

ORTHODOXY AND LOVELESSNESS (2)

The charge is often made that orthodoxy is synonymous with a lack of love. Any insistence that we adhere to Scripture and that God's law governs us is often attacked as being rigid and unloving. Noel Weeks, in his book *The Sufficiency of Scripture*, notes that "there is the simple human fact that we get on better with those who agree with us. A man who has been resisted, rebuked, and admonished for his heretical views might well conclude that his opponents are 'unloving' while those who approve and encourage his heresy are loving and kind to him." (a) He then asks the appropriate question: "Is there really anything in the charge that orthodoxy is unloving?" He notes that "sometimes the charge is purely and simply an attempt to lay aside biblical teaching." Similarly, he asks: "Is an attachment to orthodoxy necessarily accompanied by a rigid and unloving spirit?" He concludes with the statement we quoted in our previous editorial: "The real question is whether there is any likely or necessary connection between orthodoxy and lack of love."

"In this respect Christ's admonitions to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 are particularly noteworthy. Christ rebuked the church of Ephesus for lack of love (2:4). Yet the same church is commended for orthodoxy and rejection of error (2:6). There is no suggestion here that their orthodoxy contributed to their lack of love. On the other side we should note that the church of Thyatira, whose love is mentioned by Christ (2:19) is strongly admonished for tolerating false teaching (2:20). Any idea, that love and orthodoxy are antithetical to each other is foreign to the teaching of Christ. Our Lord requires both. Let us therefore reject the sort of self-righteousness in which we congratulate ourselves on being orthodox and think that this somehow compensates for a lack of love. Similarly let us not think that Christ will overlook denials of His Word simply because we are loving." (b)

The charge of lovelessness is often expressed psychologically. What does that mean? It means that there are people who, when they engage in polemics or "the art or practice of disputation or controversy," do not carefully stick to the issues at hand. They make personalistic comments, and attempt to achieve their aims by acting on the opponents mind. They engage in psychological warfare. This improper tactic is not always or necessarily a deliberate or calculated act. It is often the result of unintentional or involuntary carelessness and oversight. Yet the final result is the same. Those who raise doubts about the validity or soundness of the statements and assertions made will have their integrity questioned and their reputation tarnished.

We encounter an example of this improper tactic when we examine the pernicious view that inward piety or sincerity is of greater importance than outward adherence to doctrine. At times we are confronted with the persuasive influence of this view in our own church, or in our Reformed magazines and periodicals. As the consequence of this influence we are becoming less and less Reformed in doctrine and practice, and more and more of everything else because whether we like to admit it or not, we sympathize with this view which says that inward sincerity is more important than creedal confession. The problem with this view is that anything is permitted to be propagated as truth as long as the proponent is a sincere person who really believes what he is saying. What comes to mind are some of the words we encountered in our discussion about those who cannot "in good conscience" present their children for baptism, or those who "in good conscience" err in some

point of doctrine. Sincerity becomes a substitute for sound doctrine; errors and heresies held "in good conscience" acquire the status of truth.

People who dare question the validity of the theology held by those who "err in some point of doctrine" are often reminded of the individuals' sincerity, and the fact that he holds his erroneous views "in good conscience." Consequently, questioning his theology is readily equated with doubting his sincerity and doubting his sincerity or refusing to respect the dictates of his conscience are of course a clear indication of a lack of trust and love. Conclusion: Orthodoxy and lovelessness go hand in hand. People who insist on soundness of doctrine demonstrate by their actions that they are reluctant to show sincere love. After all, nice people do not question someone's sincerity.

Through this devious and demoralizing tactic an overwhelming psychological victory has been won. The tables have been turned. Those who dared to differ with the expressed views are now accused of insincerity and a lack of love. He who fought to affirm the truth is now forced to defend his reputation. We should take note of the fact that those who employ this psychological tactic are not working at clarifying the issues, but occupied with accusing people. They are not engaged in polemics, but busy with politics. They are not waging a war to win their neighbour, but conducting a battle to ruin his reputation.

We are frequently confronted with this kind of "psychological warfare" when it is suggested that those who take an orthodox stance are "clinging to traditional positions out of fear of change. They cannot let go and reach out into the new age. As cramped, fearful personalities they are unable to love or trust." (c) We encounter this response when we question the choice of new Bible translation, when we indicate our reluctance to give up our Anglo-Genevan Psalter, when we hesitate to affirm the necessity for changes to the liturgy, when we wonder about woman's voting rights, when we state the need for discernment in our ecumenical endeavours, when we express our concern about the direction of our schools and churches, etc. Then we are often considered and judged to be fearful of change, afraid of progress, infatuated with tradition, behind the times, inflexible, stubborn, narrow-minded, etc.

A similar situation can develop when we discuss issues such as ecclesiastical fellowship with the OPC, confessional membership, admission to the Lord's Table, the Westminster Standards, the view of the church, membership in the ICRC, contact with churches abroad, etc., and not to forget, admission to communicant membership of "those who cannot... in good conscience present their children for baptism" or "who in good conscience err in some point of doctrine." Those who take an orthodox position are then easily charged with or accused of being uncompassionate, unpastoral, intolerant, and of course, loveless. We do not deny that these charges could in some instances be true, and that one could make such a charge stick with certain people who are insistent on the teaching of Scripture

However, "one could equally charge that those who want to cut us loose from Scripture are unstable people for whom the praise of the world means far too much. And there would be certain cases where a very plausible case could be made out of this interpretation. What do we gain by exchanging insults? Let us remember that we are to be judged by the measure we apply to others. If we have dwelt on the personality of others to avoid serious consideration of their views, then the Lord has every right to subject our personality to scrutiny. Let us remember that orthodoxy itself is not a substitute for the love and fervor of a genuine obedience to Christ. To the extent that we lack that, we deny the Scriptures we claim to defend. Let us also remember that those who freely brand

the orthodox as unloving, Pharisaic, legalistic... etc., are in the act of such character assassination showing very little love. If we know the law of God sufficiently to accuse others of having failed to keep it, then we should keep it ourselves. Similarly the attempt to brand all those who hold the orthodox doctrine of Scripture as un-academic and obscurantist shows little wisdom. Much of what goes as the latest wisdom... will yet be shown to be nonsense..." (d)

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(a-d) Noel Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture*, Chap. 25, pp. 236- 238

CONFIDENCE IN OUR BRETHREN:

Creedal Subscription in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church - Part Two

Subsequent Reflection of Subscription

Later events provided opportunity for the Church to reflect on its Confession. The OPC followed closely events leading to the adoption of the Confession of 1967 in the UPCUSA.¹⁵ In adopting the Confession of 1967, mainline Presbyterians included the Westminster Confession within a book of ancient and contemporary confessions, and altered the ordination vows for church officers. No longer was there the requirement to "sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures." Instead ministers were to "perform the duties of a minister of the gospel in obedience to Christ, under the authority of the Scriptures, and the guidance of the confessions of this church." OPC commentators saw some positive benefit to the new confession: the new vow to submit to confessional "guidance," along with doctrinal changes rendered by the Confession of 1967 introduced long-overdue honesty in the Presbyterian Church. The new confession "grants creedal tolerance to the unbelief of the Auburn Affirmation," wrote Edmund Clowney.¹⁶

At the same time, it thrust the remaining conservatives in the mainline church into a confessional crisis. These changes placed the Westminster Confession in a "creedal museum,"¹⁷ keeping it only because it was historic, not because it was true. Indeed, the doctrine of confessional progress required the new Confession to prevail over the Westminster Confession. As the new Confession contradicted Westminster at several points, the new subscription formula required that officers in effect deny the Westminster Confession. Norman Shepherd summed up the OPC evaluation well when he wrote: "The tragedy of the confessional crisis in the United Presbyterian Church is surpassed only by the glory of the opportunity now at hand to confess anew and unequivocally the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the fellowship of a church where the Westminster Confession and Catechisms are sincerely received and adopted."¹⁸

During roughly the same time, the church studied subscription from another perspective. In the late 1960s the church began to discuss merger with the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod.¹⁹ During these discussions, as well as later discussions with the Presbyterian Church in America in the 1980s, much of the debate focused on alleged differences in subscription

between the uniting parties. Did these potential partners engage in credible subscriptions of the Westminster Standards? Many who opposed the merger questioned the creedal integrity of the RPCES and the PCA, often recounting anecdotal horror stories during the Assembly debate. Others responded with confidence in the integrity of these bodies. What emerged from the OPC reflection was ambiguity over its own understanding of subscription, with considerable confusion over what an officer of the church affirms when he accepts the doctrinal standards of the church.

On a practical level, the OPC engaged in a subscription discussion in the one area of the Confession that proves most vexing to contemporary Presbyterians, i.e., its teaching on the Sabbath.²⁰ In 1968, the Presbytery of Wisconsin, in the midst of a discipline case over a minister's views of the Sabbath, overtured the General Assembly, requesting that the church "evaluate the teachings of the Westminster Standards concerning the Sabbath with the purpose of defining the nature of subscription to the Standards on this matter."²¹ The Assembly's Committee on Overtures and Communications recommended that the Assembly take a strong Sabbatarian position: "the second ordination vows for office bearers . . . entails belief that, as to Sabbath observance, the prescriptions and prohibitions of the Fourth Commandment under the new covenant apply to the first day of the week, in distinction from the other six days." The Assembly itself determined, however, that it did "not deem it advisable, apart from appeal from a decision by the Presbytery, to render a decision."²²

That appeal would come in the very next year, in the form of a complaint entered against the Presbytery of Wisconsin for failing to discipline the minister. Among the reasons in the complaint was "a failure to uphold the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures" . . . and "in effect to declare that those secondary standards are themselves in error."²³ In response, the Assembly appointed a "Committee on Sabbath Matters."

Four years later, that committee presented a divided report, in 1973. The majority report essentially upheld the complaint against the Presbytery. It concluded: "So far as the teaching of our secondary standards regarding the Christian Sabbath or Lord's Day is the teaching of Scripture, its acceptance is required by the second ordination vow."²⁴ A Minority Report took strong exception to this conclusion. The offenses alleged in the trial before the Presbytery of Wisconsin were "not contrary, on any construction, to the Reformed system of doctrine." The report went on to argue that the "core of the church's faith" should not be a Reformed faith that requires what is "confessionally unique with the Westminster standards."²⁵ In other words, a "continental" view of the Sabbath should not be beyond the bounds in the OPC. The majority report was adopted, but not without significant dissent. What is important in this debate for our purposes is that it represents the first case in the OPC when the Assembly focused specifically on the nature and extent of subscription. Both the strict-leaning majority report and the system-leaning minority report claimed that their understanding was in the spirit of the founding of the OPC.

On at least one occasion, there was movement to resolve the apparent ambiguity in favor of more exact and binding forms of subscription. In 1993, for example, the Presbytery of Northern California delivered an Overture to the General Assembly requesting that the church's Form of Government be amended to establish a full subscription view of the confession. The proposed changes included the definition of "system of doctrine":

The "system of doctrine" referred to in the subscription vows for licentiates and officers in the Church are the whole body of truth which the Holy Scriptures teach. The Confession of Faith and Catechisms are to be received by the licentiate and officer as a most satisfactory exposition of this truth in an integral and indivisible whole. By receiving and adopting the standards, he thereby affirms and agrees with nothing less than the complete set of assertions contained in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms.²⁶ Rather than adopt the overture, the Assembly returned it to the Presbytery for proper grounds, and it has not yet reappeared.

The OPC as a Community of Interpretation

From its origins under Machen's leadership the church affirmed the centrality of the Confession in its worship and life, yet it fell short of assuming a rigidly strict position. The church seemed able to profess forthrightly its confessional identity in general terms, yet hesitant to specify the nature of creedal subscription in internal debates. To be sure, the church understood that vague assent to the "system of doctrine" had opened the door to heresy in church history. Yet the OPC has resisted "over-strictness," not employing exacting subscription formulas to guard against decline.

This brings us back to O'Sullivan's Law. The OPC experience suggests that an ecclesiastical version of this principle needs some qualification. The OPC is a church that was never explicitly strict subscriptionist, and it has not, over the course of 58 years, become loose subscriptionist. The church does not easily fit on either side of the strict or loose subscription debate in contemporary Presbyterianism.²⁷

How has the church avoided the tensions of strict and loose subscription? The history suggests that the church has established a community of interpretation that has enabled it to maintain both peace and orthodoxy without the polarizing effect of a rigorously enforced subscription. Providentially, the OPC has been, relative to other communions, clear about its theological identity. Both the doctrinal divisions that it has experienced, as painful as those were, and its failures at merger, as disappointing as they seemed, were helpful at least in this sense: they kept narrow the focus and identity of the OPC. If these episodes have kept the church numerically small, they have also kept it theologically cohesive.

Moreover, this corporate culture has developed in a way that has avoided the modern temptations of advanced bureaucratization and high levels of organizational efficiency. As a result, the OPC engages in very deliberate (and often painfully slow) debate on theological issues. The OPC has demonstrated the principle that theologian Richard Lints expresses in his book, *The Fabric of Theology*: "the construction of a theological framework and the appropriation of a theological vision are properly tasks of the Christian community and not of isolated individuals. . . . The communal character of interpretation serves to suppress the tendency of an ecclesiastical aristocracy or academic elite to reign supreme in matters pertaining to the Bible."²⁸

The OPC believes that, "in the final analysis there simply is no constitutional device that will guarantee continued orthodoxy."²⁹ Just as important is the necessity of a vibrant community of interpretation. As Machen put it in the premillennial debate, the OPC endeavors to interpret the Confession with "confidence in our brethren." "Unless we have that mutual confidence," Machen wrote in 1936 to a five-month old church, "it would have been better that we should not have attempted to form a church at all."³⁰

The OPC has forged one model of being a confessional church in the modern world: seeing the Church as an ethnos, a community that operates within an interpretative consensus. That the Church could remain orthodox without an articulated position on subscription is a testimony to the power of that consensus. But the OPC model may not be easily appropriated. The OPC consensus is undoubtedly aided by its small size. This ought never to be a cause for boasting, but it may be a cause for reflection. Perhaps in an individualistic, narcissistic, and anti-creedal age, size is the necessary sacrifice of confessional integrity.

This sharpened identity by no means implies theological unanimity; doctrinal tensions continue to challenge the church. Recently, the "New Life" movement within the OPC could have threatened its consensus to the point of raising the issue of subscription, but the voluntary realignment of these churches into the PCA averted that debate. There are important doctrinal issues that still divide the OPC, such as theonomy and exclusive psalmody, with some arguing that these are confessional matters. Yet the OPC has achieved a certain peaceful coexistence on these issues, and no party has prosecuted its opponents for violations of subscription vows.

Finally, this analysis offers no opportunity for the OPC to be presumptuous about its confessional identity. The OPC's confessional precision and its shared consensus have been challenged in every decade of its life. It must be constantly vigilant in maintaining Machen's vision of a "hermeneutical circle," preserving its heritage, the glorious Standards, and the community that accords "confidence in our brethren."

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1) George M. Marsden, "Reformed and American" in *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p.2. The other two strands in Marsden's taxonomy of American Calvinism are the "pietist" and the "culturalist."

2) Mark Noll, "The Spirit of Old Princeton and the Spirit of the OPC" in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the OPC, 1986), p.243.

3) For example, the Knight-Barker dialogue in *Presbyterian X* (1984) and the Barker-Smith debate at the 1992 General Assembly.

4) J.Gresham Machen, *What is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), p.229.

5) For a comprehensive study of Machen's involvement in this struggle and his role in the formation of the OPC, see Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) and D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Presbyterianism in Modern North America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

6) J. Gresham Machen, "The Issue Before the Church" in *God Transcendent*, ed by Neb B. Stonehouse (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), p.44.

7) J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981 [1923]), pp. 163-164.

8) J. Gresham Machen, "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," *Scripture and Confession*, ed. John H. Skilton (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), pp.149-157.

9) J. Gresham Machen, "The Parting of the Ways," *Presbyterian* 94 (Jan.24, 1924), p.8.

- 10) Machen, What is Christianity?, pp. 232-233.
- 11) Ned Stonehouse, J. Gresham Machen, p.496.
- 12) Ibid., p.495.
- 13) It is not possible to describe the details of these struggles here. For a fuller explanation of the, see Fighting the Good Fight of Faith: A Popular History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, by D. G. Hart and John Muether, forthcoming.
- 14) "The Second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America" Presbyterian Guardian 3:3 (November 14, 1936), p. 43.
- 15) The Presbyterian Guardian devoted a series of articles to the new confession, and the faculty of Westminster Seminary produced an anthology, Scripture and Confession (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973).
- 16) Edmund P. Clowney, Another Foundation (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1965), p. 6.
- 17) Ibid., p. 4.
- 18) Norman Shepherd, "Subscription Crisis for Presbyterian Officers," Presbyterian Guardian 34, (November 1965) p145.
- 19) The discussion would climax with the vote at concurrent General Assemblies in 1975, where the OPC approved the union plan but the RPCES assembly rejected it.
- 20) Another area is in the teaching on creation. Does the Confession require a six 24-hour day creation that eliminates an animal ancestry for Adam? Or does such a requirement direct the church toward an extra-confessional fundamentalism? It is likely that OPC will debate these issues in the near future.
- 21) Minutes to the 35th GA, 1968, p. 9.
- 22) Ibid., p. 119.
- 23) Minutes to the 36th GA., 1969, p. 12.
- 24) Minutes to the 40th GA, 1973, p. 106.
- 25) Ibid., p. 111-12.
- 26) Minutes of the Sixtieth General Assembly . . . of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (Horsham, PA: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1993).
- 27) This point should not be lost on those in the PCA, on both sides of the debate, who have suggested that the PCA's "strict subscriptionists" might seek re-affiliation with the OPC. Many of the strict subscriptionists in the PCA may be surprised at the lack of heightened sensitivity in the OPC toward subscription.
- 28) Richard Lints, The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 286.
- 29) Clair Davis, "Creedal Changes and Subscription to the System of Doctrine" Presbyterian Guardian 36 (March 1967), p. 46.
- 30) "The Second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America" Presbyterian Guardian 3:3 (November 14, 1936), p.43-44.

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