

Review Of Confessionalism and Subscription

Readings:

Recommended:

- A.A. Hodge Commentary, Chapter 1-2 (skim)
- Addendum 1: Brief Summary of the Westminster Confession of Faith, p 14
- John Calvin, Institutes of Christian Religion—NH

Other Suggested:

- Carl Trueman, The Creedal Imperative (chapter 2 especially)
- Dorothy Sayers, Creed or Chaos? Chapter 3, "The Dogma is the Drama"
- Michael Horton, *Apostle Creed*, Introduction
- Samuel Miller, *Doctrinal Integrity...* Chapter 1, "Arguments in Favor of Creeds," Chapter 2 Answers for "Objections to Creeds", "Concluding Remarks"
- John Murray, Vol. 1, *Collected Writings*, "The Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith" (p.312ff)
- Nathan Hatch, "Evangelicalism as a Democratic Movement"
- Mike Horton, *In the Face of God*, Chapter 3, "Age of the Spirit or Spirit of the Age"
- Thomas Oden, *After Modernity... What?*, Chapter 3, Defining Modernity, Chapter 5, Voices of Modernity (selections)
- Rick Lints, *Fabric of Theology*, Chapter 2, "The Face of Evangelicalism and the Task of Evangelical Theology" (pp. 29-56)

Introduction: The Modern and Post-Modern Context of American Evangelicalism
(c.f. Addendum 3, p. 16)

they have a zeal for God but not according to knowledge.

Romans 10:2

It is not so much that evangelicals cease to believe anything theological, it is rather that belief is no longer central to their identity and program!

Richard Lints, *Fabric of Theology*

I. The Nature and Importance of *Confessionalism* (*Creedalism*) in the Church

What is "Confessionalism?"

Confessionalism is the process whereby the church adopts a corporate consensus as to what the scriptures principally teach, based upon shared exegetical conclusions and utilizes this consensus as the basis for Christian faith, practice and unity when acting as a church. Stated plainly, the *confessional* church is any church whose identity is most essentially "what it believes" and whose beliefs drives "what it does."

Let the Redeemed of the Lord say so... Ps.107:2

The Ultimate Goal of Confessionalism: *To Preserve the Apostolic Faith, not supplant it!*

Our own confession teaches about itself that it is fallible (WCF 1:9, 31.3) and that "all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men and private spirits

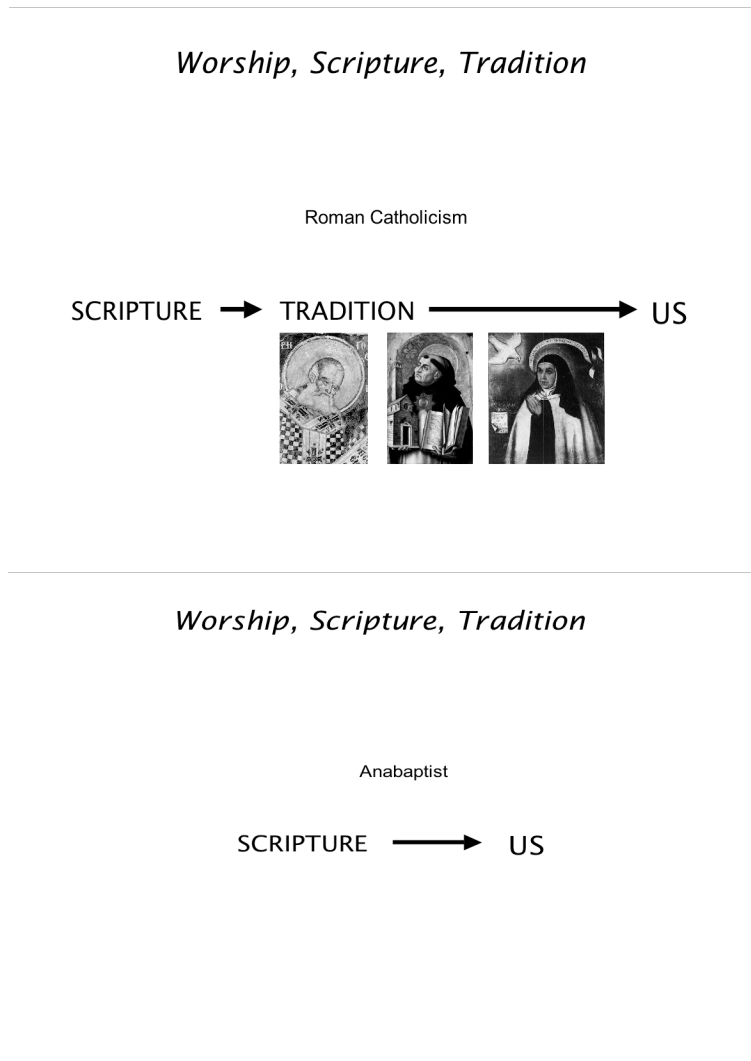
are to be examined and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture" (WCF 1.10). And yet, without a corporate reading of scripture as within the organizational structure established by Christ through the apostles (Mt. 16, Eph. 2), we are left with private interpretations and a corporate identity crisis.

Mt. 28:20, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...

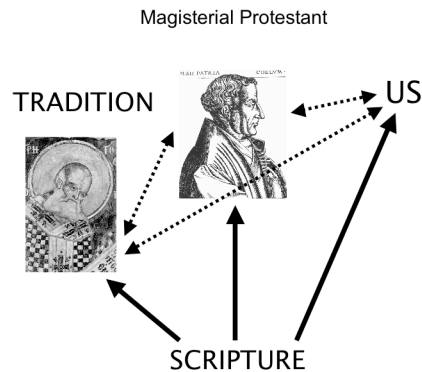
Acts 20:26-27, Therefore I declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God

2 Thess.2:15, So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

Three Options for Use of Creeds:



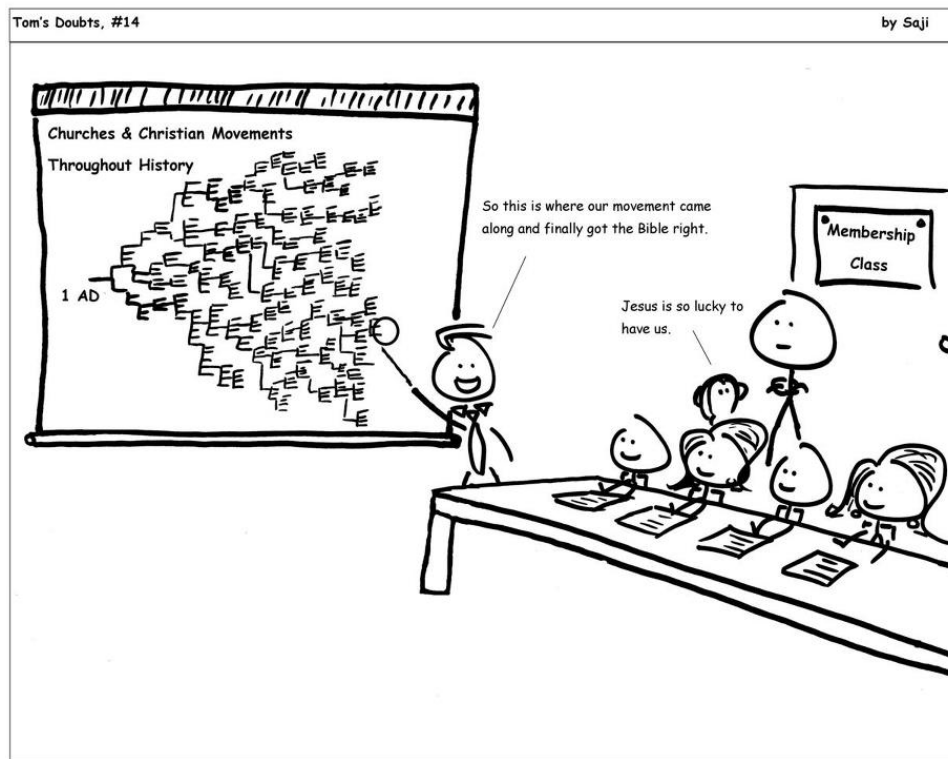
Worship, Scripture, Tradition



Ecclesial Spirituality:

A re-commitment to a communal/confessional method of bible interpretation as to include a fluid inter-dependence between reading the biblical text as our “only rule of faith and practice with the humility of knowing that we are not the only ones reading it. The need for a more globally informed or “catholic” method of interpretation wherein we read the bible WITH the church of every age and culture.

E.g. A position of inter-dependence upon other communities in order to more fully understand scripture?



The Use of Creeds to support Confessionalism

A "creed" is any summary and/or clarification of a certain belief or "a confess in writing." (The word "Creed" is derived from the Latin word "belief.") Therefore, a Christian creed is an interpretation of the general teachings of the Old and New Testament Scriptures categorized into general themes and topics of relevance to the Christian faith and subscribed to by the church.

2 Timothy 1:13, *Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.*

2 Thess.2:15, *So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.*

The Usefulness of Creeds: (Quotes by A.A. Hodge)

1. As a basis for Christian Unity

To act as the bond of ecclesiastical fellowship among those so nearly agreed as to be able to labor together in harmony.

Amos 3:3, "How can two walk together unless they be agreed'?"

Phil. 1:27, "stand fast in one spirit with one mind"

1 Cor.1:10, "speak the same thing and be on one accord of one mind"

Philip. 2:2, Make my joy complete, be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Eph. 4:4, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

Eph.4:13, "until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God.

If not unity of "faith" then unity of what?

2. For Instruction

To be used as instruments in the great work of popular instruction.

1 Tim. 4:6, *If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed.*

1 Tim. 6:3, *Whoever teaches otherwise and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that is in accordance with godliness...*

2 Tim.4:3, *For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires.*

3. For Ecclesiastical Discipline

Acts 20:28 *Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son.*

Heb. 13:17 *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing--for that would be harmful to you.*

4. As a basis for evaluating true from false teaching and teacher qualification.

To discriminate the truth from the glosses of false teachers, and accurately to define it in its integrity and due proportions.

Romans 10:2, *they have a zeal for God but not according to knowledge.*

2Pet. 2:1-2 *But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them--bringing swift destruction on themselves. Even so, many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned.*

2John 1:10 *Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching;*

5. For Preserving the "Faith of our Fathers" such as to better protect against cultural "blind-spots."
To mark, preserve, and disseminate the attainments made in the knowledge of Christian truth by any branch of the church in any grand crisis of its development.

2Tim. 2:2 *and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.*

Characteristics of a Confessional (or Creedal) Church (from the CPC intern packet, "Paradigms of Spirituality")

- A culture of humble submission to Scripture revealed in a willingness to biblically regulated worship and practice.
- A high regard for the Christian scriptures as the only rule of faith and practice wherein the church, acting corporately, is careful to declare nothing save the whole counsel of God's Word (not more, not less) as discerned by good and necessary inference.
- A high regard for the Scriptures in preaching that is expositional and Christ-centered, careful to discern the original intent by preaching right doctrines/practices from right texts.
- A humble regard for the church vs. the individual as the "pillar and bulwark of the truth" such as to read the Bible communally vs. individualistically including the use of historic creeds and confessions.
- A church that is careful to consistently teach and apply biblical theology as the friend of Christian renewal and sanctification.
- A culture of humble submission to Scripture that is less prone to be blown about by every wind of faddish doctrine and philosophy of ministry.

WCF 1.10 - "The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."

III. Our "Confessional" history...

- Other families:
 - Pre-Reformation Period: East, West (Rome, Constantinople)
 - Reformation Period: Lutheran, Anabaptist, Reformed...
 - Post-Reformation: Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist...
 - Modern: Fundamentalism, Liberal, Charismatic, etc.)
- E.g. We are "Christians" before we are "reformed Christians" and share together such expressions of faith as articulated by:
 - The Council of Nicaea (A.D.325)
 - The Council of Constantinople (A.D.381)

- Both were especially related to the doctrine of God, the Trinity, Historicity of Salvation Accomplished and Applied.
 - Our Family Tree, assuming it begins with Apostolic foundation, continues with Augustine and proceeds through Calvin, especially regarding our understanding of how God saves us from the penalty and misery of our sin.
- 5th Century A.D.—Pelagius vs. Augustine
 Humankind born innocent vs. original sin... humankind responsible in salvation vs. saved by grace through faith alone “to the praise of God’s glorious grace” (Eph. 1:3-14, 2:10ff).
 Pelagianism rejected at Synod of Carthage in A.D. 418.
 Again rejected at Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431.
- 16th Century A.D.-- Our most “important” immediate ancestor? John Calvin (1509-1564) and thus the word “Calvinism”
- Calvin’s reliance upon Augustine’s theology, especially against Pelagianism
 - Calvin’s earlier contemporary and theological ally, Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531) were together allied and associated with the reforms of Martin Luther (1484-1546)
 - Calvin’s most significant followers including such leaders as Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), Theodore Beza (1519-1605) and John Knox (1514-1572)
- 16th Century A.D. -- Pelagianism reappeared through Dutch theologian named Arminius—(Arminianism or “Semi-Pelagianism)
- Humankind only partially fallen rather than not fallen at all, but with the same result as Pelagianism—both assume human responsibility
 - Arminianism specifically rejected at the Synod of Dort in A.D. 1618-1619.
- 16th-17th Century A.D. – Reformed Confessional Tradition is further expressed various other significant contexts:
- The Scots Confession (1560)—approved by Reformation Parliament and Church of Scotland, attaining full legal status with the departure of Mary, Queen of Scots in 1567.
 - The Genevan Confession (1536)—together with a translation of Calvin’s Catechism (1541)
 - The Second Helvetic Confession (1561) and approved by General Assembly in 1566 in the Reformed Scottish Church.
 - Heidelberg Catechism (1563)
 - Westminster Confession (1646)
 - Helvetic Consensus Formula (1675 A.D.)

Therefore, in a family context, reformed Christians have discerned the need to “say so” as the redeemed people of the Lord (Ps.107:2)

So what is it?

III. **A Reformed-Theological Worldview**

1. **Biblical Theology: We are committed to the Old and New Testament Scriptures as our only rule of faith and practice.**

While believing that God powerfully manifest his infinite glory in a general way through creation, our Christian faith and practice is grounded in God’s works of redemption in history as explained to us through the divinely appointed means of inspired Scripture. We believe that all things necessary for salvation are sufficiently revealed to us by the Holy Spirit speaking through the Scriptures of the Old

and New Testaments. We believe also that all special revelation has ceased until the next and final redemptive act of God in history when Christ will return to judge the living and the dead. It is, therefore, our ambition to teach the whole counsel of God's word, not adding to, or subtracting from, anything contained within it, recognizing no other source for divine revelation, whether by ecclesiastical traditions or private revelations.

Implications:

1. The Only Authority of Scripture:

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. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. (WCF 1:6)

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. WCF 1:9

2. A Redemptive Historical Method of Interpretation: R/H approach as to reflect the “fulfillment” principle

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly. WCF 1:9

Thus, Christocentric-- (1 Cor.2:1ff, 2 Cor.5:20)

Luke 24:13 An Emmaus Road Event

3. A Hermeneutic of Tradition:

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverend esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof (WCF 1:5)

4. Expository Preaching that reflects *sola scriptura*— E.g. assumes the burden of “thus saith the Lord.”

“It is required of those that hear the Word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; EXAMINE WHAT THEY HEAR BY THE SCRIPTURES; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.”

Therefore, a sermon that is text driven and text structured (e.g. Biblical topics in biblical proportions (1 Cor.1:20, Neh.1:1-8)

5. Divine Wisdom—Sufficiency of Scripture with Illumination (Module #3)

2. Theology of Sovereign Grace: We are committed to the teachings of grace as they are summarized in the historic Westminster Confession of Faith.

Whereas the Holy Scriptures is our *only* rule of faith and practice, our Church unity is predicated upon a consensus about what the Scriptures principally teach. Our consensus is reflected in the 350—year—old *Westminster Confession of Faith*. In summary, it affirms that God is no less sovereign in our salvation than He is sovereign in our creation to the praise of God's glorious grace! This means that we are accepted by God, from beginning to end, not by our own works or attempts at being

approved by God, but by faith alone in the perfect and all sufficient work of Christ on our behalf, faith itself being the free gift of God! While many people join our church without knowing or affirming all the teachings contained in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, our church, when acting and speaking corporately, seeks to be in accord with the Westminster Standards.

Implications:

1) So Goes Sovereignty so goes Grace!

- ✓ WCF 3.5 Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his **mere free grace** and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his **glorious grace**.
- ✓ WCF 10.2 This effectual call is of God's free and special grace **alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man**, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the **grace offered and conveyed in it**.
- ✓ WCF 11.3 Christ, by his obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to his Father's justice in their behalf. Yet, inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them; and his obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead; and both, freely, not for anything in them; their justification is only of **free grace**; that both the exact justice and **rich grace** of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, 25 to the only God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen.

Jude 24

2. The "five points of Calvinism"—T.U.L.I.P.

- ✓ Total Depravity: or "not to deny common grace wherein God preserves some goodness in humanity for the common good, but that there is no goodness in humanity that is pure and without defect of moral imperfection and capable of satisfying God's holy standard of righteousness."
- ✓ Unconditional Election: or "conditioned only upon God's immutable, eternal, perfect counsel and omnipotent will."
- ✓ Limited Atonement: or "Christ's death is applied only to the elect"
- ✓ Irresistible Grace: or "God's grace is received only by those who are given faith by the Holy Spirit through "new birth" unto "newness of life."
- ✓ Perseverance of the Saints: or "The perseverance of God on behalf of the saints such that God is faithful, even when we are faithless, to enable us over and over again to confession, repentance of self-trust and faith in God for our salvation."

3. TULIP Revisited—F.A.I.T.H. (from Jim Osterhouse)

- ✓ *Fallen Humankind*—people are by nature completely unwilling morally and unable functionally to save themselves from sin and its consequences...

Rom. 1:18ff, Rom. 5:12ff, Rom. 3:23ff, Eph. 2:1

- ✓ *Adopted by God*—Based on God's own, self-sufficient character of love, God has chosen some people to be members of his family to the praise of his glorious grace.
Eph. 1:3-12, John 6:35-40, Acts. 13:48

- ✓ *Intentional Atonement*—Jesus took the penalty of God’s justice against sin upon himself in order to save his people from taking the eternal consequences themselves.

Rom. 3:23-26, Heb. 5:4, Heb. 5:5, John 5:22, John 5:27, Matt. 28:18, Eph.1:4, "

: "The business of man's salvation was transacted upon covenant terms between the Father and the Son from all eternity... What grace was that which was given us in Christ before the world began, but this grace of redemption which was from everlasting thus contrived and designed for us, in that way which hath been here opened? "

John Flavel p.61

For whom does Jesus lay down his life... for everyone?

John 10:14

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

- ✓ *Transformed by the Holy Spirit*—The Holy spirit regenerates those who are chosen by God, starting with giving them faith in Jesus and continually working more and more faith and godliness in them until their perfect glorification at death.

1Cor. 2:14, Rom. 5:5, Acts 16:14, Eph. 2:8

God did not just provide us with a potential salvation (offering salvation through the atoning work of Christ (objective)... but actual salvation (because of the salvation the Holy Spirit enables us to have by faith!)

- ✓ *Held by God*—Believers are held safe in God’s family and plan of salvation for all eternity.

Rom. 8: 35-39, Philip. 1:6, 1Pet.1:3-5, John 10:24-30

IV. Reformed Worldview in Context to Other Religions/Christian Families:

Who are we historically:

1. Apostolic (Canonical) vs. Other World Religions--- A Christ Centered Faith

Eph. 2:17-22

2. Protestant vs. "Catholic"--

- ✓ Sola Scriptura: Scripture is our only rule for faith and practice. (vs. ecumenical councils)
- ✓ Priesthood of all believers: Our access to God is through Christ alone as the only redeemer of God's people. (vs.a human succession of the priesthood)
- ✓ Justification through faith *alone*: Only by God's grace through faith are we saved, not be any works of our own. (vs. Grace through the effectual application of it by the sacraments)
- ✓ Church is a "means" of grace vs. "agent" of grace

3. Classic Protestant ("evangelical") vs. Modernist (liberal Protestantism) or Fundamentalist (dispensational)

- ✓ We do believe in an "open system" universe such that salvation is rooted in miraculous works of redemption in history.

Among other things:

- a. Historic resurrection of Christ
- b. Personal and super-natural Conversion through repentance and Faith

- ✓ The kingdom is both now and not yet—"optimistic realism" vs. either "triumphalism" or "pessimism" concerning the world.
- ✓ In the world but not of the world...

4. Reformed vs. "broad evangelical"

- ✓ Salvation by sovereign grace of God vs. Salvation by human cooperation with grace (which then would cease to be grace at all)
 - I.e. Election, effectual calling (regeneration), conversion, Justification, adoption, sanctification, assurance, perseverance, glorification
 - Vs. Mere foreknowledge, conversion, regeneration, etc.
- ✓ Theologically driven vs. POM driven—e.g. traditional or anti-traditional....
- ✓ "Ecclesial" vs. Individualistic: The Church IS an essential element of the gospel
 - a. The Church is Christology Applied:
 - Prophetic office now mediated through Authorized Preaching
 - Priestly office now mediated through Prayer and Sacraments
 - Kingly office now mediated through authorized "shepherds"/elders
 - b. The Church Has A Succession of Ministry

The language of "appoint" as applied to the offices of ministry is clearly used in the pastoral Epistles. This is significant since the pastoral Epistles were written as instructions for the church as it was to continue on after the apostolic era (Titus 1:5). The appointment of "officers" (however one may name them) in the church is accompanied by the "laying of hands" first by the apostles (Acts 8:18) and later by the "presbytery" (1 Tim. 4:14, KJV), indicating an authorization that is ultimately traced back to Christ insofar as he authorized the apostles to do this (Mat. 16:18, Eph. 2:20). Therefore, where we do not hold to a human succession traced through human lineage as the Roman church does, we do recognize a lineage that has been handed down through "presbyteries," or that "corporate body" called the "church" in 1 Tim. 3:15, which is the guardian of the Truth
 - c. The Church Has a Sacramental Gospel vs. merely a rationalistic gospel
 - I.e. The gospel is not merely a saving "idea" but also a saving "presence" as mediated by Christ through the means of grace in the church.
 - Revelations 21:3-4 from Lev. 26:9, Eph. 1:22-23, Eph. 2:19-22**

5. Presbyterian vs. "Other" Confessional Protestant

- ✓ An organic understanding of the "connected" church vs. independent church
- ✓ Representative form of government vs. congregational or prelatical),
- ✓ Two or Three Office view of Church Government

Representative/Connectional Polity Compared:

- ✓ Connectional vs. Independent
 - An organic understanding of the "connected" church vs. independent church
 - The organic concept of the church that appears in the New Testament... presents a more theological, Christ-centered, spiritual view of the church as defined not by one earthly hierarchical center nor by many earthly congregational centers, but by a heavenly center that requires multiform earthly manifestations. Earthly assemblies do not define but manifest the nature and the center of the church.*

Edmund Clowney

✓ Representative elders vs. congregational or hierarchical

1. Prelacy: administered by archbishops, bishops, deans, archdeacons and other ecclesiastical offices on a hierarchical system by hierarchical appointment vs. representative or congregational determined offices. All things are general. (Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Greek Orthodox, Methodist)

James Bannerman:

The Proper and essential distinction between the two systems is the assertion by Episcopalians and the denial by Presbyterians of Scriptural warrant for a third order of ordinary and permanent office-bearers in the Church above presbyters and deacons, having exclusively in their hands the "power of ordination" and the "power of jurisdiction." (Vol.2, p.263-4)

In other words, the difference asserted by the Episcopalian theory between the order of bishops and the order of presbyters is exhibited in the right belonging to bishops, and not to presbyters, of ordaining to office in the Church and further, in the power of pertaining to bishops and not to presbyters, of exercising government and administering discipline in the Christian society.

2. Independency: Each separate congregation is under Christ subject to no external jurisdiction. All things are local.

Congregational Independency (Baptist, Congregationalism)

Representative Independency (Reformed Baptist)

3. Presbyterianism: Representative government that enjoy jurisdictional/ecclesiastical connectedness to other churches within same denomination. Some things are originally local; some are general. Even originally local matters may become general, through review, complaint, or appeal.

1. Local Courts: (Session)

1 Cor. 5:11-13

2. Higher Courts: (Presbytery and Assembly)

Acts 15: 1-6

Acts 16:4

Note: Decrees made by court (Acts 15) constituted a standard for the churches to follow.

✓ Covenant Theology of Salvation and Church: i.e. Infant Baptism vs. anti-infant baptism (note-- we do believe our children are believers albeit unconfirmed... thus not to be distinguished from "credo-baptistic) views.

✓ Presence Theology fulfilled by Spiritual presence acting through means of grace

The Church Has a Sacramental Gospel vs. merely a rationalistic gospel

i.e. The gospel is not merely a saving "idea" but also a saving "presence" as mediated by Christ through the means of grace in the church.

Revelations 21:3-4 from Lev. 26:9, Eph. 1:22-23, Eph. 2:19-22

E.g. Covenant Theology vs. Individual Theology of Church

✓ Covenant Theology of Salvation and Church: i.e. God's salvation is ordinarily by means of His presence being mediated in communal, sacramental and confessional context. Sacraments themselves are therefore efficacious, not merely memorial. They are administered in a manner that reflects their intended means to and end:

- Baptism: Entrance Rite—Used to set apart and include all those

who are under the headship of Christ vis-à-vis the church—thus requires membership in church, albeit via household or “federal” memberships

- Lord's Supper: Renewal Rite—Used to confirm and renew the graces of the gospel vis-à-vis the means of grace in the church. Thus requires both membership and adult examination (1Cor 10-11)

Whatever be the true theory of the origin of civil society, yet in regard to the relations of the church, as originally an outgrowth of the family, we are not left to speculation. It is distinctly declared to have thus originated. For a series of generations, the family was the only divinely appointed government. In the family, as a government, were lodged both State and church; the head of the family being both magistrate and priest...When that family increased to a nation of three millions of people, the church was re-organized, and adapted to the new circumstances. It became now a distinct government, embracing many families as *families*, for not only were the families theoretically the constituent element of the government, but the actual representation in the government was by heads of families – elders of the people. And when in the fullness of time, the last and complete organization of the church took place under apostles, specially commissioned by Christ, to do for the church what the convention of 1789 did for the American people; and the church of one nation was adapted to become the church of all nations; the same principle was announced, – "the promise is to you and to your children." When a citizen was received under the new form of naturalization, "he and all his household" were thereby received. And hence, the record makes allusion to the church that is in the house of Aquila and Priscilla, of Nymphas, and of Philemon. (Rom. 16:G; Col. 4:15; and Phil. 1:2.) In accordance with these statements of the Scripture, our standards declare "The visible church consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, *together with their children.*" And this, as distinguished from "the invisible church," which "consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all."

Stuart Robinson

Representative Creeds: Westminster Confession vs. London Baptist Confession...

Conclusion:

According to the Reformers and the Puritans, the message of Christianity is not simply about how man is to be saved, it is about how God is glorified in mans salvation.

Ian Murray

Whatever else is “true” about good religion, it is first and foremost about God!

I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. (Rev. 1:8)

"Now the knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him. Indeed, we shall not say that , properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety."(Book 1,Ch. 2,1)

What help is it, in short to know a God with whom we have nothing to do? Rather our knowledge should serve first to teach us fear and reverence, secondly with it as our guide and teacher we should learn to seek every good from him and having received it to credit it to his account." (Book 1, Ch. 2, 2)

John Calvin

WCF 2.1-2

*There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal, most just, and terrible in his judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty. God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever himself pleaseth. In his sight all things are open and manifest, his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to him contingent, or uncertain. He is most holy in all his counsels, in all his works, and in all his commands. **To him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience he is pleased to require of them.***

Subscriptionism

I. Historical Context of Subscription in American Presbyterianism:

The **Adopting Act of 1729** is an act of the [Synod of Philadelphia](#), an early [Presbyterian](#) body in [Colonial America](#), requiring ministers to agree with the "essential & necessary Articles" of the [Westminster Standards](#). The Act was a compromise between [Scots-Irish](#) ministers, who preferred strict subscription to [confessional](#) standards in order to maintain [orthodoxy](#), and the [New Englanders](#), who preferred less hierarchical [church government](#) and believed the individual conscience could not be bound by others but only by the [Bible](#). The Adopting Act was unanimously approved on September 19th, 1729.

§ Act Preliminary to the Adopting Act.

"The committee brought in an overture upon the affair of the Confession, which, after long debating upon it, was agreed upon, *in hæc verba*:--

"Although the synod do not claim or pretend to any authority of imposing our faith upon other men's consciences, but do profess our just dissatisfaction with and abhorrence of such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority of such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority in the Church, being willing to receive one another, as Christ has received us to the glory of God, and admit to fellowship in sacred ordinances all such as we have grounds to believe Christ will at last admit to the kingdom of heaven; yet we are undoubtedly obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so hand down to our posterity.

And do therefore agree, that all the Ministers of this Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this Synod, shall declare their agreement in and approbation of the Confession of Faith with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine; and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our faith.

And we do also agree, that all the Presbyteries within our bounds shall always take care not to admit any candidate of the ministry into the exercise of the sacred function, but what declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession, either by subscribing the said Confession of Faith and Catechisms, or by a verbal declaration of their assent thereto, as such Minister or candidate for the Ministry shall think best. And in case any Minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministry, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds and to ministerial communion if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship or government. But if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge such Ministers or candidates erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith, the Synod or Presbytery shall declare them incapable of Communion with them.

And the Synod do solemnly agree, that none of us will traduce or use any opprobrious terms of those that differ from us in these extra-essential and not necessary points of doctrine, but treat them with the same friendship, kindness and brotherly love, as if they had not differed from us in such Sentiments."--*Minutes*, 1729, p. 94.

§ The Adopting Act.

[The foregoing paper was adopted in the morning. In the afternoon took place "The Adopting Act."]

"All the Ministers of this Synod now present, except one,* that declared himself not prepared, viz., Masters Jedediah Andrews, Thomas Craighead, John Thomson, James Anderson, John Pierson, Samuel Gelston, Joseph Houston, Gilbert Tennent, Adam Boyd, Jonathan Dickinson, John Bradner, Alexander Hutchinson, Thomas Evans, Hugh Stevenson, William Tennent, Hugh Conn, George Gillespie, and John Willson, after proposing all the scruples that any of them had to make against any articles and expressions in the Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, have unanimously agreed in the solution of those scruples, and in declaring the said Confession and Catechisms to be the confession of their faith, excepting only some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters, concerning which clauses the Synod do unanimously declare, that they do not received those articles in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority; or power to persecute any for their religion, or in any sense contrary to the Protestant succession to the throne of Great Britain.

"The Synod observing that unanimity, peace, and unity, which appeared in all their consultations and determinations relating to the affair of the Confession, did unanimously agree in giving thanks to God in solemn prayer and praises."--*Ibid*.

§ Passages of the Confession excepted to in the Adopting Act.

[The following are the passages explained in the above act. Chap. 20, sec. 4, of certain offenders it is said] "they may be proceeded against by the censures of the Church, and by the power of the civil magistrate."

Chap. 23, sec. 3. "The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church; that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. for the better effecting whereof he hath power to call Synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God."

§ The Directory recommended.

"A motion being made to know the Synod's judgment about the Directory, they gave their sense of the matter in the following words, viz. The Synod do unanimously acknowledge and declare, that they judge the Directory for worship, discipline, and government of the Church, commonly annexed to the Westminster Confession, to be agreeable in substance to the word of God, and founded thereupon; and therefore do earnestly recommend the same to all their members, to be by them observed as near as circumstances will allow, and Christian prudence direct."--*Minutes*, 1729, p. 95.

19th century Presbyterian Samuel Miller:

Let the candidate for admission unfold to the Presbytery before which he presents himself, all his doubts and scruples, with perfect frankness; opening his whole heart, as if on oath; and neither softening nor concealing anything. Let him cause them distinctly to understand, that if he subscribe the Confession of Faith, he must be understood to do it in consistency with the exceptions and explanations which he specifies. If the Presbytery, after this fair understanding, should be of the opinion, that the excepted points *were of little or no importance, and interfered with no article of faith*, and should be willing to receive his subscription in the usual way, he may proceed.

B. The Present Context:

June 12, 2003

CHARLOTTE – The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America voted Wednesday to approve an amendment to its Book of Church Order defining the nature of adherence to its doctrinal standards by ministers and elders.

At its 2002 General Assembly, the PCA approved an amendment to the Book of Church Order that its framers believed would define the nature of subscription clearer. Defining subscription or theological adherence by ministers and elders to the Confession and Catechisms of the Presbyterian Church in America has been a matter of great debate for most of its history. Forty-five presbyteries approved the amendment, while 19 did not approve it, giving it the necessary two-thirds vote needed for passage. To complete the ratification process, the amendment also had to be approved by this meeting of the General Assembly.

The effect of the amendment will require ministers to state any differences with the PCA's confessional standards, to have the presbytery (regional court) determine whether the differences are allowable exceptions and to have the differences recorded in writing.

While only a majority vote was necessary for ratification, the amendment received a 66 percent vote of the commissioners with a vote of 821 to 545.

The Motion that Passed:

Amend BCO 21-4 to Specify Good Faith Subscription

Whereas the purity and unity of our church require her to establish that her officers sincerely receive and adopt the Westminster Standards as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures, and for those officers to declare if at any time they find themselves out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system (*BCO* 21-5; *WCF* XXXI.2);

And, whereas the purity and unity of the church also require that her leaders understand both the restrictions and allowances of her Standards that are derived from Scripture but, unlike it, are not the only infallible rule of faith and practice (*WCF* I.8, 10; XX.2; XXXI.3; *WLC* # 3; *BCO Preface* II. 7);

And, whereas there is a longstanding tradition within American Presbyterianism, including the PCA, that officers may in good faith take exception to certain particulars of the Westminster Standards, if such particular exceptions are not inimical (i.e. hostile or injurious) to the more comprehensive system of doctrine;

And, whereas the PCA's original Good-faith subscription position has served the church well, but recently been challenged by some who desire either a more Broad- or Strict-subscription position;

And, whereas the church must guard against a broad, "substance-of-doctrine" subscription approach, which has no definitive meaning and leaves to the candidate himself rather than to the wisdom of the presbytery to determine what areas of his disagreement with particular statements of the Constitution are inimical to the system of doctrine and what are allowable differences with the Westminster Standards;

And, whereas the assertion that the PCA was consciously founded as a Strict-subscriptionist Church in 1973 cannot be sustained (*Minutes of the Twenty-First General Assembly*, cf. pp. 89 and 149 with pp. 146 and 166-168); And, whereas the General Assembly of the PCA did not declare itself to be a Strict-subscriptionist Church in the joining and receiving process with the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod in 1982;

And, whereas attempts to change the PCA into a Broad- or Strict-subscriptionist Church are a departure from the original position of the PCA, and such attempts may bring discord and possibly division within the Church;

And, whereas the inclusion of a Good-faith subscription statement in our *Book of Church Order* is needed to state explicitly what has been the understanding and practice of the majority of the PCA from its beginning; **Therefore**, to clarify and support the original ordination standards of the PCA, _____ Presbytery overtures the General Assembly to amend the *Book of Church Order* by inserting the paragraphs in bold below as new paragraphs of BCO 21-4 between the following sentences, as indicated:

"Whenever a Presbytery shall omit any of these parts, it shall always make a record of the reasons for such omissions and of the trial parts omitted.

[Insert new paragraphs (**in bold below**) here]

While our Constitution does not require the candidate's affirmation of every statement and/or proposition of doctrine in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms, it is the right and responsibility of the Presbytery to determine if the candidate is out of accord with any of the fundamentals of these doctrinal standards and, as a consequence, may not be able in good faith sincerely to receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith and Catechisms* of this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures (cf. BCO 21-5, Q. 2; 24-5, Q.2). Therefore, in examining a candidate for ordination the Presbytery shall inquire not only into the candidate's knowledge and views in the areas specified above, but also shall require the candidate to state the specific instances in which he may differ with the *Confession of Faith and Catechisms* in any of their statements and/or propositions. The court may grant an exception to any difference of doctrine only if in the court's judgment the candidate's declared difference is not out of accord with a fundamental of our system of doctrine because the difference is neither hostile to the system nor strikes at the vitals of religion

"The Presbytery being fully satisfied of his qualifications for the sacred office...."

III. A Compromise Between Two Positions:

1. Strict subscription means that no exceptions to the standards are allowed. Any exception renders the holder of said exception ineligible for ordination. On the positive side of strict subscription is the idea that everyone needs to be able to trust the other pastors that they believe and hold the same

confession. On the negative side, the temptation is for the candidate to be less than perfectly honest.

2. Good faith subscription allows certain exceptions if they are not ruled by the Presbytery to be out of accord with the fundamentals of the system of doctrine. Good faith subscription means that a candidate declares every difference he has, and the Presbytery rules on each difference as to its nature. And then it is assumed that the candidate agrees with everything else. That is what is assumed in good faith. In the PCA, there are three possibilities for ruling on a difference:
 - i. it is a verbal or semantic difference only, and does not indicate a theological deviation from the standards;
 - ii. an exception (genuine theological difference) that does not strike at the vitals of religion;
 - iii. a difference that does strike at the vitals of religion (if it is ruled in this third category, the candidate may not be ordained).

T. David Gordon Describes the Issue and differences this way: (c.f. Addendum

The Westminster Confession of Faith says: The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. (1:10) Similarly, Westminster Confession of Faith 31:3 says: All synods or councils, since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both. The church, then, has a responsibility to confess the faith in a manner which recognizes her own fallibility in so confessing. It was the recognition of this twofold responsibility which caused the Protestant churches to permit candidates to record exceptions and/or scruples with the confessional standards.

Thus, an individual who takes exception to something which the church has declared need not, simply for this reason, be removed from the church or from the teaching office. If no exceptions or scruples are permitted, then, effectively, the church's declarations have indeed become a rule of faith, or practice, rather than a help in both. The church must determine how significant the exception is. Does the exception sufficiently undercut the church's responsibility to confess the truth such that the candidate in question cannot be granted the court's endorsement?

At the same time, if the court determines that the candidate is acceptable, this does not mean that the candidate's exception is now part of the church's teaching, as some erroneously think.

Two views are common in the more conservative reformed bodies today, and they may be accurately represented by illustration: [c.f. PCA "Good Faith Subscription" adopted after this article)

1. The first view distinguishes three categories of beliefs which the church recognizes.
 - a. There are those beliefs which the church endorses and propagates;
 - b. there are those beliefs which the church does not propagate, but which she tolerates;
 - c. and there are those beliefs which she has declared intolerable.
2. The second view distinguishes only two categories of beliefs:
 - a. those which the church propagates
 - b. and those which she declares intolerable.

For the second view, when the church approves a candidate's exceptions, those exceptions become, in some sense, part of the church's approved view. For the first view, those approved do not become part of the church's view; yet they are considered less harmful than heresy,

and are tolerated in the sense that they are not, in and of themselves, ground for removal from the church or from the teaching office.

The picture could even be cut a little finer, because the church could assign to that second category two sub- categories: Beliefs which are tolerated and which can be taught; and beliefs which are tolerated but cannot be taught. In such a scenario, the church could permit an individual who professes a given belief to remain in the church, and to remain an officer in the church, but could require the officer not to teach the views in question.

Indeed, the picture could be qualified even further (though the readers will be spared another graphic), because a given court of the church could also elect to permit a man to teach a given exception, with the proviso that when doing so he would also clearly distinguish that view from the view of the church (This has always been the author's personal practice, even though Presbytery has not required it of him). That is, the court's tolerance of a given exception from the church's confession may be in degrees. It can be tolerated:

- if the one holding the view will not teach it (or will only teach it in discussions among other officers); or
- if the one holding the view will always teach the church's view in apposition to the exceptional view; or
- if it can be tolerated without any qualification.

IV. BCO 21.5

While our Constitution does not require the candidate's affirmation of every statement and/or proposition of doctrine in our *Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*, it is the right and responsibility of the Presbytery to determine if the candidate is out of accord with any of the fundamentals of these doctrinal standards and, as a consequence, may not be able in good faith sincerely to receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms* of this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures (cf. BCO 21-5, Q.2; 24-6, Q.2).

Therefore, in examining a candidate for ordination, the Presbytery shall inquire not only into the candidate's knowledge and views in the areas specified above, but also shall require the candidate to state the specific instances in which he may differ with the *Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms* in any of their statements and/or propositions. The court may grant an exception to any difference of doctrine only if in the court's judgment the candidate's declared difference is not out of accord with any fundamental of our system of doctrine because the difference is neither hostile to the system nor strikes at the vitals of religion.

Relevant Questions for TE/RE Ordination Regarding Subscription (c.f. BCO 21, 25)

- 1. Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as originally given, to be the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?**
- 2. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and the *Catechisms* of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures; and do you further promise that if at any time you find yourself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system of doctrine, you will on your own initiative, make known to your Presbytery the change which has taken place in your views since the assumption of this ordination vow?**
- 3. Do you approve of the form of government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church in America, in conformity with the general principles of Biblical polity?**
- 4. Do you promise subjection to your brethren in the Lord?**

Addendum 1: Round Table Discussion Based on Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos*

Read the following and Discuss using the concluding Questions:

The Dogma IS the drama! These are words spoken by Dorothy Sayers concerning the play she scripted entitled “The Zeal of Thy House.” The action of the play involved a dramatic presentation of a few fundamental Christian “dogmas.” She tells of an incident involving its production when the producer sought to edit out certain “tedious complexities of dogma” to which Sayers insisted “if my play was dramatic it was not in spite of the dogma but because of it!”

With a zeal to reach today’s emergent, shall we say “post-modern,” generation there is an increasing trend to downplay the use of creeds and confessions, especially in worship, in order to accommodate to a general distrust of such things-- as if creeds and confessions are expressions of institutional power-plays or intolerance of others. For instance, however astute are the observations and questions raised by Brian McClaren, his “program” of emergent spirituality is perhaps best exposed in the title, *A Generous Orthodoxy, Why I am a Missional and Evangelical and Post/protestant and Liberal/Conservative and mystical/poetic and biblical and charismatic/contemplative and fundamentalist/Calvinist and Anabaptist/Anglican and Methodist and catholic and green and incarnation and depressed yet hopeful and emergent and unfinished...*

As the subtitle suggests, one is often left with the impression once penned by G..K. Chesterton, that if a person believes in everything, he tends not to believe in nothing, but in everything! Indeed, and notwithstanding a biblical case for “creedalism” in its own right,” Dorothy Sayers also raises the issue of whether or not such trends are in effect loosing the “drama” in life and in worship. Here again, Sayers reminds us of a conversation that Jesus once had with a women at the well. In her words:

Christ in his divine innocence said to the women of Samaria, “you worship what you do not know”—being apparently under the impression that it might be desirable, on the whole, to know what one was worshipping. He thus showed himself sadly out of touch with the 20th century mind, for the cry today is “away with tedious complexities of dogma—let us have the simple spirit of worship, just worship, no matter of what! The only drawback to this demand for a generalized and undirected worship is the practical difficulty of arousing any sort of enthusiasm for the worship of nothing in particular.

Again, in the words of Dorothy Sayers,

Let us in Heaven’s name drag out the Divine drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slipshod thinking and trashy sentiment heaped upon it, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction. IF the pious are the first to be shocked, so much the worse for the pious—others will enter the Kingdom of Heaven before them. IF all men are offended because of Christ, let them be offended; but where is the sense of their being offended at something that is not Christ and is nothing like Him. WE do Him singularly little honor by watering down his personality till it could not offend a fly. Surely it is not the business of the church to adapt Christ to men, but to adapt men to Christ.

Discussion Questions:

- What is the “drama” that Sayer’s is concerned about loosing?
- Can a person or church have a “confession”, albeit stated or implied, but then not be “confessional” in the sense that Sayer’s is wanting?
- Why do you think “beliefs” scare people?
- What if we loose the “one faith” as the basis of our Christianity unity. What are the alternative kinds of unity, and are they “Christian?”

Addendum 2: The Westminster Standards

Ashbel Green comments that "the Catechism on which the subsequent lectures are to be founded is the production of some of the most learned and pious divines that ever lived." (p.30) This estimation of the quality of people assembled to develop a system of Faith derived from the teachings of the Bible is not unique. Philip Schaff, perhaps one of the most respected historians of the church and church creeds, could say about the Westminster Assembly that "whether we look at the extent or ability of its labors, or its influence upon future generations, it stands first among Protestant Councils." (p.728, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 1) He later quotes Anglican Puritan Richard Baxter, although himself not a member of the Assembly but well qualified under any estimation to evaluate its quality as saying;

The divines there congregated were men of eminent learning, godliness, ministerial abilities, and fidelity; and being not worthy to be one of them myself, I may the more freely speak the truth even in the face of malice and envy, that as far as I am able to judge by the information of all history of that kind, and by any other evidences left us, the Christian world since the days of the apostles had never a synod of more excellent divines that this and the Synod of Dort." (p.729, Schaff)

The Westminster Assembly occupied about five years and six months for the completion of its proper work. (July 1, 1643- February 22, 1649) It held no less than 1163 regular sessions. It met every day except Saturday and Sunday, from nine o'clock till one or two in the afternoon. The afternoons were spent in committees. The divines which attended consisted of 121 men from several different affiliations such as Episcopalian, the Belgic, French, Helvetic and other Reformed Churches, Presbyterians, etc. . There were two classes of Presbyterians corresponding to the Low and High Church Episcopalians.

The significance of such facts ought to jump out to the modern reader. Yes, we could start from scratch and develop our own interpretation of scripture. In fact, every student of the Bible necessarily does this in the very process of understanding and digesting its teaching. And if we refuse the assistance afforded by the statements of doctrine that were meticulously and cautiously elaborated and defined by the church over a period of 1163 intensive days by some of the most able of men in the church's history, we must then make out our own creed by our own unaided wisdom. So the real question is really not whether or not we have a creed. Every time we use the scripture to determine our belief, we have in effect created one. The real question is will we be humble and wise enough to utilize the great wealth of wisdom represented in such a document as the Westminster Confession of Faith. Common sense tells us we should consider the collected wisdom of the church throughout the ages as represented in our church's creed. And why not give our children the added benefit of not being left to the hurried attempts of even the most ambitious modern teacher. So we at Christ Presbyterian, while never relinquishing our responsibility to teach our children, will humbly utilize those grand statements of faith that might provide greater depth and less error in what we do teach.

Addendum 3: Modern and Post-Modern Trends and Response

In an academic atmosphere dominated by the Enlightenment idea of autonomous human reason, rigor gets confused with scientific neutrality. To be neutral supposedly implies that religious viewpoints are set aside... In contrast with this idea of neutrality, Christian believers through the ages have always acknowledged the necessity of piety and spiritual discernment in appropriating the Bible's message.

Vern Poythress

A. Rationalism-- (deification of reason) The myth of pure objectivity exposed by post-modernism... The result, an "all or nothing" fallacy such that to know something perfectly is to not know it all. E.g. Absolutizing rationalistic objectivity. (E. D. Hirsh, and Emilio Betti)

Goal-- unlocking the expressed meaning of the text, albeit recognizing both hermeneutic optimism with concession for humble fallibility as balanced by confessional methodology (see below)

B. Empiricism-- (deification of fact/language) the reduction of interpretation to understanding the effects of language on the world (Behaviorist, Wittgensteinian and Marxist theories of knowledge). E.g. Absolutizing cultural subjectivity. (Wittgenstein, Jurgen Habermas, etc)

Goal: With an open system universe, believing in God's presence in/with/through soci-cultural linguistics albeit again recognizing its fallibility as balanced by exegetical/covenantal methodology.

C. Subjectivism-- (deification of self) Reduces interpretation to the experience of the interpreter. But there is no way to discern between the differing interpretation as being valid or invalid-- thus a radical relativism as regarded in the post-modern way. setting in motion the personal transformation of the interpreter. (Hans-Georg Gadamer, Stanley Fish and the reader-response)

Goal: Communal Methodology of Bible Interp. Recognizing the Covenantal context of Exegesis and Confessional Context in Bible Interp.

The Crisis of Historical Criticism applied to Perspicuity in Bible Interpretation:

1. Historical-Criticism: Pertains to the historicity of the events recorded in the Bible and a resulting conclusion about the credibility of certain portions of text in the Bible. Post enlightenment skepticism regarding the actuality of the miraculous events in the Bible has called into question the credibility of the Biblical record itself.

Method: As stated by Maier, "as long as one makes analogous classification a precondition for acceptance, much in the word of the Bible remains without foundation." (Maier. p.16)

Response: Within a modern secular context the task was to defend the supernatural of God as applied to the historicity of the Bible and therefore the plenary inspiration of scripture. (Presuppositional and/or evidentialist apologetics, etc)

2. New Hermeneutic: Turning from the issue of Biblical credibility (the words of scripture themselves as from God), the new hermeneutic focuses on a skepticism concerning the perspicuity (clarity) of scripture in Bible interpretation and the possibility of locating meaning that transcends our individual and/or communal cultural-linguistic bias. For instance, the "new hermeneutic" espoused by Hans-Georg Gadamer provided a justification for interpretations "that are unencumbered by a concern for the author's original intention." (Hirsch. p.246) Gadamer's impetus rests primarily in a skepticism concerning the possibility of objective historical knowledge. In reference to Gadamer, E.D. Hirsch notes in his book, *Validity in Interpretation*, "If an interpreter cannot overcome the distorting perspective of his own historicity, no matter how hard he tries, then it follows that "one understands differently when one understands at all." (Hirsch. p.252.) Note Gadamer:

The meaning of a text goes beyond its author not just sometimes but always. Understanding is not a reproductive but always a productive activity... the winning

of the true sense contained in a text or artistic work never comes to an end. It is an infinite process.

In view of the historicity of our being, the rehabilitation of (a text's) original conditions is a futile undertaking. What is rehabilitated from an alien past is not the original. In its continued alienation it has a merely secondary existence."

(Hans-Georg Gadamer *Truth and Method* p. 159)

Method: Like the historical-critical method, an analogy is made between the present and the past yet for the very different purpose of expanding a historical text rather than to reduce it. In other words, by a "fusion of horizons", the present perspective of the interpreter is allowed to act upon a historical text in such a way as to expand and even change an author's intended revelatory meaning (not to be confused with illuminated significance"). As Gadamer states, "The real meaning of a text as it addresses itself to an interpreter... is always codetermined by the historical situation of the interpreter. (Quoted by Hirsch. p.253 from *Truth and Method*.)

Popular Trends...however unaware!

Modernist Trends:

1. Subjective Individualism: The Idolization of private consciousness and reader-response interpretation where "It's all a matter of a person's own, *private* Interpretation"

The revivalist of the Second Great Awakening... argued (as the secularists had a century earlier) that God's revelation was not properly mediated by either tradition or theology; it came directly to each individual through personal experience. As a result, the individual became the arbiter of what the Bible did and did not say. The new evangelical coalition attached little importance to the aid of the past or even the present community of interpreters in matters of biblical interpretation. External authorities were jettisoned and divine authority was internalized-- a strategy not altogether different from that of the Enlightenment.

Rick Lints

Compare:

1Tim. 3:15 if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.

Eph.4:11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: 13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

2. Subjective Populism (Democratization): The idolization of majoritarianism where "The *common* sense of the majority is always right"

In America the principal mediator of God's voice has not been state, church, council, confession, ethnic group, university college or seminary; it has been quite simply, the people... the impulse to rework Christianity into forms that were unmistakably popular... and democratic in at least three respects: it was audience centered, intellectually open to all, and organizationally pluralistic and innovative.

Nathan Hatch, "Evangelicalism as a Democratic Movement"

A curious effect of this emphasis on the subjective leading of the Spirit was the growth in power of the "popular popes" of evangelicalism. Though highly individualistic in their approach to salvation and populist in their biblical interpretation, populist Bible teachers and preachers served to draw people together into a

mass movement largely through the strength of their personal popularity. As Mark Noll puts it, "Evangelical interpretation assigned first place to popular approval."

Rick Lints, *Fabric* p. 35

Compare:

Matt. 7:13 "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. 14 For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Matt. 22:14 For many are called, but few are chosen.

3. Nothingbuttery Interpretation: The Idolization of the simple and lowest-common-denominationalism

By thus admitting the sovereignty of the audience, evangelicals, knowingly or not, undercut the structure that could support critical theological thinking of the level of a Jonathan Edwards or a John Wesley. Not only did theology proper recede in importance before the task of proclaiming the gospel; the new ground rules for theology, opening it to all, meant that the measure of theology would be its acceptability in the marketplace of ideas. This meant that uncomfortable complexity would be flattened out, that issues would be resolved by a simple choice of alternatives, and that in many cases the fine distinctions from which truth alone can emerge were lost in the din of ideological battle.

Nathan Hatch

Expecting that great freedom of thought would generate great ideas, he found instead that Americans easily became "slaves of slogans. Expecting to find priests, he found politicians."

N. Hatch about Tocqueville

Compare:

Rom. 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.

2Cor. 10:5 Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;

Post-Modern Trends: Anti-Propositional Spirituality in Two Directions:

a) The Idolization of Mystic Spiritualism: Where individual subjectivism in Bible interpretation is absolutized within a monistic spirituality (undefined, impersonal spiritual presence in/with/through all things and people) such as to make private intuitions into revelatory meaning. ("Christian Buddhism"). As once noted by David Brooks:

If within a modern secular context "the task was to defend the supernatural of God," the task amidst a post-propositional context is "to defend the idea of a personal God, and explain why specific theologies are true guides for behavior day to day." In other words, "the real challenge is going to come from people who feel the existence of the sacred, but who think that particular religions (as propositionally defined) are just cultural artifacts built on top of universal human traits. It's going to come from scientists whose beliefs overlap a bit with Buddhism."

b) The idolization of Communalism: Where a given socio-cultural linguistic of a particular community is absolutized in a way as to become revelatory meaning. All Biblical meaning is relative to a specific community.

Two Responses:

1) **Philosophical Issue:** The Reconstruction of A World with Windows toward hermeneutic optimism and the Perspicuity of Transcendent Meaning (or Faith Seeking Understanding)

In the demise of objective knowledge was the emergence of radical relativism. Ronald Nash has described radical relativism as "the view that impartial and objective historical knowledge about anything in the past is impossible."

Fundamental to this cosmology is the absence of divine presence in epistemology especially. That is, assuming for a moment the "class ceiling" between the divine and human, our subjectivity is without the subjective aid of a transcendent God who is nonetheless imminent God and active in the universe in even an epistemic manner. Christians, of course, call this an ongoing and divine presence by "illumination" related to an otherwise objective and static revelation.

That is, against the Enlightenment conception of God being contained to outside our universe in activity-- Mark Noll notes how the Christian faith affirms that "God is not just the creator and passive sustainer of the world, but also that His energy is the source of the world's energy and His will the foundation of its existence."¹ (Noll, p.398) As further noted by Noll:

Christians like Malebranche, Berkeley and Edwards postulated a deity who filled the universe he had created, who activated the minds he had made in his own image, who brooded over the world with constant love as well as distant power. This is the sort of Christianity that can rescue Historical knowledge. (Noll, p.399)

And yet, for many evangelicals the "knee-jerk" reaction to radical relativism was to opt for a radical historical objectivism. Nash defines the latter as a "hard objectivism" such that "all subjectivity can in principle be eliminated from history, a fact that if true, would make history a value-free inquiry." as Nash pointed out, "hard objectivity" places in jeopardy any optimism toward gaining access to historical Christianity and divine revelation in that "anything less than a complete and impartial account of some event or series of events in the past would be considered bad history."

AS to avoid either the radical objectivist or radical subjectivist orientation, Noll will argue for a pre-enlightenment approach to Bible interpretation that begins with the fundamental belief in a Sovereign God who is active and present within our world such as to even direct us to both optimism (based on an "open window" universe) and humility. More specifically, Noll argues for four basic Christian beliefs which together rescue an optimism in locating transcendent meaning in Bible Interpretation without moving into either radical objectivism or radical subjectivism.

1. An open system universe affirms that "the divine creation and sustaining of the world is the foundation for epistemological confidence of whatever sort." (Ibid. p.399) There is a correspondence between our minds and God's mind such that it is possible to gain true knowledge as God intended it in the revelation of Scripture.

2. An open system universe can affirm the doctrine of the fall such that "the resultant depravity of human nature suggests that the human moral condition obscures vision, presumably for historical as well as moral reasoning." (Noll. p.401) Therefore, there is no guarantee for a perfect knowledge of the original intent of Scripture due to the fall and the repercussion of sin upon human thought. However, given #1 above, just because the Bible reader cannot have an infallible knowledge of the Biblical intention, it does not follow that he cannot know anything about it either? Yet this second observation points to the wisdom in a "corporate" reading of scripture rather than an individualistic reading-- thus the wisdom of a confessional "tradition." Furthermore, it points to the wisdom of the ongoing history of interpretation-- while we believe that new is not necessarily better in the

¹"Traditional Christianity and the Possibility of Historical Knowledge", *Christian Scholar's Review*, Volume XIX Number 4, 1990, p.388-406

interpretive endeavor, we also believe in the possibility of progress in interpretation. Thus, a "history of interpretation" that piggy backs on previous wisdom while seeking to expand upon it.

3. An open system universe can affirm that writing history or interpreting an ancient text "from the point of view of a particular culture becomes not only inescapable, but also divinely ordained and good. A modified "Relativism", in other words, has a divine sanction." (Noll. p.401 It is true that to get at an ancient text, one must look through the lens of his/her cultural and historical particularities. However, the skepticism that is usually associated with this subjective reality is rendered unfounded given an open system universe and the belief in a benevolent, sovereign God who is active in history. What's to say, then, that the historical distance is necessarily harmful to objective understanding? In the case of eye vision, for instance, the optician might construct a series of lenses which together promote sound and proper vision in the patient. The lens actually correct, not distort the vision. What is to say that the lens of historical and cultural dimensions, constructed by a sovereign God working in history, might not serve to correct an understanding of the past rather than inhibit it. Whose to say that the historical and cultural distance might not provide the needed perspective to understand the significance of an author's intended meaning rather than preventing one from understanding the author? In other words, the skepticism itself is what ought to be questioned if one holds to an open system universe. Skepticism, that is, that functions as an *a priori* presupposition to interpreting historical texts. Therefore, we should study the bible as within its cultural/historical context yet without diminishing the divine sanction of the authority of scripture.

4. An open system universe and a Biblical understanding of the cosmos means that the "recognition that it is God who brings about belief is the source not of despair, but of hope." (Noll. p.405) The stress in the Bible is that even the ability to believe rests upon God's activity of revelation. (1 Cor.6-16) God must alter our frame of reference before we are eager to come to God and know His mind. (Jn.6:37) Yet this is a source of hope in that my own epistemological frailties can be overcome through the divine intervention of a Sovereign and benevolent God who is there. While there is a certain degree of knowledge accessible in the natural laws and order of creation, there is the anticipation of revelation by God's special grace that begins to overcome the limitations imposed by our fallen state. We therefore must assume "revelation" as this has happened in the text of scripture by the Holy Spirit, but we must pray for illumination" as this is necessary so as to change our affections so as to really "hear" the word speak to us.