

What does the Church expect when it asks: "Do you receive and adopt the Confession of Faith?"

The Vows of Teaching and Ruling Elders

Following is a letter written in February, 1833, by the Rev. Prof. Samuel Miller, of Princeton Seminary, on the subject, "Adherence to our doctrinal Standards." – Abridged by the Rev. Morton H. Smith.

Christian Brethren:

I need not say that the faithful adherence to our doctrinal standards is a matter which stands essentially connected with the peace of the Presbyterian Church. On this subject, it is of the utmost importance that there be a concurrence of sentiment, in favour of some rational and scriptural principles.

On the other hand, if such absolute uniformity in the mode of explaining every minute detail of truth be contended for; if men are to be accused and subjected to discipline for not expounding every doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith, in the same precise manner with every other subscriber who has gone before him – the Church must inevitably be kept in a state of constant mutual accusation and conflict. Quietness and peace will be out of the question.

On the other hand, if all sorts of unscriptural opinion, except the extreme of heresy, should be freely countenanced by any of our judicatories; if that refusal to censure any form of doctrinal error, short of palpable Unitarianism, be adopted as the prevalent policy, it will be impossible much longer to keep the Church together. Or rather, it will not, much longer, be **worth** keeping together. For it will cease to be what the Church was constituted and intended to be, a "WITNESS FOR GOD," in the midst of a corrupt and ungodly world; – a witness for the truth as well as the order of His family.

It is well known, that when ministers are ordained in the Presbyterian Church; or when those already ordained are received into our body, they are called upon to give their formal assent, among others, to the following questions:

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 of this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?"**

Here, it will be observed, the BIBLE is declared to be the **Only Infallible Rule of Faith**, and the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church is recognized as only a summary or compendious view of the manner in which the members of that Church agree in interpreting the Scriptures. In this sense **only** are we in the habit of calling our "Confession of Faith" and "Form of Government" our "**ecclesiastical standards.**" Not ultimate standards of faith and practice; but standards or tests, for ascertaining the manner in which we, as a Church, **profess to interpret the Bible.**

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, 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."

We cannot resist the conclusion, as fair and honorable men, that unless a

candidate for admission does really believe in the doctrine of the Trinity; the incarnation and true Deity of Jesus Christ; the personality and Deity of the Holy Spirit; the fall and entire native depravity of man in virtue of a connection with Adam, the progenitor of our race; the vicarious atoning sacrifice of the Redeemer; the justification solely on account of the righteousness of Christ, set to our account, and made ours by faith; sovereign and unconditional personal election to eternal life; regeneration and sanctification by the power of the Holy Spirit; the eternal punishment of the impenitently wicked, etc; – unless he sincerely believes all these and the essentially allied doctrines which have been considered as distinguishing features of the Calvinistic system, and believes them in substance, as they are laid down in the Confession, our verdict is, that he cannot honestly subscribe to it.

It appears to me that nothing can be plainer than that a Pelagian, a Semi-Pelagian, or Arminian, to say nothing of more radical errorists, cannot possibly, with a good conscience, subscribe to the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church. To erect a barrier against the encroachment of these errors in England was one of the main objects of the formulation of the Westminster Standards. Again, our own Church, in 1729, in her “adopting act” had the errors of Semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism in view.

The question, however, is, how minor differences in the mode of explaining Gospel truth may be decided. No position in morals can be plainer, than those principles which the Confession in **language** directly proscribes: which it was expressly and specially **intended** to exclude; and which the actual administration of the Church under it, is known to have again and again **condemned** and excluded. The advocate of such cannot possibly, with a good conscience, subscribe to its articles.

Such a subscription is a SOLEMN PERJURY.

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.

I shall close with remarks along this same line made by the late Dr. John Witherspoon: “I cannot forbear warning you against a piece of dishonesty which may possibly be found united to gravity and decency in other respects. I mean a minister’s subscribing to articles of doctrine which he does not believe. This is so direct a violation of sincerity, that it is astonishing to think how men can set their minds at ease in the prospect, or keep them in peace after the deliberate commission of it. The very excuses and evasions that are offered in defence of it are a disgrace to reason, as well as a scandal to religion.

What success can be expected from that man’s ministry, who begins it with an act of such complicated guilt? How can he take upon him to reprove others for sin, or to train them up in virtue and true goodness, while he himself is chargeable with direct, premeditated, and perpetual perjury?...I have particularly chosen to introduce the subject upon this occasion, that I may attack it, not as an error, but as a **fraud**; not as a mistake in judgment, but an instance of gross dishonesty and insincerity of heart. I must beg every minister, but especially those young persons who have an eye to the sacred office, to remember that God will not be mocked, though the world may be

deceived. In His sight, no gravity of deportment, no pretence to freedom of inquiry, (a thing excellent in itself,) no regular exercise of the right of private judgment, will warrant or excuse such a **lie** for gain, as solemnly to subscribe what they do not believe.” (Witherspoon’s Works, Vol. I, pp. 313-4.)

Dr. Miller’s Letter is taken from a volume entitled LETTERS TO PRESBYTERIANS, ON THE PRESENT CRISIS IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES. It was published at the time of tension between the Old and New School elements in the Church in the early 1830’s. Since our church today is in many ways faced with similar tensions, and since the question of subscription is again involved, these words of Dr. Miller may be useful for our day.