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# ORDAINED SERVANT



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## ORDAINED SERVANT

### Statement of Purpose

*Ordained Servant* exists to provide solid materials for the equipping of office-bearers to serve more faithfully. The goal of this journal is to assist the ordained servants of the church to become more fruitful in their particular ministry so that they in turn will be more capable to prepare God's people for works of service. To attain this goal *Ordained Servant* will include articles (both old and new) of a theoretical and practical nature with the emphasis tending toward practical articles wrestling with perennial and thorny problems encountered by office-bearers.

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1. *Ordained Servant* publishes articles inculcating biblical presbyterianism in accord with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and helpful articles from collateral Reformed traditions; however, views expressed by the writers do not necessarily represent the position of *Ordained Servant* or of the Church.
2. *Ordained Servant* occasionally publishes articles on issues on which differing positions are taken by officers in good standing in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. *Ordained Servant* does not intend to take a partisan stand, but welcomes articles from various viewpoints in harmony with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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# CONFESSIONAL INTEGRITY - A PLEA FOR RESTRAINT

by

G. I. Williamson



I'm writing this out of concern for Confessional Integrity. By this I mean the integrity of the church to which I belong. It says that we believe the system of doctrine taught in the Bible, and that the Westminster Standards accurately state that doctrine. Part of that doctrine is the fallibility of the Westminster Standards themselves (Cf. 1:9, 31:3). Therefore to put these on the same level as the Bible would be to deny one of their most important teachings. For this reason, no minister, elder or deacon—not to mention church member—is required to give unqualified adherence to these standards. It has always been understood, in terms of these very documents, that one may truly adhere to the system of doctrine expressed in these documents while—at the same time—holding that the terminology is less than perfect, could be better expressed, or is even flawed in some detail.<sup>1</sup> It is not my purpose in this article to disallow this in any way whatsoever. Yet it does seem to me that a very real danger exists, today, in what I would call the opposite direction. By this I mean a lack of proper respect for these doctrinal standards on the part of those who have subscribed to them.

Some years ago I was asked to serve on a committee appointed by our General Assembly to study the subject of paedocommunion. This I did with the conviction that it was my duty to come back to the Assembly with an honest statement of the results of my study. In this instance I came to the tentative conclusion that the arguments for paedocommunion were cogent, and that the arguments against paedocommunion were weak. I therefore helped to write a majority report that recommended that our standards be changed to allow for this practice. The General Assembly did not act favorably on our recommendations. And by that very fact it, in effect, asserted the continuing authority of our present standards. It is for this reason that I have steadfastly declined the re-

quests that I have received to write, or even speak, publicly (I mean outside the official assemblies of the church) on this issue. Some have not understood this. But my reason is quite simple: though I still think we need better arguments for the status quo than any I have seen, I am bound by my own subscription vows to honor the official standards of the church. And that is the way I want it. I do not want other ministers of the church to preach or teach things publicly that are contrary to our official doctrinal standards. If they are right, and the church's standards are wrong, I want them to prove it by due process in the assemblies of the church, so that our subordinate standards are changed. I want them to come to their fellow ministers and elders (who are jointly responsible to maintain the church as the pillar and ground of the truth) with such cogent arguments for their position that we are finally constrained to make the changes they want. And since I want others to do that for the sake of the church's unity and integrity I believe it is my duty to do it as well.

Dr. Hugh Martin, one of the great theologians of the Free Church of Scotland, put the issue like this when there was much agitation for relaxing the constraints of subscription.

*"I am...ordained in terms of an ordination vow. This vow is not an instrument special in my case, not peculiar to me. It is the vow taken also by all my brothers who in this Church are exactly my peers. It has been already taken by all the brothers who in this transaction of exacting and accepting my vow represent to me and act the part to me of the Church. Not to mention that they are thus bound by the self-same vow already, taking into account merely that they exact and I render this vow in my ordination, is it conceivable that speaking of this one ordination merely, I alone became bound by it? Is it merely a pact on my side without being a compact between me and*

*the Church? Do I, then, come under obligation to the Church without the Church coming under obligation to me? Who would make an assertion so outrageous? The idea of a vow between creatures of God binding only one party in the transaction is a sheer paralogism. The vow entails very weighty obligation on my side, and on the side of the Church the obligation is as great. The obligation is manifestly reciprocal. That inheres in the idea of it. Laying out of view the contingency of my convictions as to the subject-matter of my vow coming to be changed and my leaving the Church accordingly, I am bound by it, aye, and until the Church shall release me. Is it conceivable that all this time the Church should have been silently reserving a right to release herself what time she may be able to outvote me? Is it possible that on what are actually called 'general impressions' and considerations of good sense it is proposed to regulate anew our Church Communion and I am to be—by a dispensing power, we presume—set free from my Ordination vow and the Church from her reciprocal, and another is to be substituted in its stead?<sup>2</sup> Has a majority power to do this? Yes, if I have power to change my vow and still continue in the Church. And yes, if the Church was not bound to me by prescribing and accepting my vow... A majority may prove treacherous to a vow, just as an individual may: nor is it in the power of the multiplication table to settle a question of morals. Our Ordination vow taking us bound to our Confession settles that we have a Constitution, clearly enough defines it, renders us answerable to it and pledges the Church reciprocally as amenable to it also."<sup>3</sup>*

I do not think that I have a right to preach or to publish (including publishing on the internet) anything that plainly contradicts the subordinate standards of our church. Similarly, I do not think that other ministers and elders of the OPC have the right to do this either. And that is not all. It is also my conviction that any change in the church's position should be

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plainly stated and arrived at only by due process. This is what has been done in the past. There was a time when Presbyterians believed—and professed to believe—that the Pope is ‘that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition.’ The time came when a majority of pastors and elders came to believe that this was saying more than could be proved from scripture. Therefore the wording was changed so as to express clearly that the church had come to believe that the man of sin and antichrist passages mean more than merely the Papacy. It is my conviction that this is what confessional integrity requires. We should say what we mean, and mean what we say—unitedly and unambiguously.

If a man seeks office in the OPC but wants to publicly teach things that are contrary to the Confession and Catechisms, I do not think that we should receive him. If, on the other hand, he honestly states that he hopes to persuade the OPC to change what its Confession and/or Catechisms say—while refraining from any public preaching or teaching that is contrary to them—I think we should receive him. It is precisely here that the churches of the continental Reformed tradition have something to teach us. Consider the time-honored form of subscription that we quote here from the Church Order of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand:

*We, the undersigned, office bearers of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, do hereby, sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, declare by this our subscription that we heartily believe and are persuaded that the whole system of doctrine as taught in the Belgic and Westminster Confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, does fully agree with the Word of God.*

*We therefore promise to teach diligently and to defend faithfully the aforesaid doctrine, without either directly or indirectly contradicting the same by our public preaching or writing.*

*We declare moreover that we not only reject all errors that militate against this doctrine, but that we are disposed to refute and contradict these and to exert ourselves in keeping the church free from such errors.*

*And if hereafter any difficulties*

*or different sentiments respecting the aforesaid doctrines should arise in our minds, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, teach, or defend the same, either by preaching or writing, until we have first revealed such sentiments to the Session, Presbytery or Synod, that the same may be examined, being ready always cheerfully to submit to the judgment of the Session, Presbytery or Synod, under penalty, in case of refusal, of being by that very fact suspended from our office.*

*Furthermore, if at any time the Session, Presbytery or Synod, may deem it proper to require of us a further explanation of our sentiments respecting any particular doctrine of any of the afore mentioned standards, we do hereby promise to be always willing and ready to comply with such requisition, under the penalty above mentioned, reserving for ourselves however the right of appeal in case we should believe ourselves aggrieved by the sentence of the Session or the Presbytery, and until a decision is made upon such an appeal, we will acquiesce in the determination and judgment already passed.<sup>4</sup>*

The benefits of faithful adherence to the principles stated above became evident to me as a result of my ministerial service in New Zealand. A minister of one of the churches came to the conviction that the Westminster Confession’s doctrine of the Sabbath was wrong. But he did not begin preaching and teaching contrary to the Confession. No, he brought the matter to the Presbytery (and ultimately to the Synod) by way of what they called a ‘gravamen.’<sup>5</sup> His gravamen did not win approval, so he—still acting in a manner fully in accord with his vows—accepted a call to another church in another country where his views would not be out of accord with that church’s official standards. Though I was opposed to the change he sought in his gravamen, I have always respected the way in which he honored the form of subscription. And that is not all. To the best of my knowledge the orderly process which was followed protected the church of which he had been pastor from damage. It also helped preserve the denomination from having a serious conflict. It is not hard to imagine how different some sad events in recent church history might have been if similar restraint had been evident. Some-

times it has been the church which has failed to exercise restraint. I think this was true in the ‘common grace’ decision of the CRC in 1924. Suddenly a new doctrinal statement was imposed on men who disagreed with it, by the majority. And it seems to me that it was something like that in 1944 in the Gereformeerde Kerk in Holland?<sup>6</sup> But my concern here is that it is not only Synods and Councils that can err, so can ministers and elders. And I think we—individually—are even more likely to do so. I therefore urge you, my brother pastors and elders, to heed the wise words of the Dutch Reformed fathers by exercising restraint and patiently seeking by due process—in the assemblies of the church—to effect the changes that you think are needed.

### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> The WCF is simply mistaken, for example, when it uses the word ‘frequently’ in WCF VII:4.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Martin was a minister in the Free Church when great changes were taking place in Scotland. One of the most notable was the invention of the Declaratory Act in the United Presbyterian Church, which seriously undermined the authority of the Westminster Confession. It was in the light of such developments that he vigorously opposed the proposed union of the Free Church with that denomination.

<sup>3</sup> Scottish Theology, by John McLoed pp. 324,325.

<sup>4</sup> Forms and Confessions of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, published by the National Publishing Committee of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> The word simply means a grievance or complaint against the Confessional Standards.

<sup>6</sup> I pointed out what I see as a distinct advantage in our Presbyterian Form of Government for avoiding this sort of thing (cf. “Which is More Hierarchical: The Reformed or the Presbyterian Form of Church Government?” in *Ordained Servant*, Vol. 8, issue 2). But, of course, this will only safeguard us if we faithfully adhere to these wise restraints.

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