

CROSSED FINGERS AND BROKEN VOWS

The History of American Presbyterianism

In the book "With Common Consent" we read that "the first synod of the liberated churches was held in 1571. At that synod the brothers decided: 'In order to give evidence of the unity in doctrine among the Netherlands Churches the Brothers have decided to place their signatures under the Confession of Faith of the Netherlands Churches and to do the same to the Confession of the Churches in France thereby to witness their bond and unity with these French Churches.'

It is remarkable that of the twenty-nine brothers present only five were elders; there were nineteen ministers, three future ministers, and probably two retired ministers. Yet the brothers decided as indicated above. This may be mentioned with gratitude especially inasmuch as deviation from the doctrine of the church and opposition to subscription to the confession practically always came from ministers of the Word." (a)

PRACTICALLY ALWAYS

The fact that opposition to subscription "practically always" came from ministers of the Word may surprise us. Perhaps that is not what we would have expected; nevertheless that is precisely what our church history teaches us. That is also what we encounter in the history of American Presbyterianism. The debate about "strict" versus "loose subscription" was not simply a debate about whether all communicant (voting) members are bound to the creeds and confessions of the Church (confessional binding), but particularly about "the binding nature of confessional standards as regards ministers in the Church." (b)

This particular focus on subscription to the confessional standards "as regards ministers in the Church" is understandable if we keep in mind that a discussion on confessional binding for all communicant (voting) church members is rather problematic when the debate about the nature of such a binding "as regards ministers in the Church" remains a point of contention. Why even argue about confessional binding for all communicant (voting) members when there is still widespread disagreement as to whether subscription "as regards ministers in the Church" should be a strict or a loose subscription? Furthermore, the particular focus on subscription to the confessional standards "as regards ministers in the Church" was fostered by the fact that there were many leaders in the of church "who verbally and publicly professed faith" with the credal position set forth by the Presbyterian Church's official statements of faith "despite the fact that none of them fully believed it." (c)

The Presbyterian pastor, Samuel Miller (1769-1850) "was distressed by the decline of doctrinal integrity among Presbyterians." His prominent statements on doctrinal purity are found in his small book on "Creeds and Confessions" and in his open letters to Presbyterians entitled "Adherence to Our Doctrinal Standards." However, his work "The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions" (1824) was "addressed particularly to Candidates for the ministry." Why "particularly to Candidates for the ministry"? Because "aberrant (devious / divergent, RD) theological opinions were gaining widespread circulation, even among church officers... Lax views of confessional subscription prevailed in some presbyteries; men declaimed against creeds in

general and spoke openly of their differences with leading articles of the Westminster Confession.” (d)

CROSSED FINGERS

In his account of how the liberals captured the Presbyterian Church, Gary North recounts the rather intriguing incident that became the impetus for the title of his book “Crossed Fingers.” (e) Gary North mentions a certain Rev. Milo F. Jamison, who in 1933 became the first pastor to be thrown out of the denomination because of orthodoxy. Jamison told the story of “a fellow graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary who had just been ordained in the mid-1920’s. Jamison knew that the man did not believe in (agree with, RD) the Westminster Confession of Faith. Jamison asked him: ‘How could you tell the examining committee that you believe in the Westminster Confession when you really don’t?’ The man answered: ‘I kept my fingers crossed.’” (p.19) Ironically, Rev. Jamison himself did not agree with this historic Confession of Presbyterianism, nor had he been in agreement when the discussion with his fellow graduate took place. He had crossed his fingers early.

As we follow the history of American Presbyterianism, particularly what is commonly known as “the Presbyterian conflict,” we encounter many “theological liberals who had individually sworn formal allegiance to the Westminster Confession of faith, but who had mentally crossed their fingers when they made their confession.” They had perpetrated what is described in the introduction to Samuel Miller’s book as “a solemn perjury.” (f) They had consciously crossed their fingers and deliberately broken their vows. And, as in the history of the Reformed churches, these church members were “practically always” leaders in the church. They were professors, ministers, presbyters and/or church officers (elders / office-bearers).

THE PRESBYTERIAN CONFLICT

The Presbyterian conflict was, among other things, a battle over the degree of subscription and the system of sanctions appropriate to defend subscription (a sanction is a “coercive measure or penalty”). This battle or debate was a big part of the Presbyterian conflict. This conflict is generally dated from 1922 to 1936, but in reality it lasted from 1721 (the beginning of the a two-century debate over “strict” versus “loose subscription” to the Confession) to November, 1936 (J. Gresham Machen’s removal from the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions). The debate over strict versus loose subscription began in Scotland in the 1690’s and was still going on in the 1720’s. The first U.S Presbytery was formed in Philadelphia in 1706. In the new American Church, “loose subscriptionists” opposed any tightening of synodical authority especially over the creedal requirements for ordination.

Gary North, in his book “Crossed Fingers,” writes that the Presbyterian conflict “began with the split between what soon became ‘Old’ Presbyterians - Old Side and Old School- vs. ‘New’ Presbyterians (‘New’ School, RD). The Old Presbyterians were creedalists; the New Presbyterians were experientialists.” (g) “The issue of subscription was crucial during the Old School / New School controversy of the 1830’s. As the New School gained in influence, the practice of loose subscription became more widespread. This laxity, in turn, allowed the growth of many heresies in the church. Only the decisive measures taken in the General Assembly of 1837 provided a temporary shift toward stricter confessionalism. (h)

As mentioned earlier, in America the Presbyterian debate over confessional subscription to the Westminster Confession began in 1721. And this debate continues even today. Recently the Student Association of Westminster Theological Seminary announced: “A Debate on Confessional Subscription,” to be held Sept. 17th and 18th, 1999, on campus at Westminster Theological Seminary. We are informed that “Dr. Barker will present the case for system (or loose) subscription and Dr. Smith will present the case for full (or strict) subscription.” (i)

When we read about this continuing “debate on Confessional subscription” we can agree with Kevin Reed when he writes: “‘There is nothing new under the sun,’ and sadly, today the practice of loose subscription is the reigning position, even within so called ‘conservative’ Presbyterian denominations. Under the pretext of listing scruples, while sitting under examination of Presbytery, candidates for ordination may openly state their opposition to leading articles of the Confession. The presbyters seem especially gratified if the candidate’s denial is expressed in tones of regret, with a touch of esteem for the creed he has just denounced.” (j)

STRICT VS LOOSE SUBSCRIPTION

In his story of the history of American Presbyterianism, Gary North writes that it is a story of victory and defeat. “The victory went to men whose theological opinions were at odds with the creedal position set forth by the Westminster Confession of Faith and its Larger and Shorter Catechisms: the Presbyterians Church’s official statements of faith. These documents had been hammered out by English Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians in the midst of a national revolution. The Confession’s public defeat in 1936 came to those few people in mainline Northern Presbyterianism who still believed in that historic Confessional position.”(k)

“Yet,” writes Gary North, “this summary is too simplistic. The battle was not merely a dispute over personal belief; it was also a matter of verbal profession of faith. It was ultimately a matter of judicial sanctions. In 1901, the leaders on all three sides of the Presbyterian conflict had verbally and publicly professed faith in that historic Confessional position,” and, as mentioned earlier, they had done so “despite the fact that none of them fully believed it.” Gary North, writes that “having sworn a public oath to defend a standard they did not fully believe, the officers of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., had little incentive to use the denomination’s courts to impose the oath’s mandatory sanctions. But without negative sanctions there can be no organization. So, negative sanctions would eventually be imposed. These sanctions would be imposed in terms of a standard other than the Westminster Confession of Faith and its two catechisms. The institutional question became: By what other standard? The quest for this rival standard was the fundamental theme of the final three phases of the Presbyterian conflict, 1901-1936.” (l)

THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

“The problem of negative sanctions had been festering in Presbyterianism ever since the Westminster Assembly (1643-48), and within 50 years after this Assembly’s adjournment the debate about “strict versus loose subscription” began in Scotland (1690’s). The unresolved “battle over the degree of subscription and the system of sanctions appropriate to defend subscription” relegated the documents “hammered out by English Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians” at the Westminster Assembly to the status of museum pieces. Lax subscriptionism robbed the Confession

of any substantial authority in the church. The confessional standards served simply as a window dressing, a vague link to the past.

In a series of articles on “The Westminster Confession,” (m) Prof. J. Kamphuis writes that “it is a delight to study how the Synod of Westminster fulfilled its mandate... The members of the Westminster Assembly in all their labours always kept in mind the promotion of the unity of the Churches.” (n) Gary North in his 1086 pages on the history of American Presbyterianism tells a somewhat different story. “The Assembly had not produced the definitive ecclesiastical documents that Parliament has expected and had asked for... From the beginning, the Assembly found that it had to compromise drastically on ecclesiology if it was to get Parliament to accept its recommendations, a political goal which it never did achieve. In that fruitless ecclesiastical compromise, the Assembly bequeathed a legacy of confusion to Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism that is still not resolved in those secessionist Presbyterian Churches that take seriously at least some of the Assembly’s documents.” (o)

AN INTERIM SUMMARY

In subsequent installments on the history of American Presbyterianism we plan to discuss in greater detail such issues as “strict versus loose subscription,” the ordination vow, the requirements for voting members, and the matter of negative sanctions. From what we have reviewed to date we can conclude that the history of American Presbyterianism is a story of victory and defeat. In the battle to restore orthodoxy to the Church the victory went to theological liberalism. The defeat went to those engaged in the struggle for the truth of the Word of God and for an uncompromising commitment to that truth.

The struggle for doctrinal integrity among Presbyterians was brought about and carried out by only a handful of church leaders, “practically always” ministers in the Church and/or professors at the theological seminaries. Names such as Samuel Miller and J. Gresham Machen come readily to mind. Ironically this struggle was also necessitated by leaders in the church inasmuch as deviation from the doctrine of the church and opposition to subscription to the confession “practically always” came from ministers of the Word. It was particularly a struggle about the binding nature of confessional standards “as regards ministers in the Church.”

The history of American Presbyterianism is, in the words of Gary North, a history that began with a “fruitless ecclesiastical compromise” in which the Westminster Assembly “bequeathed a legacy of confusion to Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism that is still not resolved in those secessionist Presbyterian Churches that take seriously at least some of the Assembly’s documents.” It is a history of conflict and debate; a history of “crossed fingers” (Gary North) and broken vows, or of “solemn perjury” (Samuel Miller). It is a history dominated by an ongoing debate about “strict” versus “loose” subscription; a debate that began in 1721 and that, as we mentioned, continues even now at the campus of Westminster Theological Seminary (Sept. 17th and 18th, 1999).

In a recent contribution to “Letters to the Editor” in *Clarion* (p) a request is made to begin “dealing with the issues,” namely, the issues surrounding the OPC General Assembly’s decision concerning their relationship with the Canadian Reformed Churches. This serious decision indicates, among other things, that “today the practice of loose subscription is the reigning position even within so

called ‘conservative’ Presbyterian denominations” (Kevin Reed). The writer of the letter to the editor notes that the General Assembly’s decision “will require some sort of response from our side.” A thorough knowledge and a clear understanding of the history of Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism is a necessary requirement (prerequisite) to preparing that required response. History, also church history, is very instructive. We will therefore in the coming months, the Lord willing, continue our study of Presbyterian church history, for “he who does not learn from history is condemned to repeat it.”

Ron Dykstra

- (a) With Common Consent, Rev. W. W. J. Van Oene.
- (b) (d) Doctrinal Integrity, Samuel Miller (book jacket).
- (c) (e) (f) (g) (k) (l) (o) Crossed Fingers - How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church, Gary North.
- (h) (j) Introductory Essay, Kevin Reed (Doctrinal Integrity, Samuel Miller).
- (i) RefNet, Robert C. Davis, August 28/99.
- (m) The Westminster Confession, Prof. J. Kamphuis, Clarion (translated by Rev. J. Mulder).
- (n) The Westminster Confession, Prof. J. Kamphuis, Clarion Sept. 17/99.
- (p) Dealing With the Issues, R. Eikelboom, Clarion, October 1/99

You have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God

Heb.12:22

Chapter 12 in the letter to the Hebrews draws a comparison. The comparison is in line with the whole letter to the Hebrews: the new covenant is placed in the light of the old covenant. This comparison shows how rich we are as church of the Lord Jesus Christ living in the new covenant. The comparison in chapter 12 concerns the worship by God’s people.

Israel was gathered at Mount Sinai. We read about this in Exodus 19. It was a majestic event. There was thunder and lightning, a thick cloud and a very loud trumpet blast. It was also an event for which the people had to prepare themselves. They had to wash their clothes and consecrate themselves because they were to appear before God. To meet the holy God you have to be holy.

Well, says the letter to the Hebrews, we have not come to Mount Sinai with all its thunder and lightning, we have come to Mount Zion. This happens when we come together as congregation of the Lord Jesus. Then we come to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem and to innumerable angels in joyful assembly (Heb.12:22 -23).

If it was wonderful and majestic for Israel, how much more for us. We may never take for granted that we meet our God in the worship service. But also, if Israel had to show holiness in worship, how much more obligated are we. The letter to the Hebrews adds even the warning that our God is a consuming fire. This passage shows us how wonderful it is to worship. It also teaches us how careful we have to be in our worship.

Our worship is directed to God. We come to praise and glorify Him. To acknowledge Him as the only true living God. Our worship, the way in which we worship Him, is then also determined by Him. I think of what we see in Isaiah 58. The day of the LORD is the day to honour Him not to do our own pleasures and go our own ways. It is a privilege to worship Him. But, exactly because He brings us here in His immeasurable grace, He has the right to demand that we worship Him in His way.

We see here a connection with the second commandment. The Catechism says in Lord's Day 35, that we are to worship God in the way He has commanded us in His Word. You know that the second commandment has a warning as well, the sin of the fathers will be visited to the third and fourth generation. Sloppiness and disobedience in worshipping the LORD will have consequences for next generations. Sometimes it appears that we have the impression that these matters do not seem to be all that urgent. But let's not be short sighted and forget about our children and grandchildren. When we become easy-going in these things then we will see in our lives yet the result of our doings.

When we come to worship we must be aware what the worship service is all about. I like to apply that to one more aspect, namely our dress. Yes, I know that is a touchy subject, but the way we clothe for worship is also ruled by the work of Christ. Why was it that the Israelites had to wash their clothes? Or, read Exodus 20:26. The LORD makes rules about the way the altar had to be built, lest their "nakedness be exposed on it." Our clothing also has to reflect the holy character of the worship.

It is not uncommon that when people come back from a visit to the Netherlands they comment on the fact that so many come in casual dress to church. It is always easier to see the weaknesses of others. Let us be aware how such an attitude starts. It does not happen in one week that from Sunday suit we change to jeans on the Lord's Day. That goes gradually. It starts with things that do not seem a big deal. It starts with wanting to be more casual, because you feel more at ease that way. It starts with placing your own feelings and ideas before the Lord. Thus the suit is replaced with casual pants and a nice sweater (in the winter). It can start by wanting to be up to date with the fashion. Thus the dress goes away and is replaced by the dress pants. It starts with wanting to dress as I feel best. In the process we can forget what the worship service is all about. The next generation will take it one or even more steps further.

No, we do not have to dress in 18th century fashion. The Bible does not require this. But the Bible does speak about dress and clothes. Not only in day to day life, but also on the Lord's Day. In 1 Tim.2 the appearance of women is mentioned as well, and Paul does it in the context of the worship service. The church is instructed that women should dress modestly with decency and propriety and moderation (1 Tim.2:9). It reminds you of what the LORD stipulated in Exodus 20:26, no nakedness exposed by His altar. We have to live chaste and disciplined lives. This certainly rules how we dress on the Lord's Day. The way we dress on the Lord's Day shows what lives in us. Carefulness in selecting modest and decent dress shows carefulness toward the service of the Lord.

We do not dress to be in tune with the latest fashion. We do not dress to show others how daring we can be and to turn the heads of the men to our shoulders or legs. We dress because we worship the holy God. I do believe that a warning is in place going by what you see in church.

Remember that when we worship we come not to Mount Sinai wrapped in smoke and fire, but to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God. We worship in the company of innumerable angels. Let our modest apparel be a joy to our God and His holy angels. After all this is the beginning of the eternal joy, when the Bride of the Lamb will be given to wear fine linen, bright and clean (Rev. 19:8).

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RCUS Report on Women Voting at Congregational Meetings ⁵

IV. With these principles then in mind let us attempt to answer the question at hand: Who is to vote in the congregational meeting? Obviously the requirement of Scripture that the church do things in order in exercising its Christ-given authority protects it from gross inequities. Who, for instance, would hold that a fourteen year old boy rightly exercises the same authority in church meetings as does his father? Yet there are those who claim that communicant membership should be the only basis upon which the vote is decided. These would say that, since each believer partakes in the authority of the general office, each believer should exercise that authority by vote in the congregational meeting. Then problem with this is that each and every believer does not partake equally in the authority of the general office. In fact, the extent to which a particular believer does partake in this authority is conditioned by several factors other than the factor of true faith alone. The fact that there are special officers in the church clearly shows that some believers are called to exercise far more and even a different kind of authority than other believers. We are then forced to look elsewhere than to the question of faith as the condition which tells us to what extent a believer partakes in the authority of the general office. It is at this point that the principle of the representative headship in the family applies to the problem. As the head of the family the husband and father holds governmental authority over the family. It is as head that he represents the family in larger society. As leader of the basic Christian unit it then follows that the head of the family partakes more fully in the governmental authority of the general office than do the other members of the family. If this is the case, it follows naturally that the head of the family would represent it in the broader exercise of the authority of the general office. The answer to our question is then apparent: he should vote in the congregational meeting who is the believing head of a family. His voting alone does not deprive the other believers of the exercise of their proper part of the authority of the general office, since he represents them. Rather this guarantees that the authority will be exercised in good and proper order. To have everybody voting in the larger society of the church is to tear down the representative and governmental authority of the head of the family. If this representative and governmental authority is not upheld in every situation, the difference is leveled out and made subjective even in the home. To deny governmental and representative authority in

the church, then, is to deny it in the home.

APPENDICES

A. In the studies that have been made before on this subject emphasis has been placed on trying to determine the circumstances of the New Testament examples of congregational meetings. This approach has yielded several conflicting answers because it is easy to read in circumstances which are not clearly stated in the context. Some say, for instance, that the presence of women in the upper room with the other disciples shows that they had an active part in later casting lots to determine a successor to Judas' apostleship. However, it is clear that presence at one point is a long jump from casting lots in an official meeting of the congregation. We know, in fact, from extra-biblical information that it is highly unlikely that women took an active part in meetings of this nature in that day and age. Certainly if they had, we would expect a pointed reference to the fact because it would be so far out of the ordinary.

B. We might notice that uniformly in Acts, at official gatherings, both Jewish and Christian, and at such gatherings only, that the group is always addressed as "men and brethren" (andres adelphoi). This would seem to militate in favor of the conclusion reached above.

C. The head of a family to anyone is the closest male relative who can exercise the proper responsibility. The following would fit the biblical description of a "head of family":

1. Married men.
2. Bachelors who are no longer under the authority and support of their fathers. And
3. The oldest son of a widow, provided he is a communicant member and personally capable of exercising the proper responsibility.

Classis Action: It was moved to submit this report to the congregations, for their consideration.

Report Three: Who Shall Vote in Congregational Meetings?

Your committee wishes to make grateful acknowledgment at the outset of the past studies conducted by the Eureka Classis on this question. These studies are more than adequate to settle the question put before this committee. At great length and in much detail, these studies were considered and were found to be scriptural. This committee feels that this is the only consideration which should be the measure of truth. (It should be noted that one particular congregation of the Eureka Classis was presented with one of these studies and on the basis of the conclusions was driven to lay aside all and any emotional feelings and to change the constitution of the local congregation in an effort to come closer to Scripture.)

Central to the question of whether or not women should have the vote in the congregational meeting is the question of the authority of the congregational meeting. Perhaps this could have been made clearer in the past, but as it was not the question of the particular studies completed, and because it now is seen to be the prime question, your committee offers the following considerations:

If the congregational meeting is no more than a meeting which is called to advise the Consistory of the church, and if the Consistory is given the right to change, alter, or exclude any or all business transacted at the congregational meeting then there is no real authority for that meeting. And, if there is no authority, then it would follow that the biblical injunctions concerning the exercise of authority would not apply. If the congregational meeting is merely advisory, then this study would have to come to a close, for then it would make no difference who exercises the vote.

Reformed church government does not recognize the congregational meeting simply as advisory because that would mean that the special offices of the church should be responsible to God but that the general office - the office of the believer - would be responsible to men, namely the special officers. This would tie the conscience of the believer in a most unbiblical manner. It should be immediately recalled that the same binding of the conscience applies if the congregational meeting exercises independent authority. In that case it is the conscience of the special officers that is bound since they would be obligated to fulfill the desires of the congregation whether or not they are in accord with Scripture.

What we come to is the question of the sovereignty of God, and the application of that sovereignty over the consciences of his people. If God is sovereign, and he most certainly is, then it must follow that all are responsible to him, and not either directly to the general office of the believer as is the case when the congregation acts independently, nor are all directly responsible to the special office of the Consistory as is the case when the congregation acts only to advise.

Your committee seems then to come to an impasse. If the congregational meeting for business does not act independently or in an advisory capacity, what does it do? The answer is that the general office of the believer, in business meeting also, is exercised in accord with the law of God and in relation to the special office of the Consistory. And, on the other hand, the special office is exercised in accord with the law of God and in relation to the general office of the believer. What the congregation does, then, in the business meeting is to act in accord with the rule of Scripture and with the interests of the office of the special officers in mind. There is here a cooperative effort to honor God and to build the church of Jesus Christ. The congregation does exercise authority, but that authority is exercised in conjunction with the Consistory. And the Consistory, recognizing its responsibility to God and the welfare of God's people, must recognize that authority exercised, providing, of course, that it is exercised according to God's law.

Your committee feels that this position, sketchily presented as it might be, is the position of Scripture. The alternatives are hard and definite rule from the top on the one hand, and the rule of the wishes of the majority over and above considerations for the law of God on the other hand. Neither of these positions is acceptable.

The above considerations are presented in order that we might see that each and every vote in the congregational meeting is an exercise of authority, easily calculated as a percentage of rule, real and designed to shape the activities and position of God's people. With that conclusion in mind we then ask the question of whether or not the woman may exercise the vote. Our answer must be based on whether or not the Bible will allow women to exercise the vote over the man. Your

committee directs your attention for answer to the attached studies. From them it is clear that the woman is not to exercise authority over the man in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let your committee say it one more time. If the congregational meeting is authoritative and if then the participants of said meeting do exercise authority then it must follow that scripturally women are not to vote.

Your committee has no desire to lord it over the consciences of the members of the individual congregations of the Eureka Classis. This report is not designed to do that. Our concern is that the Constitution of the Reformed Church in the United States be brought into accord with the teaching of Scripture on the position of the congregational meeting and the position of the woman in God's order. There is no question that such a change in the Constitution will affect the constitutions of the local congregations in some way, but it is not the task of this committee to comment upon such change nor the causes for such change. Our task is simply to study the one question of the woman's vote in the congregational meeting.

Classis Action: This report was not received by the Eureka Classis when it was first made in 1968. Rather, it was moved to "postpone action on it indefinitely." However, the Classis considered this subject again in 1978, at which time it adopted the three preceding reports (without the recommendations, which were omitted in this edition) as the position of Classis." The 1978 Abstract says that this position is "that the exercise of the vote in the congregational meeting is an exercise of authority in the church of Jesus Christ and is therefore properly the province [sic] of the male head of household" (p. 28). The Classis also instructed each congregation to examine its constitution and practice in light of the biblical principles set forth in the reports.