

## Creedal Subscription

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

**“Overstrictness [in subscription] demands and begets laxity in performance; while a truly liberal but conservative formula binds all essentially sound men together in laxity.” – B.B. Warfield<sup>1</sup>**

### *Prolegomena*

God created man in His own image, and man has expressed this religious instinct in three ways – in ritual, in creed, and in daily life. Without benefit of the Word, pagan religions begin with ritual to express devotion and to appease divine wrath. This is followed by myths created to justify the rituals. But since pagan religions are not based upon divine revelation, strictly speaking, they have no **“pattern of sound words”** or *creedal theology*.<sup>2</sup>

The interface between the Word of God, faith, and the public declaration of men, is basic to all discussions about subscription. There are some who argue that our emphasis on *sola Scriptura* is prejudiced by an emphasis on creeds, which in time, can build up such respect, that they are held on equal footing with Scripture. The Scriptures alone are infallible, but fallible men are charged with the duty to interpret them. The nature of the human mind forces all Christians to have a creed, whether unwritten and vague, or written and precise.

A.A. Hodge rightly observes:

The Divine Word, therefore, is the only standard of doctrine which has intrinsic authority binding the conscience of men. And all other standards are of value or authority only in proportion as they teach what the Scriptures teach. While, however, the Scriptures are from God, the understanding of them belongs to the part of men. Men must interpret to the best of their ability each particular part of Scripture separately, and then to combine all that the Scriptures teach upon every subject into a consistent whole, and then adjust their teachings upon different subjects in mutual consistency as parts of the harmonious system. Every student of the Bible must do this; and all make it obvious that they do it, by the terms they use in their prayers and religious discourse, whether they admit or deny the propriety of human creeds and confessions. If they refuse the assistance afforded by the statements of doctrine slowly elaborated and defined by the Church, they must make out their own creed by their own unaided wisdom. The real question is not, as often pretended, between the Word of God and the creed of man, but between the tried and proved faith of the collective body of God's people, and the private judgment and the unassisted wisdom of the repudiator of creeds.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Biblical Warrant for Creedal Theology*

In the Old Testament, we find a creedal theology in seed form. Beginning with *Decalogue*, we see a summary formulation of God's moral law. In the *shema*, we have the basic articulation of the doctrine of monotheism: **"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. (Dt 6:4)** Several psalms (e.g. **33, 97, & 136**) may also be viewed as ancient confessions.

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<sup>1</sup> B.B. Warfield, "Presbyterian Churches and the Westminster Confession," (*Presbyterian Review*, 1889) p. 650

<sup>2</sup> Archibald Alexander (1772-1851 - founding professor of Princeton Theological Seminary), essay on "Creeds" as cited in the electronic version of *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Eerdmans, 1939)

<sup>3</sup> A.A. Hodge (1823-1886, son of Charles Hodge, named after the founder of Princeton Theological Seminary), *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 1869) pp. 1-2.

It is in the New Testament, however, that we find the clearest warrant for creeds. We must remember that Christ lived and taught before any attempt was made to portray His life or to record His sayings. The earliest writings are not the Gospels, but some of the Epistles. But before the Epistles of the New Testament were written, there were already thriving communities of believers. There can be no belief in the Lord Jesus without some elementary knowledge about His life and teachings, so how did these communities come to know and confess Jesus Christ?

Obviously, they would have relied upon the Old Testament, but they also would have used *faithful oral summaries* of the life and teachings of Jesus. Though these oral summaries were not inspired, it does not logically necessitate that they contained substantial error. The binding nature of these early creeds was directly linked to one thing, "How accurately did they portray the life and teachings of Jesus?" This same creedal principle remains today.

Luke refers to this compilation of creedal accounts of Christ's life and ministry in **Lk 1:1-2**. Within the gospel themselves, we see personal confessions of faith strongly encouraged by Jesus, such as the confessions of Nathaniel (**Jn 1:49**), Simon Peter (**Mt 16:16**), and Thomas (**Jn 20:28**)

In their oral addresses to these early Christian communities, the apostles not only stated creedal facts which were familiar to the hearers, but they also drew inferences as to the great truths centering on Christ, as we see from the recorded sermons in Acts. It was natural that some creedal expression of the faith once delivered to the saints should be formulated and summarized for a body whose members were pledged to each other and united for common action. The apostle Paul summarized these truths, ca. 55-57 A.D: "**because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.**" (**Ro 10:9**) These words indicate that a brief confession of the Deity, the atoning death, and resurrection of Jesus was among the earliest forms of Christian creeds.<sup>4</sup>

Approximately ten years after these words were penned, we see a natural historical development of creedal theology by the time of the Pastoral Epistles (ca. 62-68 AD). In these Epistles are references to *faithful uninspired sayings* within the Church that were *declared trustworthy by the Holy Spirit*. Dr. George Knight has convincingly demonstrated these "faithful sayings" are references to early creedal summaries of Apostolic teaching.<sup>5</sup>

***"The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."*** 1 Ti 1:15. Other examples of divinely sanctioned "faithful sayings" are found in **1 Ti 3:1; 1 Ti 4:8-9, 1 Ti 6:20, 2 Ti 1:13; 2 Ti 2:11**. Of particular interest is **1 Ti 6:12**, a reference that likely refers to an early ordination vow: ***"Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses."***

The next major historical development in creedal theology is seen in the epistles of John, which were written, ca. 85-95 A.D. As King Jesus was building His Church throughout the Roman

<sup>4</sup> Archibald Alexander, essay on "Creeds" as cited in the electronic version of *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1939)

<sup>5</sup> cf. George W. Knight, *The Faithful Sayings in the Pastoral Letters* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House: 1979)

Empire, various errors began to arise both from within and outside the church. This development was no surprise, for the apostle Paul had warned the church, ca. 55 A.D: **“For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are *divisions* (Gk: *schisms*) among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be *factions* (Gk: *heresies*) among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.”** (1 Co 11:18-19)

George Gillespie provides a classic exposition of this passage, summarized below:<sup>6</sup>

1. Heresy is not to be extended to every error contrary to the Word of God. A minor exegetical error (much less a differing orthodox opinion) does not make one a heretic.
2. Heresy is not to be so restricted that we refrain from using the word, unless someone is attacking a cardinal doctrine of the faith. In an age that finds the Scriptural word “heresy” unpleasant to modern ears, Gillespie reminds us that attacking the Trinity is not the only thing that makes a person a heretic. He distinguishes *destructive* heresies (which undermine substantial truths) from *damnable* heresies (which deny cardinal doctrines).
3. Heresy is an error that is held by a person within the church. **1 Co 11:19** states **“there must be heresies among you.”** A heretic must be a professing Christian.
4. Heresy is an error that is voluntarily chosen and accompanied with rejection of the truth. The Greek word for “heresy” literally means, “I choose.” During times of persecution, those Christians who profess error under compulsion are not to be designated as heretics.
5. Heresy is an error that is obstinately maintained and publicly propagated.
6. Heresy is an error contrary to any “substantial truth” of Scripture. The Scottish Church understood “substantial truths” as those key truths of doctrine, worship, discipline, and government upheld in the faithful creeds of the church. Gillespie explains the rationale of why the Scottish Church used uninspired creeds to define “substantial truths” of Scripture:

There was never yet any heretic in the Christian world who contradicted that which is literally and syllabically in Scripture. The most damnable heretic will offer to subscribe to the Scripture instead of a confession of faith, who yet will not subscribe to all truths which necessarily follow from the words of Scripture.<sup>7</sup>

7. It is an error factiously maintained, with a renting of the church and the drawing away of disciples from it. A person who turns from error and avoids schism is not a heretic.

Gillespie concludes this sober discussion on Paul’s positive note that concludes verse 19:

It is God’s purpose to permit heresies, and to overrule them for this end, that his grace in his children may the more shine forth, and that even heresies (contrary to the intentions of Satan and the heretics) may make manifest who are approved.<sup>8</sup>

As new challengers to orthodoxy arose, creedal theology was expanded and honed to protect the truth and to refute new errors. Those simple affirmations of faith that were sufficient for a credible profession of faith, ca. 55 A.D., were no longer adequate, since the cultic Docetists and Gnostic precursors could easily affirm early creeds such as found in **Rom 10:9**. This is not to

<sup>6</sup> cf. George Gillespie, *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions*, (Edinburgh, Robert Ogly, & Oliver & Boyd, 1649), chapter 9

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51

imply deficiency in Paul's words, for the Word is perfect and complete. The human mind, however, is not. Like the cults of today, it would take a significant amount of discernment for these early Christians to see that the "Jesus" and "gospel" these sects were promoting were not the Jesus and Gospel of Scripture.

Whereas it was sufficient in 55 A. D. to simply confess that "Jesus is our resurrected Lord" as a credible profession of faith, John is now compelled to give *an expanded creedal formula* to separate truth from error and to now affirm that Jesus Christ *has come in the flesh*.

**"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already." (1 Jn 4:1-3)** The word John uses for the "testing" of doctrine (*Gr. dokimazo*) is a trade term from the field of ancient metallurgy. It refers to the testing of precious metals to determine whether they are genuine or fraudulent.

Calvin makes a helpful distinction at this point by elucidating the "twofold trial of doctrine":

But it may be asked, whence have we this discernment? They who answer, that the word of God is the rule by which everything that men bring forward ought to be tried say something, but not the whole. I grant that doctrines ought to be tested by God's word; but except the Spirit of wisdom be present, to have God's word in our hands will avail little or nothing, for its meaning will not appear to us. ... But here a difficult question arises: If every one has the right and the liberty to judge, nothing can be settled as certain, but on the contrary the whole of religion will be uncertain. To this I answer, that there is a *twofold trial of doctrine, private and public*. ... The private trial is that by which every one settles his own faith, when he wholly acquiesces in that doctrine which he knows has come from God; for consciences will never find a safe and tranquil port otherwise than in God. Public trial refers to the common consent and polity of the Church, it is a necessary remedy that the faithful meet together and seek a way by which they may agree in a holy and godly manner.<sup>9</sup>

Calvin's writings on this subject make it clear that, though our private and public faith is ratified in two separate spheres (conscience and church courts), they are not two separate entities, *but are essentially the same*.

At the closing of the canon, verbal plenary inspiration ceased. But the development of new heresies did not. And, since the apostolic era, the Holy Spirit has continued to guide His Church in the expansion and honing of faithful creeds to protect truth and to refute error.

### ***Creedal Subscription in the Post-Apostolic Era***

Biblically based creeds witness to the universality of faith, bind believers together, and unite the successive ages of the church. We highlight a few main historical forms:<sup>10 11</sup>

**The "Apostles Creed" (Old Roman Creed) 2<sup>nd</sup> century** – The origins of this creed date back to the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century. It was used as an adult baptismal formula by the early Church to separate

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on The First Epistle of John* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, reprint 1999) pp. 230-231

<sup>10</sup> cf. Henry Bettenson & Chris Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford, England: 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1999)

<sup>11</sup> cf. Phillip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes* (Eerdmans, 3 vol., 1887)

Gnostic “Christians” from the orthodox. Its final form was settled in the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century. The apostle Paul had referred to **“the standard of teaching to which you were committed” (Ro 6:17)**. The basic elements of this creed come primarily from the teachings of the apostle Paul (**1 Ti 6:12-13, 2 Ti 2:8; 4:1**).

**The Council of Nicea (325 A.D.)** - The great question that occupied the mind of the early Church for three hundred years was whether Jesus Christ was as truly and fully God as the Father. A prestigious presbyter named Arius argued that ascribing full deity to the Son would lead the Church into polytheism. A young presbyter named Athanasius challenged this teaching by arguing that Christ’s work and His person are inseparably connected. “If Christ is not God”, Athanasius argued, “then He cannot be our Savior.” The Arian controversy culminated with the Council of Nicea. It condemned the teachings of Arius, and affirmed that Christ is very God of very God: “begotten, not created; co-substantial with the Father.” All orthodox branches of the church subscribed to original Nicene Creed.

**The Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.)** - Arius and his supporters refused to sign the Nicene Creed, and prominent leaders in the state backed them. The “three great Cappadocians;” Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, stood upon the shoulders of Athanasius, contending for the faith once delivered. Since the Nicene Creed said nothing regarding the deity of the Holy Spirit, a second ecumenical council was held in 381 A.D. that affirmed this teaching and declared belief in the Holy Trinity to be a fundamental article of the faith. This rejection of Arianism and affirmation of the Holy Trinity was fully subscribed to by all orthodox branches of the church.

**The Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) and Synod of Orange (529 A.D.)** - Pelagianism derives its name from a 5<sup>th</sup> century British monk who denied that the entire human race had fallen in Adam’s first sin. Pelagius not only denied original sin, but also denied the complete depravity of man and the doctrine of predestination. Under the guise of Christianity, Pelagius taught a naturalistic religion that mankind had not truly fallen and, therefore, had no real need of a Redeemer. Against him Augustine echoed the teaching of the apostle Paul that every man is conceived in sin and can be saved only through the grace of God according to His good pleasure. The Council of Ephesus condemned the teachings of Pelagius in 431 A.D. In 529 A.D. the Synod of Orange condemned the semi-Pelagians who taught that God’s offer of sovereign grace is dependent upon the will of the individual. The Church now clearly affirmed the Biblical view of man and salvation.

**The Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.)** - Nicea had confirmed the doctrine that Christ is fully God, but within the church there was considerable debate regarding Christ’s humanity, His two natures, and their relation to one another. It required a tremendous amount of exegetical labor, deep thinking, and prayer to arrive at a common understanding of what Scripture taught on these points. In 451 A.D., a council of six hundred bishops was called to Chalcedon. The creed formulated by this council reasserted the Council of Ephesus, but now confessed its belief in Christ’s equally full and complete humanity, expressed in two natures: the human and divine. Finally, the Church confessed that while Christ has two natures, He remains one person. The Creed of Chalcedon was subscribed to by all orthodox branches of the Church.

**The Synod of Dort (1618 AD)** – Jacob Arminius was born in the Netherlands in 1560. He was recognized as a learned and able minister, but, as professor at the University of Leyden, some of his lectures departed from a Biblical view of salvation. Arminius did not deny the doctrine of election outright as Pelagius did, but rather taught that God had elected those whom He had foreseen would believe. By making God’s election dependent on man’s action, Arminius destroyed the doctrine of election in a subtle and indirect way. Arminius also taught that Christ died to atone for all men (though all do not go to heaven), and that it is possible to fall from grace and lose one’s salvation. He taught that men might successfully resist the will of the Holy Spirit. To settle these questions the Synod of Dort convened delegates from all over Europe. The Synod unanimously rejected the teachings of Remonstrants (Arminians). The reformed churches of Europe unanimously affirmed the teaching of Dort, but a remnant of Arminians continued in the Netherlands and England, where his teachings were carried to America. It is of interest that the Arminian Episcopius equated the “tyranny” of confessional subscription with “the hand of the Devil”.<sup>12</sup>

The nature of the Arminian error was in a different category than the errors promoted by early heretics, whose teachings placed them often outside the realm of the gospel. Therefore, Arminianism should not be viewed as a *damnable heresy*, but rather as a *destructive heresy*. The reformed theologian William Ames served as a paid consultant to the moderator of the Synod of Dort, but yet he was sensitive to some criticisms raised by the Arminians. Ames argued that if pushed to an extreme, the “dangerous error” of Arminianism could lead to “Pelagian heresy”, but that orthodox Christians must maintain a distinction between the severities of these two errors.<sup>13</sup>

**The Westminster Assembly (1643-1648 A.D.)** – While the English Civil War was raging, Parliament called an assembly of one hundred twenty-two clergymen and thirty prominent laymen to provide a new creed and form of church government. The Westminster Assembly contained Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and a Presbyterian majority. Since Scotland was aiding Parliamentary forces and the Church of Scotland was considered more pure, several Scottish commissioners were given seats at the Assembly.

In terms of the historical development of creeds, Westminster stands as a high water mark. Earlier creeds of church history (e.g. “Apostle’s Creed”) contain many precious truths, but yet such minimalist creeds would have served little use by the time of the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, since virtually every Christian citizen of Europe, both Romanist and Reformed, both persecutor and martyr, could have subscribed to it. An analogy from early church history would be the lack of usefulness in using the *shema* to resolve the Docetist controversy.

Dr. Alan Cairns observes:

The fullness of the *Confession* is in vivid contrast to the almost meaningless brevity that marks the statements of faith produced by church and para-church organizations today. Because of the its eminently full and scriptural treatment of the important subjects it covers, it provides a good basis on which to judge ecumenical

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<sup>12</sup> *A Collection of Confessions of Faith, Catechisms, Directories, Books of Discipline, etc. of Publick Authority in the Church of Scotland*, (Edinburgh: James Watson, 1719), vol. 1, p. lvii., as cited by Dr. Peter Lillback in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*. ed. By David Hall (Lanham, Md): Univ. Press of America, 1995), p. 34

<sup>13</sup> cf. William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids: orig. 1643)

attempts to bridge the gulf between Protestantism and Romanism. All too often these proceed on the basis of a deliberate ambiguity of language or a recognized difference of understanding of terms. This is not agreement but a deliberate masking of difference under equivocal language. The *Westminster Standards*, the quintessence of Protestant theology, furnishes a safeguard against all such ecumenical duplicity... It is "the truth of God in its fullest expression" that the *Westminster Standards* seek to set forth.<sup>14</sup>

Earlier ecumenical creeds were appropriately simple, allowing a diverse group of Christians to fully commit to them. But since the Westminster Assembly produced such a detailed document from a broad range of backgrounds, how could all of the men honestly subscribe to every point? To answer this question, we must briefly consider the unique historical context.

The first Protestant Reformation was an age of religious violence against evangelicals. Therefore, reformed civil governments often advocated subscription to confessions of faith by all citizens *in toto* or not at all. In these turbulent times of war, this extraordinary subscription policy aided in mutual protection and in rapidly distinguishing friend from foe.

The second Reformation was followed by an age of religious violence against Presbyterians. The Scottish church had adopted a policy of "covenanted uniformity" to the Westminster documents. Since this extraordinary Spirit wrought reformation was "bottom up" and so thorough, the policy succeeded for a season, though there still remained some elements of coercion. We must remember that with their feet straddling the medieval and modern age, these were unique times when the civil magistrate could enforce subscription by the sword.

We do not want to fall into the trap of chronological arrogance by harshly judging our reformed forefathers. Given the age in which they lived, mandatory subscription without exceptions was considered to be the wisest way of confessing orthodoxy. But does this mean that we ought to hold to the same manner of confessional practice today, or have the dynamics changed enough to justify a departure? Your committee humbly argues for the latter.

Later reformed theologians, such as Thomas Boston, said that in an age of religious liberty, such forcible subscription is oppressive, and not conducive to the spirit of the gospel age, which encourages a willing, rather than coerced people, offering themselves freely, in the day of power. Drysdale, in his scholarly appraisal of this time in England, concluded that subscription should ideally "be free and unoppressive, yet secure."<sup>15</sup>

After the Glorious Revolution (1688 A.D.), persecution ended and religious tolerance was granted. But given the Covenanter bloodshed of the 'Killing Times,' and the fact that *jus divinum* Presbyterianism was abolished, there was a broader spectrum of ministers seeking admittance.<sup>16</sup> Without seeking to impugn the character of these ministers, maintaining the no exceptions "uniformity" subscription policy combined with the true diversity present in this assembly, led towards hasty agreement in order to avoid re-opening recent wounds. There is evidence that candidates were not probed as deeply regarding their personal convictions, lest reservations be discovered. This led to an environment where others were disinclined to check

<sup>14</sup> Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Belfast: Ambassador Productions Ltd, Belfast, 1998) pp. 438-439

<sup>15</sup> A.H. Drysdale, *History of the Presbyterians in England: Their Rise, Decline, and Revival* (London: Pub. Cmte. of the Presbyterian Church in England, 1889) as cited by David Hall in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*. (Lanham, Md): Univ. Press of America, 1995) p. 16

<sup>16</sup> cf. J.D. Douglas, *Light in the North*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1964) chapter 11

for concurrence, and heterodoxy became safe. This was evident by 1711 A.D. where measures were taken to remove Episcopalians from within the Presbyteries. Dr. Thomas M'Crie writes:

The whole scheme, indeed, was one of mere expediency, and as might have been expected from the various conflicting interests that had to be consulted in its formation, it was a piece of compromise from beginning to end. Accordingly, it was full of self-inconsistencies; ... To the radical defects of the Revolution settlement we can trace all the subsequent corruption and declension of the Church of Scotland.<sup>17</sup>

By the 1800's the medieval subscription model had begun to give way. And by 1847-1879 A.D. the Church of Scotland had drifted into a latitudinarian state that prized unity over truth.<sup>18</sup>

In America the context of religious freedom was radically different from that of the European experience. Charles Hodge, who believed himself to be one of less than a dozen ministers in the Presbyterian church who subscribed to every article in the Confession, warns against using the strict European model of subscription within the American context of religious liberty:

There doubtless have been, and there still may be, men who would do all this, and in the mingled spirit of the Pharisee and Dominican, rejoice in the desolation they had wrought, and shout, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are we!" God forbid that such spirit should ever gain the ascendancy in our church. Let us keep our hands off God's ark, and not assume to be more zealous for his truth, and more solicitous for the purity of his church, than he is himself.<sup>19</sup>

Hodge argued that such a spirit would inevitably damage the conscience and "fosters a spirit of evasion and subterfuge." "The overstrict, the world over," Hodge asserts, "are the least faithful."<sup>20</sup>

The Adopting Act of 1729 was the first American attempt to formally wrestle with the subscription issue. Interestingly, the stalwarts of American Presbyterianism would later be in essential agreement on the matter of subscription. A careful study of the writings of Archibald Alexander, R.L. Dabney, Charles Hodge, J.G. Machen, Samuel Miller, John Murray, J.H. Thornwell, and B.B. Warfield demonstrates that they all held the same basic views regarding subscription. These stalwarts wanted to avoid the extremes of an overly restrictive medieval view of subscription that could promote evasion and duplicity on the one hand and a casual latitudinarianism that would undermine reformed orthodoxy on the other. These men wisely recognized that if we cannot adopt some course between these two extremes, then the bonds of fidelity, love, and ecclesiastical union are destroyed. Dr. Samuel Miller, Professor of Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote in 1833 A.D.:

How is this public subscription, or assent to the Confession of Faith, to be understood? Is it to be considered as precluding all variety of opinion? Is it to secure perfect uniformity in the manner of construing every minute article, as to censure and exclude every possible diversity of exposition on any point? Such perfect uniformity among 3,000 ministers is not to be realized. It is well known that the framers of the Westminster Standards differed on minor points, yet they were all substantial and sincere **Calvinists**. The same is true of the Dutch Synod, and also of the American Presbyterian Synod of Philadelphia of 1729, who first adopted the Westminster Confession and Catechisms for the American Presbyterian Church. They were all substantial,

<sup>17</sup> M.Crie, Thomas, *The Story of the Scottish Church* (Bell and Bain, Ltd, Glasgow, 1874) pg. 422

<sup>18</sup> N.M.de.S.Cameron, *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, 805, s.v. "Subscription" by I. Hamilton.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Hodge, *Minutes of the General Assembly from 1821- 1835*, as cited by D. Calhoun in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*. pp. 241-242

<sup>20</sup> Charles Hodge, *The Presbyterian Digest of 1898*, (Philadelphia, PA: 1898) pp. 40f, as cited by *ibid.*, pg. 242

sincere **Calvinists**; and, therefore, unanimously, and with good faith, subscribed to the Westminster Standards.

An impartial jury would answer the question of the meaning of the words “the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures,” in the following manner: “Since the primary object of subscribing an ecclesiastical creed is to express agreement in doctrinal beliefs; since the manifest design of the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church is to maintain what is commonly called the **Calvinistic system**, and since this has been the universal understanding, every since that Confession was formed, we judge that no man who is not a sincere **Calvinist**, that is, who does not **ex animo** (from his heart) receive all the distinguishing articles of the Calvinistic system, can honestly subscribe it. ...

If there be such a thing as “lying to the Holy Ghost,” here it is. It is destroying the very intention of a creed; the object of which, as all allow, is to ascertain and secure concurrence of faith. If the system of doctrine taught in the Confession be wrong, let it by all means be changed. But as long as we **profess** to hold certain doctrines, let us **really** and **honestly** hold them. I would unspeakably rather discard the Confession altogether, than adopt a principle which would render its use a solemn mockery.<sup>21</sup>

Based upon our studies, we conclude that there is no ‘magic subscription formula’ for maintaining orthodoxy, lest we fall into the trap of galvanizing one historically conditioned policy into a golden calf for the ages. But in utter reliance upon God’s grace, history demonstrates that there are *four key principles* that when working together, best preserve the purity of Christ’s Church:

1. **Clerical integrity** – Even the best subscription formulas may be overcome through deceit.
2. **Good theological training** – Men must know the standards, before they can vow to teach and defend them. Weak seminary training often leads to hasty and thoughtless agreement.
3. **Thorough examinations** – Presbytery must give fair but rigorous exams, and tell men the truth about their gifts. This intimate knowledge of students usually begins at session level.
4. **Constantly operative discipline by mutual consent**

In conclusion, we concur with the words of Dr. Samuel Miller, which echo a consensus of the finest thinking on this subject within conservative American Presbyterianism:

Let the candidate for admission unfold to the Presbytery before which he present himself, all his doubts and scruples, with perfect frankness; opening his whole heart, as if on oath; and neither softening nor concealing any thing. Let him cause them distinctly to understand, that if he subscribes the Confession of Faith, he must be understood to do it in consistency with the exceptions and explanations, which he specified. If the Presbytery, after this fair understanding, should be of the opinion, that the excepted points were of little or no importance, and interfered with no article of faith, and should be willing to receive his subscription in the usual way, he may proceed. ... And if he should, at any time, alter his views concerning any part of the Creed or order of the Church in question, it will be incumbent on him to inquire, whether the points, concerning which he has altered his mind, are of such a nature that he can conscientiously be silent concerning them, and ‘give no offense’ to the body to which he belongs. If he can reconcile this with an enlightened sense of duty, he may remain in peace. But if the point concerning which his views have undergone a change, are of so much importance in his estimation, as that he cannot be silent, but must feel himself bound to publish, and endeavor to propagate them; then let him peaceably withdraw, and join some other branch of the visible Church, with which he can walk harmoniously.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Miller, *The Vows of Teaching and Ruling Elders* (PCA Historical Center: February, 1833: Miller’s private correspondence on the subject of “Adherence to our Doctrinal Standards”, original informal punctuation maintained)

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Miller, *The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confession* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1839) pp. 101-103