

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.

Editorial Policy

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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Please send materials intended for possible publication in *Ordained Servant* to the Editor, G. I. Williamson, 406 Normal College Ave., Sheldon, IA 51201. (Or you can send a text file, by Email to: williamson.1@opc.org).

EDITORIAL NOTES

Three of the ordination vows taken by office bearers of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church are the same for Ministers, Elders and Deacons. These vows are as follows:

- (1) **Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?**
- (2) **Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?**
- (3) **Do you approve of the government, discipline, and worship of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church?**

In later issues we hope to devote attention to other vows as well, but in this issue of *Ordained Servant* we want to focus attention on the second vow. As suggested in the editorial of the previous issue of this journal, it is our conviction that we, as a confessional church, need to manifest a greater degree of integrity in our adherence to the form of sound words that we have solemnly confessed to be a faithful expression of “the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.” As John Murray once said with respect to signers of the Auburn Affirmation, these “men... solemnly vowed belief in and adherence to these great verities which they...either denied or branded as mere theories.” Professor Murray rightly called this

a “blatant breach of trust, of the basic principle of honesty” or in other words it is “moral perjury, and that in one of the most sacred relations that exists in this world.”

“Can you say that there is no relation between a man's position in the realm of doctrine and his principles of life and conduct?” asked Murray. “No; they are one because they concern truth and the sanctity of truth. Truth is one, and it is a moral and psychological impossibility for a man's belief with respect to what constitutes Christianity to be heterodox and his beliefs with respect to what constitutes the norm of Christian life to be orthodox.”

“The primal necessity is truth in the inward parts, and error with respect to God, Christ, sin and redemption cannot co-exist there with a true standard of moral obligation. Modernism in doctrine and modernism in ethics are ultimately one.” (The quotations are from *Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 1, pp. 194,195.*)

We are not Modernists, of course. But, as Murray went on to show in the essay quoted above, it is by no means impossible that “earnest men, believing men” can nevertheless “appear to be out of sympathy with some of the distinctive doctrines of that communion whose doctrines they have solemnly vowed to believe and maintain.”

Now some will immediately ask the question: “But isn't this to put these man-made documents in

too high a position?” The answer to this is really quite simple: “No, it is not anything of the sort *if they actually are a faithful summary of the teaching of Scripture.*” And that is exactly what we said we believed when we subscribed to them in the first place. We said we sincerely received and adopted the Confession and Catechisms as faithful expressions of what the Bible teaches. No, we did not say we believed they were infallible or inerrant. We affirmed that to be true only of the Scriptures. So, if we—for some reason that we *now* find compelling—come to believe that they are *not* in actual fact true to the Bible we have two options. We can leave the OPC and join a denomination that has a creed we can agree with. Or, if our disagreement is relatively minor, we can bring a revised creedal statement to my Session or Presbytery in order to seek to persuade our fellow office-bearers that the secondary standards need improvement. This has actually been done in our history, and should be done wherever it can be shown to be needed. In the mean time, while this process is going on, it is our solemn duty to abide by the precept of the Psalmist (Psalm 15:4b). The man acceptable to God is he who, when he finds out that there is pain involved in keeping vows, accepts that pain because of his ethical integrity.

There is no more urgent need in the OPC today than Ministers, Elders and Deacons who are willing to honor their vows in the manner spoken of by the Psalmist.

THE DUTIES OF ELDERS

by

Daniel R. Hyde



Almost 60 years ago, J.L. Schaver lamented the deplorable condition of the eldership in Reformed and Presbyterian churches, which “were sleeping at the switch.”¹ It is always a delicate matter when one wants to sound an alarm without sounding as an alarmist. I do want to sound an alarm, not that there is any specific errors we are guilty of, but to always keep us alert and sober, which is a Biblical virtue.

As Reformed and Presbyterian churches, we need to ask ourselves the question, “What are we doing to ensure that our churches will stay orthodox in doctrine and vibrant in witness for the next generation?” There are countless ideas and topics that can fit under this question, but I want to focus on one, namely, training up a new generation of elders to rule, to teach, to shepherd, and to counsel.

As a young church planter I can say from experience, that one of the most important foundations of our churches must be a strong eldership. We need men with conviction and passion to lead God’s people. This is of the essence of being Reformed and Presbyterian. Too many of our churches rise and fall with the pastor; this is one danger. But another is that too

many of our churches rise and fall with the congregation. To remedy this and bring stability into a local church, a solid group of elders is needed to safeguard the congregation from the minister, and to safeguard the minister from the congregation. In my own experience I witnessed a solid Consistory (Session) not only keep a church afloat when its pastor retired, but actually see the church grow as they searched for a year and a half for a new pastor.

What follows is a part of my elder-training manual that I am developing in my congregation. It is an exposition of article 14 of the Church Order of the URCNA, which I pray will benefit my colleagues in the URCNA, but also in the OPC as these principles apply. This article may also serve to further our common bond of fraternity as historic Reformed and Presbyterians.

Article 14 of our Church Order says

The duties belonging to the office of elder consist of continuing in prayer and ruling the church of Christ according to the principles taught in Scripture, in order that purity of doctrine and holiness of life

may be practiced. They shall see to it that their fellow-elders, the minister(s) and the deacons faithfully discharge their offices. They are to maintain the purity of the Word and Sacraments, assist in catechizing the youth, promote God-centered schooling, visit the members of the congregation according to their needs, engage in family visiting, exercise discipline in the congregation, actively promote the work of evangelism and missions, and insure that everything is done decently and in good order (paragraph division mine).

The Elders’ Purpose

The goal and reason the eldership exists is “in order that purity of doctrine and holiness of life may be practiced.” The elders are to rule over the beliefs and lives of their flock, since Christians are members of a public community. I like how *The Book of Church Order* of the OPC states this, when it says, “They are to watch diligently over the people committed to their charge to prevent corruption of doctrine or morals” (X.3).

Ruling takes diligence. In a church like mine, which began as a small church plant but is now

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growing month by month, the amount of guidance, visiting, counseling, and sin is exponential. But the elders must be diligent to keep on top of who is in need, who needs correction, who is not at worship, what problems exist amongst the members, etc. It may seem overwhelming, but it is only overwhelming when you are not being a diligent elder.

The Elders' General Duties

The elders fulfill their purpose of keeping the church pure in doctrine and life by doing certain duties. Article 14 begins with the general duties of the elders and then moves on to their specific duties.

In unity with the ministers (art. 2) and deacons (art. 15), prayer is listed as the first duty. We can say this is the primary duty of the elder. As he prays, his duties will be effective and powerful; but if he doesn't pray his duties will be futile and impotent. I especially appreciate how *The Book of Church Order* of the OPC says this: "They should pray with and for the people" (emphasis mine; chapter X.3). How strong would our churches be if the elders did not simply pray for those under their care, which is very important to say the least, but as shepherds lived among their flock, knew their intimate needs, and offered those needs to the Chief Shepherd?

In distinction from the ministers and deacons, the elders are to rule. They hold the analogous

office of the Old Testament king.² They are anointed for ruling, governing, and guiding. But their rule is not according to the principles of the business world, but "according to the principles taught in Scripture." So how do the elders rule? This leads us to a consideration of their specific duties below.

The Elders' Specific Duties

1. Oversee all office-bearers

The elders are to "see to it that their fellow-elders, the minister(s) and the deacons faithfully discharge their offices." The elders hold the office of elder, have the task of overseer, and are to have the character of a shepherd. To be an overseer is to be a watchman, always on the lookout (Acts 20:28). And watching out for the other officers of the church is to be done willingly, eagerly, and as an example (Greek: tupos, "type"; 1 Peter 5:2). This is a huge task. But God fills the office with capable men for the task. This is why the wisdom of the following statement is so good:

"Those who fill this office should be sound in the faith and of exemplary Christian life, men of wisdom and discretion, worthy of the esteem of the congregation as spiritual fathers" (BCO, X.2).

The elders are to oversee the minister of the Word. The Book of Church Order especially emphasizes this, saying, "They

should have particular concern for the doctrine and conduct of the minister of the Word and help him in his labors." Some questions the elders need to ask themselves are these: Is the pastor faithfully preaching the Word? How can I free him from administrative tasks so he can pray, study, and visit? Is the flock growing in knowledge and piety?

The elders are also to oversee the ministry of the deacons. A few questions would be: Are the deacons aware of benevolent needs in the congregation? Are they serving the pastor, also, by assisting him in daily administrative tasks? Are they visiting those in need regularly, praying and encouraging them with Scripture?

These are the kinds of questions that the elders must ask and evaluate to ensure the congregation is being true to Christ's great commission. This is the essence of what Paul told the elders in Ephesus, when he said, "...take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:28).

2. Maintain the purity of the Word and Sacraments

In order for an elder to know if the Word and sacraments are being administered purely, he must himself know the Word and be "apt to teach" the Word (1 Tim 3:2). One practical way this

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can be worked out in a particular congregation is to have a time of “sermon review” at Consistory/Session meetings. And in doing so, here are a few pointers to the elders: Be humble. Be specific about a point the minister made that you don’t understand or agree with. Don’t make generalized statements as this shows an uncaring attitude – uncaring in taking the effort to listen well and uncaring in burdening the pastor with doubt and criticism. Have direct quotes from the sermon you would like to discuss. The minister must also be humble enough to receive constructive criticism, and actually train the elders to be able to offer this review.

Since the elders hold the office of king, analogously, they are also to “maintain the purity of the Word and sacraments” by defending the church (Acts 20:28-31). They are to defend the church from enemies outside the church, as Paul says, “Savage wolves will come in among you” (Acts 20:29); and from enemies inside the church: “From among yourselves men will rise up” (Acts 20:30). As under-shepherds of the Chief Shepherd, they too are to use the rod of defense (Ps 23) and the sword of offense, the Word of the Living God (Eph 6:17). Elders, know the Word! Know your Confessions!

3. Assist in catechizing the Youth

This is primarily the task of the minister, as the one trained to teach. But one joy in a healthy

ministry is to have the elders join this task. They are to “nourish and guard the children of the covenant” (BCO, X.3). Here is where I must sound the alarm. In my experience, most elders are not “apt to teach,” but in fact, shun the idea of teaching at all. How can we remedy this? First, nominate and elect only those men who know the Word well enough to teach it. Second, we as pastors need to have the elders/potential elders sit in on our catechism classes. They need to observe us and we need to observe them in teaching situations. This is so important as elders need to be a part of the life of our covenant youth.

4. Promote God-centered Schooling

Elders are to be involved in the lives of their flocks, for example, in the education of their children. While education is primarily the sphere of parents, the church is also involved as it seeks to see its members applying the word of God in all areas of life. In our diverse congregation we encourage parents to be involved in their children’s education by applying the Reformed Faith, whether their children attend a Christian school (in our area there is a URC/CRC school, a Lutheran school, and an Evangelical school), are home schooled, attend a public charter school, or the public school.

5. Visit Those in Need

One of the blessings of being an elder is the experience of visiting the people under your care,

whether they are sick, hospitalized, or mourning. We have a glorious history as Reformed Churches in visiting our people, whether in Geneva with Calvin, or Scotland with Knox. It is amazing to me that in so many evangelical churches that I was a part of in the past that the pastors and elders did not visit their members. But let us be faithful shepherds, knowing who is in need, not being afraid of those in need, and comforting them. Remember, you too will one day need a visit just as someone today may.

6. Family Visitation

The practice of regular (yearly) visitation of the families in our congregations is also a blessing. To intimately fellowship with young and old, single and married, new convert or faithful widow where an elder will see the labors of the minister, elders, and deacons in practical ways. Here are a few practical points for family visiting: First, be prepared. In our church I prepare a basic outlined lesson for the elders to use with every family in that particular year. Second, have questions for every age group. I love to ask little children to open with praying the Lord’s Prayer. I also ask them to recite the Creed and a few of the commandments. For older children I have them recite a catechism question or two, such as questions 1, 21, and 60. I always ask children what baptism means. Ask the adult(s) about their relationship, about their daily piety, and encourage them to become a part of the life of

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the church. Third, bring a journal with you. After the visit write down the prayer requests, how you think they are doing, and your overall impressions.

7. Exercise Discipline

Discipline is a ministry of reconciliation (cf. Mt 18:12-14; Lk 15; 2 Cor 5) and restoration (cf. Jn 21:15-17; Acts 9; Phil 15-17). I think we can more effectively exercise this, the third mark of the Church, if we do the following: First, we need to be praying as Consistories/Sessions more for those under discipline to be restored. Second, we need to be prepared with the mindset that discipline is long, painful, and difficult work. Third, we need to learn tact and boldness in the interpersonal relationships that are involved with discipline. Fourth, and very basic, sin should never come as a surprise to us, no matter whose sin it is or what sin it is.

8. Actively Promote the Work of Evangelism and Missions

I think The Book of Church Order gives us a very practical key in what this means when it says that one of the ministries of the elders is to “instruct the ignorant” (X.3). What better way to “actively promote the work of evangelism and missions” than to be involved in those tasks oneself? As well, it the elders’ job to invite missionaries to preach and present their work in our churches. It is the elders’ job to be active in planting new churches, by proposing to start them, and by overseeing them in their infancy.

9. Insure that Everything is Done Decently and in Good Order

Finally, what this all boils down to is this: the elders are charged with governing the churches doctrine and life so that all things are done in rever-

ence to God. The eldership is a service to God, and we serve Him best by letting His name arise in our midst and letting ours fade into the background. When things are done decently and in good order, we are not on the stage performing in the eyes of men, but God is center-stage, performing through His Word and Sacraments and receiving all the praise and adoration.

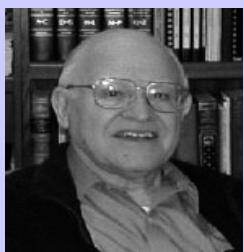
May you as elders decrease that the Lord’s work and will may increase.

1 J.L. Schaver, *The Polity of the Churches: Volume 1* (Chicago: Church Polity Press, 1947) 153.

2 For an excellent explanation of the Continental Reformed view of the analogy between the offices of Israel and the Church, see Derke P. Bergsma, “Prophets, Priests, and Kings: Biblical Offices,” in *The Compromised Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998) 117-131.

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SUBSCRIBE TO THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS?



by

G.I. Williamson

No one can be a minister, ruling elder and deacon in the OPC without first giving an affirmative answer to the following question:

“Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?”

We are all familiar with this vow, but what does it mean? According to Charles Hodge our vows have been understood in three different ways in the history of Presbyterianism. “First,” says Hodge, “some understand them to mean **that every proposition contained in the Confession of Faith is included in the profession made at ordination.** Secondly, others say **that they mean just what the words import. What is adopted is the ‘system of doctrine.’** The system of the Reformed Churches is a known and admitted scheme of doctrine, and that scheme, nothing more or less, we profess to adopt. The third view of the subject is, **that by the system of doctrine contained in the Confession is meant the essential doctrines of Christianity and nothing more.**” (Editor’s emphasis.)

I

The first, says Hodge, was never the view even among Old School Presbyterians. Men have always been free to say that they do not think this or that word, or phrase, is the best way of saying what the Bible teaches. And with this I am in hearty agreement. To explain why, I want to cite two examples. (1) In Chapter VII, section 4, of the Westminster Confession we read that the “covenant of grace is frequently set forth in Scripture by the name of a testament...” The problem is that while everything else in this statement is true, I do not think the word ‘frequently’ is accurate. May I not, then, be free to state this fact without anyone saying I dissent from the *doctrine* of the covenant? (2) Or take the statement in Chapter XXI, section 8, where the Confession explains how the Sabbath is to be sanctified. Here we are informed that men are not only required to “observe a holy resting all that day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their **worldly** employments and recreations, but are also [to be] taken up, the whole time, in the public and private **exercises** of [God’s] worship...” Now my problem here is

not that I disagree with the doctrine, but that I do not think this is the best way of stating the doctrine. I do not think we should be involved in ‘worldly’ employments or recreations on any day of the week, any more than on the Sabbath. I think a better term here would be ‘daily’ or ‘everyday.’ The other term that I would like to see improved on is the word ‘exercises.’ This term seems to me to conjure up the idea of a kind of mechanized spirituality, as in read the Bible and pray all day Sunday. Sometimes I think the best thing for me to do on Sunday is to take a short nap (which could hardly be called an exercise)!

Other examples could be given. But my point is that the text of the Confession is not perfect as the *inspired* text of the Bible is. So there ought to be the right to disagree with a particular expression here and there, so long as the disagreement really *is* with the wording, and *not* with the doctrines.

II

The other view that Charles Hodge opposed was what can be called ‘the substance of doctrine

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view.’ And here, too, I am in hearty agreement with him. If there is one thing that I have learned from recent church history, it is the devastation that this view has brought upon Presbyterian Churches around the world.

In 1879 the United Presbyterian Church in Scotland invented what was called a Declaratory Act or Statement. Other churches soon followed their example (the Free Church in 1892 and the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand (PCNZ) in 1901). By this act, the PCNZ said “diversity of opinion is recognized in such points of the Confession as do not enter into the substance of the Reformed Faith, and full authority to determine what points fall within this description is retained for the church.” Whatever may have been the intention in adopting this act, as Rev. Jack Sawyer noted “the historically observable effect of this Act was to allow the assemblies of the church to permit increasingly significant deviations from the express doctrinal propositions of the Westminster Confession, until at last the Westminster Confession in reality ceased to have any binding authority as a subordinate standard of the church.”¹

As Dr. Hodge himself put it, “the substance of the doctrine is not the doctrine, any more than the substance of a man is the man.” To say “I adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this church, as containing system of doctrine contained in the Scriptures” is one thing. To say “I adopt the substance of the system

of doctrine contained in the Confession of faith and Catechisms teaching” is another.

The fatal flaw with this view is that there is no definition of what the substance of the system of doctrine is. We know what the system of doctrine is because it is clearly (though not perfectly) expressed in the Westminster Standards. But no one knows what is meant by speaking of “the substance of” this doctrine.

III

The only viable view, then—according to Dr. Hodge—is the adoption of the Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Bible. And concerning this Dr. Hodge says “the candidate has no right to put his own sense upon the words propounded to him. He has no right to select from all possible meanings which the words may bear, that particular sense which suits his purpose, or which, he thinks, will save his conscience. It is well known that this course has been openly advocated, not only by the Jesuits, but by men of this generation, in this country and in Europe. The ‘chemistry of thought,’ it is said, can make all creeds alike. Men have boasted that they could sign any creed. To a man in a balloon the earth appears a plane, all inequalities on its surface being lost in the distance. And here is a philosophic elevation from which all forms of human belief look alike. They are sublimed into general formulas, which include them all and distinguish none. Professor

Newman, just before his open apostasy, published a tract in which he defended his right to be in the English Church while holding the doctrines of the Church of Rome. He claimed for himself the Thirty-nine articles in a ‘non-natural sense’; that is, in the sense which he chose to put upon the words. This shocks the common sense and the common honesty of men. There is no need to argue the matter. The turpitude of such a principle is much more clearly seen intuitively than discursively.”

“The two principles which, by the common consent of all honest men, determine the interpretation of oaths and professions of faith, are; first, the plain, historical meaning of the words; and secondly, the animus imponentis, that is, the intention of the party imposing the oath or requiring the profession. The words, therefore, ‘system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures,’ are to be taken in their plain, historical sense. A man is not at liberty to understand the words “Holy Scriptures,” to mean all books written by holy men, because although that interpretation might consist with the signification of the words, it is inconsistent with the historical meaning of the phrase. Nor can he understand them, as they would be understood by Romanists, as including the Apocrypha, because the words being used by a Protestant Church, must be taken in a Protestant sense. Neither can the candidate say, that he means by “system of doctrine” Christianity as opposed to Mohammedanism, or Protestantism, as opposed to

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Romanism, or evangelical Christianity, as distinguished from the theology of the Reformed (i.e., Calvinistic) Churches, because the words being used by a Reformed Church, must be understood in the sense which that Church is known to attach to them. If a man professes to receive the doctrine of the Trinity, the word must be taken in its Christian sense, the candidate cannot substitute for that sense the Sabellian idea of a modal Trinity, nor the philosophical trichotomy of Pantheism. And so of all other expressions which have a fixed historical meaning. Again, by the animus imponentis in the case contemplated, is to be understood not the mind or intention of the ordaining bishop in the Episcopal Church, or of the ordaining presbytery in the Presbyterian Church. It is the mind or intention of the Church, of which the bishop or the presbytery is the organ or agent. Should a Romanizing bishop in the Church of England give “a non-natural” sense to the Thirty-nine articles, that would not acquit the priest, who should sign them in that sense, of the crime of moral perjury; or should a presbytery give an entirely erroneous interpretation to the Westminster Confession, that would not justify a candidate for ordination in adopting it in that

sense. The Confession must be adopted in the sense of the Church, into the service of which the minister, in virtue of that adoption, is received. These are simple principles of honesty, and we presume they are universally admitted, at least so far as our Church is concerned.”²

Presbyterian and Reformed history demonstrates the fact that there is no absolute safeguard in any form of subscription. This is not to say that no improvement is possible. When the Reformed Churches of New Zealand adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith alongside the Three Forms of Unity, they also modified the wording of the form of subscription. The phrase “all the points of doctrine” was changed to read “the whole system of doctrine.” And it is my opinion that this is a modest improvement. But be that as it may, the fact remains that nothing will protect the church from error but diligence on the part of those who administer this oath.

In other words the men who already are ministers and ruling elders must be diligent and careful as they examine men who aspire to the biblical offices. They must do this in order to elicit as clearly as

possible the testimony of these men that they really mean it when they say they sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms as faithful (though not infallible) statements of what the Bible teaches. It is my opinion that this—*more than anything else*—has enabled the Orthodox Presbyterian Church to continue in the line of those men who sacrificed so much back in 1936 because they believed these doctrines.

We, as officebearers of the OPC, need to be men of integrity. We need to examine our own hearts before the Lord to make sure that we are faithful to our commitments. And one of these is the duty to ascertain that those who are ordained by us give convincing evidence of their hearty agreement with the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Standards.

1 *Trust and Obey*, A forty year history of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, by D. G. Vanderpyyl p. 453.

2 All of the quotations from Hodge are from his *Church Polity*, which has recently been republished by, and is available from, Westminster Discount Books of Scarsdale, N.Y. (914) 472-2237.

“...the creed is the bond of fellowship...and an instrument for the preservation of both purity and peace. The persons subscribing to that creed are bound to adhere to its teaching as long as they enjoy the privileges accruing from that subscription and from the fellowship it entails. They must relinquish these privileges whenever they are no longer able to avow the tenets expressed in the creed.”

— John Murray



ON BEING A CONFSSIONAL CHURCH

BY

Gregory Edward Reynolds

In 1980, at my first General Assembly, the late Bernard “Chip” Stonehouse exhorted us 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 to 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 I think it means to be a confessional church. My fellow officers and I 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. But we must always be testing the truth and accuracy of that consensus by the careful exegesis of Scripture. Unlike the Scriptures, our confessions are fallible. Yet, 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 come to 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.

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, Professor Murray taught his points of difference to seminary students and even defend them in his writings. He ad-

ON BEING A CONFESSIONAL CHURCH

mitted 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 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. And it often does so on non-essential points, teaching what 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 interpretation. As a confessional church our courts must not act as if no one before us had 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

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

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 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”⁷ he said.

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 defined “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 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.

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. 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. Consensus requires humility and submission to the others. Even the most cursory look at the history of the extended 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.

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.

1 Bryan Pieters, “Synod of Dordt, the Lesser,” (Nicotine Theological Journal October 2003) 4.
 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. David 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.
 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.
 13 *Ibid.*, 334.

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SOME THOUGHTS ON TERM ELDERSHIP

by

John R. Sittema

Some time back, a reader wrote to ask me to address a column to the subject of the practice of “term eldership.” For those unfamiliar with the practice, allow me to explain: In many Reformed churches, elders are selected by “election” by the congregation for a specified term of office. “Ordained” to office only once, these brothers are eligible for reelection, and subsequent “installation” to office, again and again throughout their lifetimes. The practice differs markedly from that in most churches who hold to the Westminster creedal tradition where the manner of preparation and selection to office for a ruling elder is much more rigorous, and the term is considered to be lifelong.

The reader implied some criticism of the term-eldership practice, as I recall, opining that nowhere in Scripture was the practice to be found, either explicitly or implicitly. Further, the writer went on, it is a waste of God’s precious gifts to the local church if several of the men to whom He has given the wisdom and spiritual ability to pastor the flock are on “vacation” from their responsibilities for a year or more at a time. And, as another correspondent observed not too long ago, the practice of “term eldership” tends to tilt the emphasis of the office from pastoring to that of a committee position or a

board member term of office—hardly appropriate for an office with such weighty Biblical responsibilities.

PROBLEMS WITH TERM ELDERSHIP

Allow me to make a few observations up front. The first is that the practice of “term eldership” today seems to be especially prevalent in those churches whose legacy is that of the Church Order of Dort (the great synod that answered the challenges of Arminius with the Canons and also wrote a comprehensive Church Order whose fundamental principles serve to undergird several such documents, representing many denominations and/or groups of churches today). Term eldership is not customarily the practice in those Presbyterian and Reformed churches whose confessional legacy is that of Westminster, rather than the Continental standards.

Second, among those churches that practice “term eldership,” several bad habits seem to go along hand in hand. One of these is, as the correspondent above notes, that the view of “election” to office carries with it such non-Biblical political connotations as to corrupt the high and holy practice from the start. In the USA especially, where the image of the political process is so low, it is

difficult to imagine “election” to the office of elder not being corrupted by association with popularity, the notion of the elder as the democratic representative of a group within the church, and even the practice of “campaigning” for office. Sadly, I have heard much that would indicate that these practices and attitudes are widespread.

In addition, the practice of “term eldership” does, at least, suggest a temporary, and thus an insufficient view of the work of the elder. I have railed for years in this column against an “administrative” view of the office of elder, insisting on one shaped by the Biblical image of the shepherd. It is difficult to imagine a true shepherd, in Biblical times, working an eight hour shift, and then forgetting about his flock for the remainder of the day. Jesus, in John 10, called such a caregiver a “hireling,” and would not even dignify such a man with the term “shepherd.” But this would seem to be the inevitable consequence of electing elders to a three year term. Service in office as an elder is viewed as no different than service on the Christian school board. It’s a committee position. And once that notion sinks roots, it is almost impossible to cultivate a strong and Biblical view of an elder as a pastor, daily and deeply concerned about the spiritual life and walk of the

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flock of God throughout their long discipleship.

Further, if the concept of “term eldership” twists the view of elder even a few degrees off Biblical center, the result also affects the preparation process for those entering the office. My contacts within several conservative Presbyterian bodies convince me that their view and practice of the preparation and examination of elders is superior to that in the CRC tradition with which I am most familiar. In the CRC, my experience has been that training often discusses policies, procedures and practices. Newly elected term elders are helped to become acquainted with the routine of the meeting schedule, assigned their “district,” partnered with a visiting teammate, and briefly apprised of “cases” in process. Such a pragmatic approach is necessary with only three (and in some cases two) years in office, one has to “hit the ground running.”

In the Presbyterian churches with which I am familiar, elder training involves years of assigned reading and study, thorough grounding in Reformed theology and the creeds, careful examination of the existing pastoral involvement of the potential candidate. (Is he already teaching? How well? What is the level of his discernment? Is he already involved in counseling? Is his work up to Biblical standards? Does he “desire the office of overseer/elder?” Is he willing to do the work necessary to be spiritually prepared?) Only after such careful and lengthy reflection do the existing elders present the candidate to the flock, often ex-

amining him in the presence of the congregation, and only then proceeding, should they concur, to his ordination. The result of such a careful process is that a weight of respect and trust is given to the elder by the flock. In my experience, election to a three year term often (usually?) does not bestow such respect and trust. (Should you desire to read a bit more of the theory and practice behind such a view and practice of office, I highly recommend a little booklet by Lawrence R. Eyres entitled *The Elders of the Church*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1975.)

By this point, you have no doubt noted that I am critical of the “term-eldership” concept. Clearly I am, and not only for the reasons listed above. I have challenged several of my friends who hold passionately to the “term-eldership” concept to point to any passage that suggests, not to mention insists, that the Bible views an elder in any other way than a man appointed for life. None to date has risen to the challenge. In fact, the “defense” of the practice among theologically competent people is usually apologetic, not passionate. All I hear is appeals to tradition, that “Church Order prescribes it thus and so.” OK, but Church Order isn’t infallible, remember? At the same time, as a minister of the Word in the CRC, I am bound to that Church Order, and am aware that my options are limited. And so, although I write as I do above, hoping and praying to change attitudes and perspectives, and thus practices within the CRC and other churches that have adopted term eldership, here

at Bethel CRC in Dallas, we practice term eldership. And, to be honest, I’ve never met an elder with whom I’ve worked in the CRC who doesn’t like the “term” concept (especially in the last three months of the last year of the term)! So. . .

“IF YOU CAN’T SAY SOMETHING NICE. . .”

To be fair, I must note some benefits in the practice of “term eldership.” For one, gifted men are more likely to serve in Christ’s church as elder if their service has specific term limits. That benefit is worthy of note in light of the many kingdom causes which place demands particularly upon the most gifted of the men of God among us. They simply do not have the time to serve all who ask; a limited term in each ministry enables them to serve several, in sequence.

Again, the practice of “terms” does allow for the practice of “sabbaticals,” periods of rest and refreshment from the weighty burdens of office. Such sabbaticals, between terms of office, are particularly beneficial for those who serve in very large congregations, with many pastoral duties, or those who serve in young, new or smaller congregations, where the amount of work is not able to be spread around as many willing workers. Of course, granting a temporary “sabbatical” is not inappropriate for those churches that practice life-tenure eldership. In fact, it is quite common.

I will report a benefit which Professor William Heyns alludes

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to in his venerable *Handbook for Elders and Deacons* (even though I find it a spurious argument). He suggests that term eldership profits the church by allowing the work to be spread out more equitably among the congregation, and that it profits the church by avoiding “hurt feelings” in those who would otherwise not be able to take a turn. As I said, I find the argument spurious, because in my view it promotes a non-pastoral understanding of the office of elder. I only mention it because it is one of the most popular explanations I’ve heard for the term eldership view in twenty years of ministry (sad to say).

“IF I HAD MY DRUTHERS...”

I would prefer, for the overall dignity of the office, and to preserve the pastoral character of it, that the office of elder be clearly understood to be for lifetime tenure. I believe it is the testimony of Scripture that God makes men elders (Acts 20:28); the church only receives and recognizes them as such. This, of course, would demand a change in the manner of selecting elders (not electing them, but examining and approving them), and may well include the needed admission that the church cannot, indeed may not, determine in advance how many elders it will have. If God makes men elders, he alone determines how many he will raise up. Those whom he has equipped, to whom the church identifies and recognizes as possessing these Spirit-endowed qualifications, should be ordained to office.

However, I am unlikely to sway easily the views and practices of Reformed churches and individuals who have several hundreds of years of tradition behind them, I’ll settle for securing your agreement to a couple of smaller points. (If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em, but convince ’em in the process!)

First, even if you practice (and defend) term eldership, please remember that those once ordained remain elders for the rest of their lives, even if they are not in active office all that time. That this point is valid even in churches that hold to term eldership is demonstrated by the difference in “ordination” and “installation.” An elder is ordained once; after that, he is installed. Constant reminders of this fact may assist those making nominations, and help those in the congregation as well to grasp the seriousness and weight of the office, and to avoid the “democratic process” corruption discussed above.

Second, if your congregation elects elders for terms of office, and then grants them release from active duty for a time, make clear to all that they are still in service, even though the nature of their service may be changed for a time. For example, sabbatical elders (call them that!) ought to be invited to regular and periodic (quarterly?) elder conferences, to be apprised of the status of the spiritual care of the flock, to be involved in prayer on behalf of the other brothers and the flock itself, and to be consulted on matters in which their wisdom would be beneficial. Further, should the burden of the care of the flock be-

come too great, due to some unusual circumstance or set of circumstances, the sabbatical elders could be called in to relieve the active elders of some of the routine (but nonetheless important) pastoral duties.

Finally, even if your congregation practices term eldership, make clear to the flock and to any potential candidates that your local requirements for office are those weighty requirements set forth by Scripture, and not merely a list of “functionary skills” needed for a committee-type position. Far too often local churches get what they deserve: elders unqualified for office because they were neither appropriately trained nor screened. God forbid that should happen to any of you. His church is too precious to Him to be placed under the care of unqualified, untrained, ill-equipped hirelings!

This article was originally published in the September, 1995 issue of *The Outlook* magazine. Dr. Sittema is presently serving as the Pastor of Young Families in Christ Covenant Church (PCA) in Matthews, North Carolina.

TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM - PART III

Old Side versus New Side, 1741-1758

Darryl Hart and John Muether



Almost like clock work American Presbyterians have endured a major division in the church resulting in two separate denominations. Orthodox Presbyterians are generally well aware of their own break with the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1936 under the leadership of J. Gresham Machen. Fewer in our church, but still many, also generally know the contours of the 1837 split between the Old and New School branches of the Presbyterian Church (still to be featured in this series). Rare however is the Orthodox Presbyterian who can identify the chief causes of the split between the Old Side and New Side Presbyterians that occurred in 1741 only thirty-five years after the formation of the Presbytery of Philadelphia.

The most popular read on that division is correct in that it generally pits the anti-revival Old Side against the pro-revival New Side. But where that interpretation falters is in attributing to the pro-revival party the mantle of conservative Presbyterianism. As it turns out, the revivalists were generally the innovators (if one can be novel in a church so young), while their Old Side opponents were not the proto-liberals many have assumed them to be.

The differences that emerged over the nature and value of subscription at the time of the Adopting Act of 1729 (see part two of this series) revealed two types of piety within the young Presbyterian communion. On the one side, many Presbyterians to the north of Philadelphia, in New Jersey and New York, who shared theological sympathies with New England, were

For the Presbyterians of New England descent, subscription was a violation of liberty of conscience, a way of binding conscience with the words of men rather than the yoke of Christ.

less enthusiastic about subscription than their Scotch-Irish and Southeastern Pennsylvania peers. For the Presbyterians of New England descent, subscription was a violation of liberty of conscience, a way of binding conscience with the words of men rather than the yoke of Christ. On the other side, those Presbyterians who were recent immigrants to the New World and generally of Scotch-Irish descent, having settled in Philadelphia and beyond to Chester and New Castle, believed subscription to be valuable for protecting the church from error

among her ministers. Creedal subscription had become the practice in the Old World and these pro-subscriptionist Presbyterians held that it should also be the practice in America.

The revivals that broke out during the First Great Awakening only contributed to this relatively minor tension. Smaller awakenings had already occurred locally in 1729 among Dutch Reformed in northern New Jersey under the ministry of Theodore Freylinghuysen and then again among New England Congregationalists in 1735 under Jonathan Edwards' preaching. Presbyterians also experienced first hand the effects of these local revivals when Gilbert Tennent followed the example of Freylinghuysen and in the 1730s began to preach the "terrors of the law" to Presbyterians in Pennsylvania.

What turned these minor awakenings into a great one was the arrival of George Whitefield in 1739 in North America. His itinerancy and powerful preaching caused an immediate sensation that in turn generated controversy within the churches and, because of Protestantism's social

standing, also in the surrounding society.

Whitefield complicated the existing tension between those Presbyterians who favored subscription and those who did not. Three specific issues emerged during the years between 1739 and 1741 and each of them had to do not with the gospel and its denial or the personal holiness of Presbyterian ministers—as some attempted to interpret it. Instead, all three concerned the nature and authority of the Christian ministry.

The first issue that Whitefield's revivals brought to a head was the question of itinerancy. Whitefield perfected the practice of itinerant preaching, that is, of traveling from city to village, speaking to crowds of believers and the unchurched whether inside church buildings or outside in the market square or in the river-side pasture. But itinerancy had been an issue before his arrival. The specific conflict stemmed from pastors, like Gilbert Tennent, who went into a community and began to preach without the invitation of the local pastor. Revivalists felt justified in so doing because souls were at stake. Established pastors, however, rightly considered such occasions of preaching as a rebuke to their own ministry. After all, if a church were already in place with a duly ordained minister, why were the revivalists necessary?

A second issue, much related to Gilbert Tennent, concerned the proper training of pastors. William Tennent, Sr., with sup-

port from his sons, in 1735 had founded the Log College just north of Philadelphia, as a "school of the prophets." Not only was the Log College a forerunner of the American Protestant seminary, but it also schooled its students in the marks of revivalistic Presbyterianism. Many of the pastors in Philadelphia and southeastern Pennsylvania, who were Scottish or Scotch-Irish, had trained at Scottish universities. Accordingly, they put a premium on European educational standards. For some opposed to revivals, the issue of theological education was a smokescreen since it gave conservatives a way of opposing the Log Collegemen without addressing the issue of revivalism itself. Still, the Log College raised important questions about the proper theological education for ordination.

Here the second issue, theological education, merged with the third, qualifications for ordination. The pro-revivalist party in the church (led by the Tenents) insisted that candidates for ordination give evidence of a conversion experience. Presbyterian conservatives, such as John Thomson, the author of *The Government of the Church of Christ* (1741), disagreed and argued that presbyteries could well dispense with such personal questions since licentiates were coming before presbytery as church members. Instead, what church officers needed to consider during ordination exams was how well trained were candidates for the ministry. Log Col-

lege graduates were suspect from the conservatives point of view because those who studied with the Tenents were better schooled in the ways of experimental religion than in Calvinist dogma. Related to this debate was the older one about subscription. Those who took a softer view of subscription tended to stress the need for ministers to give evidence of a personal religious experience. Those who thought the creeds gave the church proper boundaries wanted to hear candidates understanding of theology, not their personal testimonies.

In 1740 these matters came to a head when Gilbert Tennent preached the controversial sermon, "The Danger of An Unconverted Ministry." He not only accused those who were critical of revivals of being unconverted—a group that included those who had plausible scruples about itinerancy, the Log College and the necessity of ministerial candidates to relate a conversion experience. Tennent also encouraged church members to flee the congregations of such anti-revival ministers and find safe ecclesiastical havens. Thomson shot back by asserting that ministers and presbyteries had legitimate authority, delegated by Christ, to execute the Christian ministry. What Tennent and other pro-revival Presbyterians were guilty of, then, was no less than usurping Christ's authority by either refusing to submit to the judgments of presbytery or synod, or by telling church members to resist the ministrations of their own

pastors. Thomson wrote, “the Relation between a Minister of the Gospel and his Flock, yea and every Person belonging to it, [is] a sacred and religious tie.” As such, revivalism represented a “new-fangle Method of Religion.”

With fighting words like these, a split was inevitable. In May of 1741, in a move that foreshadowed the action of the Old School Presbyterians a century later, the Old Side declared that the Presbytery of New Brunswick, the judicatory established as a release valve for Log College graduates, was no longer part of the Synod of Philadelphia. And with that decision, the Old Side and New Side Presbyterians would remain separate until 1758, with the former being strongest among the recent Scotch-Irish settlers in the Susquehanna and Shenandoah river valleys and in parts of the Philadelphia region, the latter prosper-

ing in upper New Jersey and the New York city area.

Like so many splits in the history of the church, part of what accounted for the reunion of 1758 was a change of personalities. Some of the old antagonists died, others like Gilbert Tennent, apologized for their youthful obstreperousness. Even so, the re-

Although the terms affirmed the Old Side’s concerns about subscription and the legitimate authority of church officers and judicatories, the plan of reunion overwhelmingly affirmed the New Side’s understanding of revivals and the piety fostered by them.

union was generally a victory for the New Side. Although the terms affirmed the Old Side’s concerns about subscription and the legitimate authority of church officers and judicatories, the plan of reunion overwhelmingly affirmed the New Side’s under-

standing of revivals and the piety fostered by them. It stated that candidates for the ministry would have to demonstrate an “experimental acquaintance” with the gospel in addition to having the requisite learning. The plan also declared that the Great Awakening was “a blessed work of God’s Holy Spirit,” an assertion very much at issue at the time of the split.

The Reunion of 1758 was significant, then, for settling the identity of American Presbyterianism. Two versions had vied with each other during the colonial period, one shaped by pietism (New Side), the other content with old world forms of creed and polity (Old Side). The Plan of Reunion, to be sure, represented a compromise between the two sides, trying to affirm both. But as the subsequent history of American Presbyterianism would reveal, the combination of pietism and confessionalism is an unstable compound.

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BOOK REVIEWS

What is a True Calvinist? by Philip Graham Ryken, P&R, 2003, 32pp. List price \$3.50. Reviewed by Sam Allison, pastor at Covenant Community OPC, Evansville, IN.

Ryken, the successor to James Boice at Tenth Presbyterian Church, early in his booklet, quotes an Arminian critic of Calvinism who makes the claim that Calvinism produces deadness and kills prayer, faith, zeal and holiness. Ryken uses this to sharpen the issue: “What is a true Calvinist?” Admitting that some who claim to be Calvinists have been narrow minded, proud and unkind, he states that the true Calvinist is much more like Isaiah or the Apostle Paul, full of love, faith and hope. The author uses Isaiah as his example to show that the true Calvinist is a miserable sinner who has seen the majestic and holy glory of God that pervades all the creation and who now seeks to live for God’s glory. Ryken gives a profile of the true Calvinist under six topics:

- (1) a God-centered mind, 4pp.,
- (2) a penitent spirit, 3pp.,
- (3) a grateful heart, 2pp.,
- (4) a submissive will, 5pp.,
- (5) a holy life, 5pp., and
- (6) a glorious purpose, 3pp.

All but the last topic are developed by beginning with the man Isaiah and opening up another facet of the teaching in Isaiah 6. Ryken credits Al Martin for naming Isaiah 6 as the “historical account of how God ‘makes a Calvinist.’”

The five points of Calvinism are listed four times in the booklet: pp 5, 6, 17, and 22-25. Three of these are each a one- or two- sentence summary of TULIP. Under

“a holy life”, pp 22-25, Ryken relates each of these five points to holiness. This is excellent.

Calvinism might be set forth by expounding TULIP, or by starting with the most abundantly testified fact in the New Testament, which is the substitution of Christ in the place of the sinner, and identify Calvinists as those who uniquely refuse to compromise that fact. Or Calvinism might be set forth by selecting a set of three concepts (Reformed worship, Reformed Church Government and Reformed Doctrine) and giving the necessary doctrinal Bible texts, or Calvinism might be set forth by introducing its major teachers and organizations from church history. Ryken does none of these; he develops everything out of Isaiah 6 and further opens the topic or answers stock objections from many portions of the New Testament.

If you want a booklet to hand out when the Mennonites or followers of John Wesley have scheduled their Anti-Calvinism lectures, I recommend this one. If you have people who are totally unfamiliar with the particular atonement and unconditional election, this is one of your better choices of reading material for them. If you need to counter a carnal and prideful attitude in some of the young people, or others in the church, this will be one of your best choices of literature. If you want to set forth didactically the TULIP doctrine, this booklet will not do the task directly.

Overall this is a gracious, well-written, well-edited booklet published in fine style by P&R. I found no printing errors.

The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant, by Lewis Bevens Schenck. Published by P&R, 2003. Paperback 208 pages. List price \$15.99. Reviewed by the Rev. Mike Ericson, Pastor of the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Johnston, Iowa.

Schenck’s basic thesis is that historic Reformed theology and its creeds are clearly presumptionistic, with the vast majority holding to the presumptive regeneration of children in the visible church. This, in his view, is what justifies and explains infant baptism. The relationship between presumptive regeneration and infant baptism is revealed in the original subtitle of the work: An Historical Study of the Significance of Infant Baptism in the Presbyterian Church in America. As Schenk conceives our tradition children are baptized because they are presumed to be regenerate members of Christ’s body, the church. Schenk’s concern is that a low view of the spiritual condition of children in the covenant community has resulted in a lack of nurture and improper understanding of education.

To substantiate his thesis Schenk brings before the reader what he believes to be an accurate history of Reformed and Presbyterian teaching and creeds on the subject. He seeks to show that the historical majority view has been that children born in the visible church are already believed to be regenerate, or at least presumed to be such. He doesn’t significantly differentiate this from the view of presumptive election—which holds that children may or may not be regenerate from the womb, but are presumed to be among the

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elect who will one day be regenerated and come to faith in Christ. The main point is that children have been considered as possessing vital life in union with Christ until they prove otherwise. In other words, children are presumed regenerate until they give evidence to the contrary. He spends no time on any possible evidence to the contrary.

When the historic doctrine of presumptive regeneration as the basis of baptism is lost, according to Schenk, one is left with a cold formalism or a heated fanaticism of subjectivism. This he sees as coming to play in the 18th and 19th century revivals in America, which presentation takes up a significant portion of the work. The influence of the revival paradigm gave rise to revivalism and the popular notions of conversions as always being of a crisis nature, with everyone going through such a crisis. The pains and torments of some persons' consciences have been held up by the revivalists as the norm for everyone else.

If one were to read Schenk's work and implicitly receive his presentation of history and doctrine it would lead to serious problems. The reader is cautioned, therefore, on several counts. First, it is not the case that historic Reformed and Presbyterian churches have been presumptionistic. The Second Helvetic Confession (1566), for example, XIX:11, of the Word and the sacraments, states that "the unbelievers receive not the things which are offered." The Westminster Confession of Faith, likewise, speaks about the grace signified in baptism "to such as that grace belongeth unto ... in

His appointed time" (28:6). All the great creeds agree that only the elect, through faith, receive what is signified in the sacraments, and that not all in the visible church are of—or presumed to be of—the elect.

Classic Reformed and Presbyterian theology has always strongly maintained the distinction between the visible and the invisible aspects of the church. This is not to deny that some in the camp have held varying views including the element of presumption, but to present it as the majority view is to ignore a vast wealth of theological writing to the contrary. Schenck consistently argues from what theologians have said may be the case in some infants to what is the case, or presumed to be the case, with all infants.

A second serious concern is Schenk's development of a false dilemma between revivalism and formalism, with his view of presumptionism as the only alternative historically. To be sure, there are those extremes. It is also true that revivalism has had a major negative impact in some regards. This, however, is not Schenk's main point. His main point is to seek to show, in a scholarly manner, that there has been no alternative to presumptionism in the mainstream of the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition. He clearly reveals that he assumes his own thesis throughout and therefore does not bring to light much that ought to have modified his theological viewpoint. This is illustrated by the fact that, in his treatment of the subject, Schenck quotes nearly every Princetonian, except, as far as I can tell, one particular

writing that deals directly with his subject. That book is Archibald Alexander's *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, which is a masterpiece that details the varying aspects and degrees of the work of God upon the soul in conversion.

While there are abuses on every side, there has been a portion of the church that has held on to the clear, biblical teaching on the subject, such as espoused by those doctors of the soul, the Puritans, Alexander, and many others. This seems to be lost to Schenk. It simply is not true that the revivalistic notion of conversion became the center of Old School Presbyterianism or any other orthodox branch.

There is another alternative and that is experimental religion, which brings us to our third concern. While Schenck speaks of nurture, historic Calvinism has spoken of bringing the gospel to our children. Experimental religion is the practical application of the doctrines of sacred Scripture to particular individuals by the Holy Spirit in vital union with Christ. It involves testing fruits, in their lives, by the Word of God to see evidence that they are in the faith and walking accordingly. It is making our calling and election sure, relying on the grace of God in Christ alone, by faith alone, to work His mighty work of salvation in us (2 Pet 1:5-11).

The Puritans, Reformed, and Presbyterian writers were zealous for a head and heart religion—for a faith that was objectively grounded and also experienced by the subject of election. If someone is already presumed to be regenerate then what is needed is to nur-

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ture and help to grow what is there. This covenantal nurture, in Schenck's view, is a sufficient instrumental condition of the covenant. Faithful parents will have believing children. Rather than holding forth the gospel, looking for its sprouting, then aiding in testing by the Word to see and be assured of saving faith—or convinced of the contrary by a lack of such evidence—presumption leads to a practical loss of gospel application to the heart and soul. Schenck's work, I fear, leads in that direction.

Preaching Christ, by Charles P. McIlvaine. Published by Banner of Truth, 2003. Paper, 86 pages, list price \$6.99. Reviewed by Larry Wilson.

Charles McIlvaine (1799-1873) was converted in a revival which took place during his studies at Princeton College. He entered the ministry of the Episcopal Church. He served as a chaplain to the Senate and to the West Point Military Academy (where God used him mightily among the cadets), and as pastor of St. Ann's Church, Brooklyn, New York. In 1832, he was made Bishop of Ohio. This book consists of what was originally a charge to the clergy of the Diocese of Ohio at their annual convention in Akron, Ohio in June 1863 and published shortly later in New York.

On the front cover, this book is subtitled *The Heart of Gospel Ministry*. Inside, it is subtitled *An Address to Those Entering the Christian Ministry*. Both subtitles are accurate. Evidently believing that his ministry was drawing to a close, McIlvaine addressed the one

issue that he deemed most crucial to press home to other ministers: "What is embraced in the work of preaching Christ according to the mind of the Spirit, as exhibited in the teaching of his Word, and in the practice of his Apostles?" (p. 3).

This is one address, but the publishers have helpfully divided it into five chapters: (1) How did the apostles preach Christ?; (2) How some fail in preaching Christ; (3) What is it to preach Christ?; (4) Truths connected with preaching Christ; (5) Qualifications for preaching Christ. To give an example, and to reinforce the theme of the book, the publishers included as an appendix the first sermon that Charles H. Spurgeon preached in the newly-opened Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, in 1861—a sermon on Acts 5:42 ("And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ").

How we ministers and men intending the ministry need to hear and heed McIlvaine's exhortation in our day. Just listen to Christian radio. With a few notable exceptions, some of the most articulate, oratorically gifted, and even doctrinally orthodox preachers, in the name of "relevance," do everything that McIlvaine warns against in chapter two, "How some fail in preaching Christ." Nor are our OPC pulpits exempt from these failures. "Sometimes," McIlvaine exhorts, "it seems as if the preacher could preach just as he does if Christ and his work were a mere incident in religion, a name, and little more—answering now and then as a convenience to a sentence introduced occasionally, be-

cause, under some texts, it is not easily avoided, but never as the root and foundation out of which our whole ministry proceeds. But what awful condemnation to be thus essentially defective at the very heart of the great work committed to us! Nothing can in the least atone for it. You might as well attempt to turn night into day by lighting a candle as a substitute for the sun." Do we who are preachers preach Christ "as the root and foundation out of which our whole ministry proceeds"?

Unhappily, for the most part, we cannot trust that our seminaries are adequately preparing men to preach Christ from the whole Bible. They didn't when I was a student, and they aren't today. Nor should we expect them to. Timothy was mentored by the Apostle Paul himself. If he needed to heed the exhortation—"Until I come, devote yourself to the public reaching of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.... Practice these things, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress" (1 Tim. 3:13-15)—how much more do we need to! Every minister must seek opportunities to continue to learn and to grow and to make progress. Every session should see it as its duty to enable and encourage their pastor to "sharpen the saw"—as part of his responsibilities and not as part of his family time.

It seems that we should prepare and proclaim our sermons with two mandates equally in mind: "preach God's Word" and "preach Christ." On the one hand, what we proclaim should be the Word of God and not the wisdom of man. The people in the pew should be

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able to see our emphases as they follow along in their own Bibles. At the same time, the subject of the whole Bible is Jesus Christ (Lk. 24:27; Jn. 5:39). Believers, as well as unbelievers, desperately need the gospel. And so, every sermon must preach Christ—and not as a “Jesus ex machina” artificially inserted into the sermon with no real relation to the text, but as a natural explanation and application of the text. To do so, we need to muster every resource that exegesis and biblical theology and systematic theology and church dogmatics and Christian ethics can give us. (This is why I find 1 Timothy 3:15 to be so encouraging. To be a faithful minister, one need not “have it all together.” He can and should make continual progress.)

But preaching Christ is not just a matter of learned knowledge and skills, McIlvaine urges; it is above all a spiritual matter. Every part of our ministry must be done in desperate dependence upon the gracious working of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, a faithful ministry will be marked by at least two things. A minister first needs a vital faith. “I mean faith, not merely in such of its exercises as make the minister a living Christian, and a growing, vigorous Christian, but in that special exercise which enables him to go on patiently, persistently, hopefully, immovably, preaching the gospel as we have seen the Apostles preached it, in like simplicity and spirituality—with as little of the devices and mixtures and dilutions and subterfuges of man’s wisdom, no matter what the obstacles or what the apparent fruitlessness—believing it is God’s own

way, to which alone his blessing is promised, and, which he will bless as his own ‘wisdom and power unto salvation’” (p. 58). Second, faithful ministry will be marked by “a very earnest, tender, and overcoming love” (p. 63). “He will preach best who loves most” (p. 64).

Preaching Christ is a welcome exhortation. It is as timely for the 21st century as it was for the 19th. It is not so much a book which teaches new doctrine that we have never learned. It’s rather one which takes the heart of the matter and addresses it to our hearts. It doesn’t take long to read in itself, but if one reads it correctly, he will frequently pause for prayer. It could be excellent devotional reading; a pastor would do well to review once each year. Highly recommended for ministers (who are called to preach Christ), for men intending the ministry, and for elders (who are responsible to oversee our pulpits and to guard the sheep).

On Being Black and Reformed—A New Perspective on the African-American Christian Experience, by Anthony J. Carter. Published by P&R. 2003. Paperback. 154 pages, list price \$9.99. Reviewed by the Editor.

I still have a vivid memory of the shock I received—as a young soldier stationed in Georgia during World War II—when I first saw our American version of Apartheid. It has helped me to understand the depth of pain still felt by black people in our country. It is therefore, for me, a wonderful thing to read a book such as this. The fact that this book was written

by a man who feels deeply the injustice of the slavery his ancestors experienced makes all the more powerful his clear affirmation of the great classic doctrines of the Reformed Faith.

The Reformed faith is Biblical, Historical and Experimental and therefore “in no way... limited to any cultural expression and race of people. In fact” says Carter, “the Reformation will only be complete once the elect from every tongue, tribe, and nation have embraced these truths” (p. 103).

The book includes an appendix entitled “Limping toward Reconciliation.” It contains statements made by three Christian denominations dealing with the sin of racism (the Assemblies of God, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian Church in America). These certainly have their value. But, as the author says, “the disconnect that exists between black Christians and white Christians in America can be traced to our lack of understanding of the historical commonality that exists between these two groups. In order to bridge this divide, blacks must study the history of the church and see how their beliefs are rooted in the historical truths of the faith. Also, whites must study the history of the church, particularly as it has been developed among African Americans, to see just how similarly God has worked in the midst of both groups to bring out the truths we hold so dear... the historical truths handed down through the church by the Holy Spirit.” (p 120).

This book is a worthy contribution to this much needed goal.

A REVIEW OF TWO BOOK COLLECTIONS ON COMPACT DISKS

The Puritan Bookshelf, and *The Reformation Bookshelf*, a large collection of antique books on CDs created by Stillwaters Revival Books. Price: \$650 for *The Reformation Bookshelf*, with which *The Puritan Bookshelf* is added free. We understand that the purchase can also be made by time payment. Reviewed by the Editor.

A few weeks ago I received a full set of these—sixty-two CDs in all—from the Stillwaters Revival Books company in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. I did not order them and it was not my intention to do so because I cannot in good conscience support a work that seems to me to have so little good to say about churches outside their own immediate fellowship.

Yet serious as this issue is to me, it does not prevent me from saying that this set of CDs contains some very rare material—from many out-of-print volumes—not readily available anywhere else, some of which is quite valuable. The material is recorded on the CDs in Adobe PDF files. When you open them you are presented with a digital picture of book's pages. Most of these are quite readable, showing the painstaking effort that has been made to produce these CDs. But at the same time it must be said that some are difficult to read (just as they would also be if you had the

original book, from which these were made, in your hands).

Thirty-two of these CDs are entitled *The Puritan Bookshelf*. The other set of thirty are entitled *The Reformation Bookshelf*. And just about everything you can think of from the great Puritan and Presbyterian divines of the past can be found in these CDs somewhere. But that is just the problem. For these to be of much use to a busy pastor a unified and complete index would have to be provided. I was told by Reg Barrow—of SWRB—that just such an index is currently being prepared. If such a complete and well-organized index actually does become available, this library could be a very useful tool for anyone interested in the great Puritan and Presbyterian writers of the past. But unless and until a good index is available I'm afraid this set would not be of much practical value.

At present there is no way to know, in any convenient way, what is on a given CD. To find out what is on a CD you just have to open it up and see for yourself. One could, of course, laboriously go through the sixty-two CDs and make one's own index. But this would certainly be a very time-consuming task. There is some rather vague indication of the contents of each CD in the form of a

short description of subject matter on the end of the CD case. There is also a list of the authors printed on the CD itself. But I did not find either of these two rather cryptic sources sufficient to facilitate practical usage. In my opinion the price is much too high until there is at least an index of this sort.

It should also be mentioned that there is a considerable volume of material on these CDs, sandwiched in between the older works of great value. This material, which is found on most (if not all) of these CDs, comes from the pastor of the Edmonton Church, from Mr. Reg Barrow and others who belong to the denomination known as the Reformed Presbytery of North America (RPNA). Because of their severely negative attitude toward virtually all other Reformed and Presbyterian churches, the inclusion of a large amount of material reflecting this point of view reduces the value of these two CD sets considerably.

There is certainly some fine gold to be mined in this amazing compilation, no doubt about that. But there is no easy way to locate exactly where to find it. This being the case I cannot recommend buying this collection—at this price (\$650 USD)—unless, and until, the promised index of the whole collection is made available.

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