unloving and uncooperative. Church bureaucrats do what they can to keep them out of positions of influence.

Without a detailed doctrinal Standard above *both* church officers and communicant church members, voting members in Presbyterian churches (who themselves are a mixed bag doctrinally because they were largely admitted into the church based only on a few fundamentals) control access to the pulpit and also the church's funds. Although sessions have a veto power over the decision of church members, the pressure to please the congregation historically has won out over orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The mediocre, compromised confession and corrupt views on worship of the laity have eventually (over time) come to govern the confession of most church officers. The unconfessional, covenant breaking tail wags the unfaithful dog. Thus we see that rejecting the strict terms of communion and the requirement of faithfulness to our covenant obligations by Presbyterians has been an unmitigated disaster. Modern Presbyterians have set in place an unbiblical system that makes reformation and covenant keeping, from a human standpoint, virtually impossible. The solution to this problem is to return to a full subscription to the Standards by both church officers and communicant members. (Remember, Christ gave a solemn charge to the apostles and Christian ministers "to accompany the administration of the seals with the instruction of the nations in the knowledge of divine truth. And it is observable, that they were not to content themselves with teaching them one, or a few leading truths, which might be called fundamental; but all the difficult articles of his revealed will in general, so far as they had opportunity, and circumstances might require. – 'Teaching them,' says he, 'to observe ALL THINGS whatsoever I have commanded you.'"²⁸) In conjunction with this must be an acknowledgment of sins and a return to our covenant obligations. If people think that the Standards are in error in any place, they should amend them. This would be the honest, Christian thing to do instead of swearing to the Standards with crossed fingers or allowing many multiple contradicting views in the same ecclesiastical body.

Some Brief Arguments for Truth or Full Subscription to a Creed as a Basis for Union

By way of summary and review, let us examine some reasons why a strict adoption of creeds or confessions is necessary for true unity and corporate purity.

(1) Given our sinful human natures, a full adoption of a Standard is necessary to identify and maintain a particular church's basis of the union. Every person whether he is aware of it or not holds to a particular system of doctrine and has certain views about church polity and worship. A detailed confession is a banner of the union as to doctrine and practice. As Miller notes,

The Church is a *society*: a society which, however extended, is "one body in Christ," and all who compose it, "members of one another" [Rom. 12:5]. Nor is this society merely required to be one in name, or to recognize a mere theoretical union; but also carefully to maintain "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" [Eph. 4:3]. They are exhorted to "stand fast in one spirit, with one mind" [Phil. 1:27]. They are commanded all to "speak the same thing" [1 Cor. 1:10], and to be "of one accord, of one mind" [Phil. 2:2]. And this "unity of spirit" is as essential to the comfort and edification of those who are joined together in church fellowship, as it is to a compliance with the command of their

²⁸ Ibid, 17.

Master. “How can two walk together and lest they be agreed” [Amos 3:3]?²⁹

If each individual session or Presbytery can allow for exceptions to the church’s standards, the church over time will lose its homogenous character and become a fragmented body with only outward institutional unity. Such a church will not effectively or consistently be able to guard against corruptions because some degrees of corruption are allowed at the outset, which over time become widely accepted by members of the body. It is kind of like installing a screen door with many holes in the screen with the idea that a certain amount of insects are tolerable in one’s house. Over time, new holes are added and the house becomes even more infested with bugs. Church history has demonstrated quite clearly that tolerating corruptions has led to more declension and corruptions over time. Therefore, a written, detailed, objective test of truth is necessary as a bond of union that can be appealed to in order to keep out the bad (i.e. those who are unorthodox or heterodox in doctrine and/or practice), identify the good, and serve as a standard for cases of discipline. “[A] church, in order to maintain the ‘unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace and love,’ must have a creed—a written creed—to which she has formally given her assent, and to a conformity to which her ministers are pledged. As long as such a test is faithfully applied, she cannot fail of being in some degree united and harmonious.”³⁰

(2) A strict or full adoption of creeds is necessary for the church of Christ to maintain her testimony or witness to the Christian faith internally and before the world. The church has a great responsibility as an organic body to maintain the corporate attainments over time. She must be a faithful guardian, witness and depository for the truth throughout history. This responsibility becomes virtually impossible if the church clings only to a few fundamentals and leaves many attainments in worship, ethics and doctrine open to equivocation, disagreement and contradictions. Instead of “contending earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), “with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27) and “holding fast to the form of sound words” which we have received (2 Tim. 1:13), the church’s doctrine and practice is allowed to be in flux. A creed full of exceptions, held with diametrically opposed interpretations and sworn to with crossed fingers is not a sure or reliable testimony to the truth. This point is supported by Christian history and simple logic.

(3) A strict or full subscription to a creed is necessary for honesty. In 1645 one could read the Westminster Standards and attend any Presbyterian church with the full expectation of uniformity of doctrine, government and worship. Today there are conservative (i.e. conservative by today’s fundamentalist standard) Presbyterian churches that have episcopal worship, charismatic-Arminian worship or church growth type entertaining worship. There are sacramentalists, Federal Vision heretics, non-Sabbatarians, feminists, etc... Even the RPCNA has Christmas and Easter services, pictures of Christ and many feminists. Churches without a clearly defined system of doctrine, government and worship are *sort of Presbyterian* but *not truly Presbyterian* according to the Westminster Standards. If people want to know the real character of most modern Presbyterian churches, they have to attend a church for a period of time to discover what type it is. Thus, a major reason for adhering to a creed has been denied.

This dishonest, loose subscriptionism has led to the acceptance of all sorts of theological fads and evangelical gimmicks ranging from church growth techniques, paedocommunion, Promise Keepers, Billy Graham crusades, high church worship, rock and roll services, Super Bowl parties, etc. Increasingly, Presbyterians have come to reflect our culture instead of direct it. As Kevin Reed notes,

In principle, this lax subscriptionism differs little from theological liberalism. Both are pious frauds, for both are exceedingly dishonest. The difference is merely found in the object of accommodation. Theological liberals accommodate to a humanistic spirit of the age, while “conservative” Presbyterians

²⁹ Samuel Miller, *Doctrinal Integrity*, 6-7.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 11.

accommodate to the broader “evangelical” community. The net effect is the same: the Confession is robbed of any substantial authority in the church. The confessional standards serve simply as a window dressing, a vague link to the past.³¹

(4) A strict or full subscription is also necessary for purity. Loose subscriptionism is built on the presupposition that unity is more important than true doctrine and purity of worship. It teaches churchmen and laity to have an indifference to certain errors and sinful practices. Historically, many errors and unbiblical practices related to the first table of the law have been allowed, while sins related to the second table of the moral law have been treated much more seriously. Pictures of Christ are used, a violation of the second commandment. The regulative principle of worship is openly rejected by ministers in the OPC, PCA and RPCNA, a violation of the second commandment as well. The covenant obligations that apply to Presbyterians are both denied and openly broken, a violation of the third commandment. Sabbath enforcement is virtually nonexistent or, at best, applied very inconsistently, a violation of the fourth commandment. Men are licensed and ordained who have a so-called continental view of the Sabbath. Would these churches ordain a man who was an adulterer or fornicator? No, of course not! But why is corrupting the worship of God permissible? Is not “will worship,” which is a species of idolatry, a serious sin? Why then is it treated like a trifle by pluralists? Is not breaking the lawful *binding* covenant obligations a serious offense against God? Why then is covenant breaking treated as nothing today? These churches would not allow habitual liars to preach, why then allow covenant breakers? Sabbath keeping is crucial for Christian families and churches; it is a pillar of a Christian society. Yet today, it is largely viewed as optional. Pluralism has led to the idea of sins and errors that are acceptable; that can be habitually or permanently tolerated or overlooked; that should not be disciplined.

Such thinking, which is very common today, is totally contrary to the biblical teaching that we are individually and corporately to be witnesses for the truth; that, as a covenant body, we are to bear testimony. To say that as Presbyterians we hold to these standards, yet allow people to habitually reject and violate many crucial parts therein, is lip service and not true testimony bearing. Bearing testimony to the truth involves testifying *against* and *rejecting* error. It involves disciplining those who deny sections of our creed and separating ourselves from bodies that, as a habitual or constitutional policy, tolerate corrupt doctrines and practices. Pluralism treats many crucial teachings of Scripture on doctrine and worship as optional or merely as human opinions, not inspired and obligatory truths. Given this reality, one could say that it is modern pluralism or loose subscriptionism that is schismatic. As Thomas McCrie writes,

While the Church has been frequently divided by a spirit of unwarrantable and arbitrary impositions, so, on the other hand, the same effect has been sometimes produced by aversion to the strictness of ecclesiastical communion, and impatience of that submission which is fully warranted by the Word of God. When a church has been constituted conformably to the Scripture pattern, makes a faithful confession of the truth, and maintains good order and discipline agreeably to the laws of Christ, a divisive spirit is evinced by those who factiously exclaim against its severity, enter into schemes, open or covert, for relaxing its bonds, or form themselves into another society connected with looser and more general ties; whether this be done to obtain greater latitude to themselves, or with the view of uniting persons of opposite religious sentiments and practices into one general and catholic communion.³²

(5) A strict or full subscription teaches people a respect for the corporate body’s doctrinal

³¹ Kevin Reed, “Introductory Essay” in Samuel Miller, *Doctrinal Integrity*, xxi.

³² Thomas McCrie, *The Unity of the Church* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage [1821] 1989), 40-41.

achievements and encourages the study of Christian doctrine. If the leaders of a Christian communion treat their creeds as Swiss cheese, as optional documents, as containing sections that can be openly denied or reinterpreted in a humanistic-arbitrary manner, then why should the laity take them seriously? When congregants are taught what the Standards actually teach, instead of speculative and heterodox distortions, unity is encouraged in the body and people learn to respect the doctrinal achievements of their forefathers. “If the friends of orthodoxy and piety...really desire to cherish and maintain a love for the discriminating study of Christian doctrine; a taste for religious knowledge; a spirit of zeal for the truth, in opposition to that miserable indifference to articles of faith, which is so replete with mischief to every Christian community in which it is found then let them be careful to present, and diligent to keep it before the eyes of one another, and the eye of the public, that ‘good confession’ which they are commanded to ‘professed before many witnesses.’”³³

If the creeds were held to fully, without equivocation and all sorts of unbiblical exceptions, perhaps preaching would be more doctrinal and decisive. The vague, loose, mediocre, indecisive nature of much that is called preaching today would be replaced by dynamic doctrinal preaching. The common idea that doctrine is impractical and rather useless would vanish and be replaced by solid doctrine followed by application. A return to the old Puritan dogmatism would cause the heterodox to leave, for they would not find ignorant itching ears in such churches. Is it not because of a lack of knowledge that multitudes are destroyed (cf. Hos. 4:6)? Pluralism caters to itching ears, while full subscriptionism drives them away with the sword of the Spirit. Let us note Paul’s warning: “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth... to fables” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Much of modern so-called conservative Presbyterianism essentially says, “Don’t offend itching ears; make exceptions for them and their corrupt teachers.”

(6) A strict or full subscription is necessary for upholding our covenanted reformation. All Presbyterians were at one time known as Covenanters. They followed the biblical practice of covenanting to uphold and solidify reformational attainments. The purpose was to advance the truth in a covenanted uniformity against errors. For example, the Solemn League and Covenant (1643), which binds the Anglosphere and all Presbyterians to this day, calls for “the preservation of the reformed religion...in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, according to the Word of God, and the example of the best reformed Churches” (i.e. the Presbyterian churches of the Second Reformation period). It requires us to endeavor the extirpation of popery and prelacy as well as superstition, heresy, schism and profaneness. It commands us to expose any sin that would hinder the work of reformation. It requires us to assist and defend each other (i.e. those obligated to the covenant) in the cause of [true] religion, liberty and peace. The document made to support the covenant and bring to pass the wonderful biblical principles therein is the Westminster Standards. Because this covenant is binding on posterity and only requires us to obey a secondary document that is fully in accord with Scripture, it is wrong or immoral to depart from it without clear and convincing proof from Scripture.

This raises the question: have the churches that have allowed many exceptions in teaching and practice to the Westminster Standards done so because they have proved the Standards to be in error? No. Loose subscriptionism, with its many exceptions, has been the result of churches trying to hold themselves together as they *decline* in doctrine and practice. Presbyterians have repudiated and neglected their lawful, binding covenants because they have been and continue to be unfaithful to those covenants in many areas.

(7) A strict or full subscriptionism is necessary to avoid our sinful natures’ tendency to embrace human autonomy, which leads to popery and prelacy. One of the reasons that Presbyterianism is biblical and vastly superior to prelacy is the fact that the pastor’s and elder’s authority is ministerial and

³³Samuel Miller, *Doctrinal Integrity*, 19.

not arbitrary or subjective. Ministers and presbyters are there to teach, govern and counsel according to Scripture *alone* and not according to their own opinions. When a church's objective creeds are not truly respected and are treated more as suggestions where churchmen can make exceptions as they please, there has been a tendency historically to regard a session's, presbytery's or synod's authority as intrinsic or subjective, not ministerial. In other words, everyone must obey their church officers' authority simply because they say so, not because they are in agreement with the Word of God. For example, a church court in one denomination rebuked a minister for exhorting his congregation to elect only male deacons following the example of Acts 6 and ordered him never to speak such things again – *even though they knew their ruling was unscriptural*. Church courts have allowed the Federal Vision heresy, pictures of Christ, ministers who openly reject the regulative principle, Sabbath breaking, etc., not because such things are taught in the Word of God and can be proven, but because they believe they have an intrinsic popish authority to govern on their own terms. Such thinking is common today in the OPC, PCA and RPCNA. It leads to bureaucratization and unpredictability in church courts. It unwittingly transfers authority from the Scriptures and the subordinate standards to churchmen who are pragmatic and untrustworthy. It turns presbyteries and ministers into little prelatic bishops. Of such men McCrie writes,

Forgetting the nature and limits of the power with which they have been entrusted, and their own complaints against Papal and Prelatical usurpations, Protestant and Presbyterian courts have acted “as lords over God's heritage,” trampled on the sacred rights of conscience, stripped the Christian people of liberties which their divine Master had conferred on them, and which they were in the undisputed possession of for several centuries after his ascension, intruded hirelings on them for overseers, and driven those who resisted their arbitrary measures to seek the food of their souls in separate communions.³⁴

(8) Strict or full subscription is needed in order to preserve and transmit the truth uncorrupted, unadulterated and not watered down to our spiritual and physical posterity. Regarding God's law and the inspired redemptive history that accompanies it Asaph says,

For He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children; that the generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children that they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments; and may not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not set its heart aright, and whose spirit was not faithful to God (Psalm 78:5-8).

The very future of the church and our children and grandchildren are at stake. This point is strongly established if we consider church history. Pragmatism and looseness of doctrine and worship brings numbers and visible gains in the short run, but have always led to declension and disaster in the long run. The adoption or toleration of one error, or one corruption in worship, has led to adoption and defense of other errors and corruptions. Every act of pragmatism and looseness has taken the church further away from her testimony and biblical mission. The church becomes further and further distant from orthodoxy and orthopraxy. This led the early post-apostolic church down a path that culminated in Romanism or complete apostasy. It has led modern Presbyterians down a similar path to the point where most churches have little in common with the Presbyterians of the Second Reformation. For this reason, church officers must take seriously their responsibility as stewards of the mysteries of God. They must be faithful by being dogmatic and this requires detailed creeds and confessions.³⁵ This is

³⁴ Thomas McCrie, *The Unity of the Church* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage, [1821] 1989), 39.

³⁵ Thomas McCrie writes, “When false and corrupt views of Christianity become general, it is necessary that confessions of

especially true of an institution that has existed for thousands of years and will likely exist in its present form for another few thousand years.

For this reason the church has used creeds and confessions in her struggle to maintain orthodoxy and to fight off heretics and errorists. Thus creeds have always been used to resolve doctrinal controversies. They have also placed doctrinal achievements (forged in the fire of controversy) in stone. They are used to examine and try pastors and elders; to serve as tests for communion; to judge false teachers and catechize new converts and covenant children. Throughout church history, as corruptions and heresies increased, so did creeds and confessions. As time progressed and the church was sanctified, creeds and confessions became more detailed and more minute in their analysis of doctrine.

(9) Strict or full subscription is needed because once dissensions and separations have occurred they, from a human standpoint, are almost impossible to heal. Because of our sinful natures, the tendency to divide is easy. Attempts to reunite are exceptionally difficult because the errors and corrupt principles that lead to division, over time eventually become church traditions and set principles accepted and defended as truths. People fall in love with corrupt worship and defend it with a deep emotional fervor. Sophisticated arguments for error and declension are developed and accepted even though they are non-exegetical and often irrational. We are told that Christmas is not really Christmas if we *pretend* it is a secular day. People argue that uninspired hymns are acceptable because singing praise is *not* a separate element of worship. The dividing lines between truth and corruption are *not* softened by modern pragmatism and pluralism, they are only ignored. Because errors are not nipped in the bud, parties at variance move further from each other while only feigning unity.

The bond of unity is the truth and only the truth. Therefore, all pragmatic attempts at unity are illusory and dangerous. Thus far, historically, there have been no church unions with positive results. The reason for this tragic fact is quite simple. The stricter parties have been forced to submit to looser principles and standards to effect union. Thus the more faithful body is absorbed and corrupted by the larger more dominant body. Essentially, biblical distinctives are eventually cast aside and lost. While we acknowledge that we should attempt to draw together, combine, cooperate and unite with other like-minded Christians, it can only be done by *first explicitly* approving of the *same* articles of faith, methods of worship (including administration of the sacraments [e.g., close communion]) and rules of discipline. Only in this way are unions warranted by the Word of God.

The Error of Going beyond the Confession

While we live in a time when creeds and confessions are generally disregarded or sworn to with crossed fingers, there is another error to be avoided which is on the opposite end of the spectrum from pluralism. It is the idea that we are not only to seek uniformity based on the Westminster Standards but

the truth in opposition to them be embodied in formal and written documents, which may be known and read by all men. *Vox emissa perit: litera scripta manet* [a voice sent forth disappears: a written letter remains]. It is not enough that Christians confess their faith individually: to comply with divine commands, to answer to their character as church members, and the better to gain the ends in view, it is requisite that they make a joint and common confession. When the truths contained in the Word of God have been explicitly stated and declared, in opposition to existing errors, by the proper authority in a church, and approbation of such statements and declarations may be required as a test of soundness in the faith and Christian fidelity, without any unwarrantable imposition on conscience, or the most distant reflection on the perfection of Scripture. The same arguments which justify the use of creeds and confessions will also justify particular declarations or testimonies directed against errors and corruptions in churches which still retains scriptural formularies. Those who allow the former cannot consistently condemn the latter. It is not sufficient to entitle persons to the character of faithful witnesses of Christ, that they profess a general adherence to the Bible or a sound confession of faith, provided they refuse or declined to direct and apply these sensibly against present evils. It might as well be said that the soldier has acquitted himself well in a battle, because he had excellent armor lying in a magazine, or a sword hanging by his side, although he never brought forth the armor nor drew his sword from its scabbard" ("A Short View of the Plan of Religious Reformation and Union Adopted Originally by the Secession" in *The Unity of the Church*, 135-136).

must go back to the 16th and 17th centuries and attempt to enforce the minutia of private writings and doctrines of individuals of that time, almost as if they were inspired. For lack of a better term to describe this tendency, we will refer to it as *traditionalism*. If a prominent writer of this time held to a naive statism, then we must all become statist. If Gillespie and Durham (based not on Scripture but on speculations regarding some of the strange things that occurred during the Reformation in Scotland) posited a lesser non-revelatory type of predictive prophecy, then we must accept it and make it a term of communion even though: (a) In the sacred Scriptures there is only one kind of prophecy, not two. That is, there is no such thing as a non-revelatory secondary prophecy; (b) The Confession of Faith explicitly says, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men” (1:6); and, (c) It is used by Charismatic heretics to justify their contention that revelation (at least the nonbiblical theoretical secondary kind) is still active.

It is important that we recognize that the divines of the Westminster Assembly did not think that every belief rose to the level of importance where an inflexible position had to be chosen and made a term of communion. Some things in Scripture are not clear and a number of passages are liable to two or more legitimate interpretations. A confession, and the doctrinal uniformity it produces, is not the same as doctrinal and exegetical perfection in all things. Such a thing is impossible this side of heaven. Samuel Miller notes that the men who wrote the Westminster Standards had minor differences among themselves. Some of them were supralapsarians, others sublapsarians, and a third class had their peculiar views respecting *reprobation*, and also respecting the place which the *active* as well as the *passive* obedience of Christ holds in the gospel system. Still they were all substantial and sincere *Calvinists*, and framed the Confession in such a manner as that those who deferred, in respect to those minor shades of opinion, might all honestly adopt it.³⁶

Therefore, it is crucial that we seek unity on the basis of the Westminster Standards (properly interpreted) and do not attempt to read views into the Standards based on the *private* views of early Presbyterians. In addition, this does not mean that we should be anti-ecumenical. It only means that our seeking of union must be based solely on unity in doctrine, ethics and practice, not on pluralism or a watering down of the truth. May God bring reformation to the Reformed churches in this day of serious declension.

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³⁶ Samuel Miller, *Doctrinal Integrity*, 77.