

On Being a Confessional Church

by
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In 1980, at my first General Assembly, in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the late Bernard “Chip” Stonehouse exhorted rookie commissioners to wait five years before we opened our mouths in debate. Fresh out of seminary I thought my Old School theology made my position superior to Chip’s on most questions. However, I am pleased to have heeded his exhortation. Over the past several decades I have been privileged to observe and participate in a system of church government based on principles that are self-consciously Biblical. It has been difficult at times to learn to think and communicate in a way different from my native egalitarian instincts. As an outsider, raised in liberal New England Congregationalism, it took a conscious effort, time and experience to learn to participate in the culture of Presbyterianism. I am glad I waited. Chip gave us good advice on this point.

With an increasing number of ministers entering the OPC from outside the Presbyterian tradition, and with the increasing variety of seminary training of our ministers, I would like to pass on some thoughts on what it means to be a confessional church. I, with my fellow officers, have taken a vow to uphold the purity, peace and unity of the church. I believe that only a truly confessional church has the ability to keep such a vow, because we have corporately agreed on what we believe. If we cannot continue our agreement we will face, as is perhaps already evident, a confessional crisis. As one astute observer of the last General Assembly comments: “The church is particularly ill-equipped to judge the way in which her subordinate standards serve to establish both the unity and the diversity of its faith. In the more confessionally literate age [of] . . . the Synod of Dordt, the church recognized that a confession served both vital functions: it established boundaries for theological formulation and it offered latitude within those boundaries for the development of varied theological expressions. . . . A party spirit seems to be emerging within the church, with factions largely determined by where ministerial commissioners were educated.”¹ The antidote is the culture of confessionalism.

Being a confessional church means that we are exegetical.

As the body of Christ, the church is rooted in the text of Scripture. Being confessional means that we have come to a consensus regarding what Scripture teaches. We must always be testing the truth and accuracy of that consensus by the careful exegesis of Scripture. Unlike Scripture confessions are fallible. Being faithful to Scripture does not mean that because I have a particular understanding of a passage or passages that my interpretation supercedes the confession of my church. If I think the confession unbiblical, based on my understanding of Scripture, I am bound to test my findings with the mind of the church, and then if others agree, take proper constitutional steps to revise the confession. I must be careful not to think that my interpretation trumps the church’s understanding. The Biblical alternative to authoritarian clericalism is not an egalitarianism, in which my opinion sets the agenda, but confessional Presbyterianism.

Being a confessional church means that we respect our history.

¹ Bryan Pieters, “Synod of Dordt, the Lesser.” (*Nicotine Theological Journal* October 2003) 4.

When examined by the Presbytery of New York and New England John Murray, who differed with the confession on at least eight points, stated only one exception and that was his conviction of exclusive psalmody. What is ironic and instructive is that the *ipsissima verba* of the confession supports exclusive psalmody, but because Murray thought historically about the confession he knew that his church had decided in the nineteenth century that it was permissible to sing hymns, since the singing of psalms was not essential to the system of doctrine.²

Furthermore, Murray taught his points of difference to seminary students and even wrote to defend them. He admitted that his view of the covenant was a significant recasting of the historic reformed doctrine. However, even in teaching contrary to these non-essential points he always did so with great respect for the confession, while never treating it as if it is infallible. “It is with something of an apology that attention is drawn to these blemishes,” he wrote. “But they serve to point up and confirm . . . that any amendment necessary does not affect the system of truth set forth in the Confession, and they remind us of the imperfection that must attach itself to human composition so that we may never place human documents or pronouncements on a par with the one supreme standard of faith.”³ Murray is worthy of our emulation.

Tradition is a living reality [L. *traditio* = hand down]. Culture is “the ideas, customs, skills, arts, etc. of a people or group, that are transferred, communicated, or passed along, as in or to succeeding generations.”⁴ All cultures are in dynamic growth, but when cultures grow properly they cultivate themselves in the soil of their past. The church decides what it confesses. It often does so on non-essential points, teaching that is not part of the system of doctrine, without changing the text of the confession, as with hymn singing. Its commitment to the authority of Scripture means that it is always seeking to maintain what is Biblical, and correct what is not. Thus, the confession is, in this sense, a working document. Like any constitution it must be revised or amended with great care and deliberation, but it is open to revision.

Some might object that this is judicial activism. The answer is no, judicial activism is interpreting the constitution in a new way, as it is applied to a particular case, which is out of accord with the history of the church’s interpretation. As a confessional church our courts must not act as if no one before us had ever read, interpreted or subscribed to the confession, but we must rather ask How have our forefathers interpreted it? If we seek to understand it differently then it is the whole church that decides through the arduous process of amending the constitution. Substantive changes to the system of doctrine must be made by amending the constitution. This is a legislative, and not a judicial action. In deciding judicial cases, it is important not to reverse the church’s former understanding. Such a reversal is judicial activism. It is unjust because it is unpredictable. This can only be corrected by understanding the *animus imponentis* (“the intention of the party imposing the oath”) of the church, which is the meaning of “the system of doctrine.”⁵ The *animus imponentis* is

² James E. Urish, “A Peaceable Plea About Subscription: Avoiding Future Divisions.” David W. Hall, ed. *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1995) 220-221. Urish lists the other seven points of difference, which Murray apparently did not consider essential to the reformed system.

³ John H. Skilton, *Scripture and Confession: A Book about Confessions Old and New* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973) 148.

⁴ *Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus*. Accent Software International, Macmillan Publishers, Version 2.0 – 1998, Build #25.

⁵ I owe some ideas in this paragraph to T. David Gordon. For the expression of them I take full responsibility.

not a subjective or arbitrary concept. It is the mind of the church as expressed in the concrete history of the specific decisions of its courts, especially its General Assemblies.

Being a confessional church means upholding the “system of doctrine.”

The recent ongoing debate among conservative Presbyterians over subscription needs to be understood in terms of the ways that we American Presbyterians have understood the nature of subscription, especially our understanding of what constitutes the “system of doctrine.”

The ways in which words are used to communicate ideas is especially important in maintaining and developing a culture. The words “strict” and “full” have recently been used to define “system” subscription as subscription to every single teaching or doctrine of the confession. The impression is given that anyone who differs with this view is not strict, but “loose” and therefore suspect. In fairness to men like Morton Smith and George Knight, who use these terms, they grant that not every word, phrase or even proposition is required. But, they insist, every doctrine is. Thus, the idea of the “system of doctrine” is narrowed in a way never intended by the authors, or subsequent interpreters, of the second vow. John Murray quotes Charles Hodge with approval: “The words ‘system of doctrine,’ have a definite meaning, to serve to define and limit the extent to which the confession is adopted.”⁶ Hodge believed that to require the adoption of every proposition or teaching is to invite hypocrisy and foster disunity. “We are not sure that we personally know a dozen ministers besides ourselves, who could stand the test,” he asserted.⁷

Hodge took his cue from the original Adopting Act of 1729, which refers to the “essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine” and defines “scruples” as “only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government.”⁸ Thus the “system” excludes articles not part of the “whole system in its integrity.”⁹ Hodge was careful to distance himself from the view that *essential* refers only to the “doctrines of the gospel.”¹⁰ *Essential* refers, rather, to the entire “system of doctrines common to the Reformed Churches.”¹¹ This includes all teachings on doctrine, worship and government, which are *essential* to that system. There are three categories of such teachings: 1) those common to all Christians, expressed in the early councils of the ancient church; 2) those common to all Protestants, as distinct from Romanism; 3) those peculiar to Reformed Churches, as distinct from Lutheran and Arminian.¹² On the other hand Hodge gives examples of doctrines not essential to the system which are consistent with the kind of exceptions noted by the Adopting assembly. These are doctrines “relating to civil magistrates, the power of the state, conditions of Church membership, marriage, divorce, and other matters lying outside of the ‘system of doctrine’ in its theological

⁶ John Murray, “Creed Subscription in the Presbyterian Church U. S. A.” David W. Hall, ed. *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1995) 259.

⁷ Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1878) 331.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 321.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 329.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 326.

¹² *Ibid.*, 333.

sense...”¹³ As important as the Confession’s teaching on these doctrines is, Hodge maintains, the Church has been wise not to make them conditions of ministerial communion.¹⁴

Being a confessional church means that we are the church.

The church is not a group that supports the particulars of my agenda. The confession is not what I interpret it to mean, but what the church has said it means. It is decidedly un-confessional to seek to impose my own set of particular cherished beliefs on the entire church. The very concept of confessionalism is that the whole church comes to a consensus about its system of belief. To behave otherwise is to be sectarian. Thus, Murray always taught his points of difference with deference to the confession. While Presbyterianism in the nineteenth century moved in the direction of confessing less than it should, our own reaction may lead us to seek to confess more than we should. The prudence of confessionalism demands that we strike a careful balance between these two extremes, nothing less and nothing more.

Being a confessional church requires substantial humility.

The first time I heard the term “consensus document” used of our confession I was taken aback. Surely, I thought, this smacks of compromise. Of course, it is not wrong to hold convictions narrower than the confession, or even at odds with the confession, as long as these do not undermine the system of doctrine. But consensus requires humility and submission to the others. Even the most cursory look at the history of the deliberations of the Westminster assembly will demonstrate that many particular views were consciously and humbly set aside in order to agree upon a doctrinal position. Compromise on non-essentials is necessary to being a confessional church, and essential to conserving the culture of confessionalism, maintaining the purity, peace and unity of the church.

When debating and deciding judicial cases we must consider the nature of the case itself in light of our tradition, consciously setting aside our own particular views or views imputed to but not part of the case. Humility also requires deferring to older elders and ministers. Theological training in our circles is a heady academic experience. That is necessary, but often leaves us with the false impression that we are wiser than those who have been involved in the life and work of the church for decades. Only then will justice be done and the culture of confessionalism preserved.

We need to work much harder at this critical point in our history at being a confessional church.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 334.

¹⁴ Cf. Gregory E. Reynolds, “The Nature, Limits and Place of Exceptions and Scruples in Subscription to the Doctrinal Standards of the Presbyterian Church,” written for the Committee on Candidates and Credentials of the Presbytery of New York and New England, 1999.