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Engaging the World With Christ: Participating in the Royal Office of Christ

by Scott R. A. Starbuck

A burnished gem of Reformed theology is set within the ordination prayer printed in the 1946 edition of the *Book of Common Worship*. The Presbyterian Church (USA) would do well to recover this biblically incisive prayer:

Send down thy Holy Spirit upon this thy servant, whom we, in thy name and in obedience to thy holy will, do now by the laying on of our hands ordain and appoint to the office of the holy ministry in thy church, *committing unto him authority to preach the word, administer the sacraments, and to bear rule in thy church*¹

Despite the prayer's time-bound language (we should read "...committing unto him/her authority..."), it is one of the clearest liturgical expressions of an essential and momentous doctrinal belief.

When individuals, under the call of God, are ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, they are ordained to the ministry of Jesus Christ. This holds true for elders and

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Concordance to the Dead Sea Scrolls (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

deacons as well. It is Christ's ministry, not our own, to which we are set apart. Hence, we *participate* in a ministry that preceded us and which will long follow us, and we *participate* in a living active ministry that far transcends and exceeds anything that we could author ourselves. Despite the constant demands and drains of ministry, it is a unique and superlative privilege to *participate* in the ministerial offices of Jesus Christ; to engage the world with Jesus Christ!

If for no other reason, the ordination prayer commends our theological reflection given its clear and purposeful language. At once and at the same time it exegetes the minister's authority in view of the *munus triplex* (the three offices of Christ), and it links the commission of the one being ordained to the larger ministry of Jesus Christ. "Authority" is conferred to 1) preach the Word, 2) administer the sacraments, and 3) bear rule in Christ's church. We are familiar with the first two authorizations since they are overtly named in the current designation of the minister's office, that is, he or she is set apart to be a

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Minister of *Word* and *Sacrament*. The third authorization, “to bear rule in Christ’s Church,” may, however, give us pause. What does it mean for a minister, or for an elder or deacon, to bear rule in Christ’s Church? Even the phrase, “bear rule,” seems anachronistic and perhaps hostile to our seemingly enlightened, kinder, gentler age. I have read church information forms that express great anticipation for a pastor to preach the Word. Congregations are hungry for pastors to bring them into the sacramentally powerful presence of the Triune God. But most congregations are timid when it comes to their pastors, elders, and deacons “bearing rule.” And yet, the polity of the Presbyterian Church (USA) requires ruling, albeit always for purposes of redeeming and building up the body.² “Bearing rule” is as important for the graceful exercise of ministry as the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments.

The authorities conferred on the minister at the time of ordination are derived from nothing less than the ontological reality behind the doctrinal description of Christ’s three offices. According to this biblical-dogmatic construction, Christ was the one and only true prophet, the one and only true priest, and one and only true king. Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment, in both his earthly and exalted states, of the most essential “offices” of God’s economy during the Old Testament period. Although this is a rudimentary doctrine of the Reformed tradition, few pastors and lay persons can articulate it, let alone be guided by it. Moreover, I am convinced that the present confusion in the Presbyterian Church (USA) regarding the nature of ordination as well as our reluctance to engage in church discipline ultimately stems from the denigration of the three offices of Christ in preaching, teaching, and theological formulation. Whereas the prophetic and priestly offices have too easily fallen to neglect, it has been the royal office of Christ that has been most seriously discounted.

The theological discounting of the royal office has been due, in large part, to an overly negative evaluation of passages in Scripture where Judah’s and Israel’s royal ideology can be discerned. Actually, the negative evaluation of these materials is simply the logical outcome of a set of ideological commitments that biblical scholars have brought to bear on the scriptural texts from which the three offices were classically derived. The anachronistic and culturally arrogant assumption that egalitarianism is superior to any form of hierarchy, even benevolent and servant rulership, has encouraged many to label a number of the key biblical texts as antiquated and theologically passé.

Important for this article, a number of psalms critical to the biblical-theological formulation of the three offices have been misinterpreted. However, once rightly understood, these psalms strongly undergird the traditional Reformed view of the royal office, demonstrating it to be not only theologically constructive but also biblically sound.

The Three Offices of Jesus Christ

Before turning to the biblical foundations of the doctrine of the *munus triplex*, it will be helpful to review the theological construction itself. The classical Reformed doctrine of the three offices of Jesus Christ is the most comprehensive and essential formulation of our Lord’s ministry to us and, at the same time, our directive for a lovingly responsive ministry to him. Although the seeds of the doctrine can be traced to the fourth century AD, John Calvin was the first to clearly and extensively articulate the biblically-derived formulation of the three offices of Christ.³ Calvin’s thorough exposition of the three offices can be found in Book II, Chapter XV of the *Institutes*.

Therefore, in order that faith may find a firm basis for salvation in Christ, and thus rest in him, this principle must be laid down: The office enjoined upon Christ by the Father consists of three parts: for he was given to be prophet, king, and priest. Yet it would be little value to know these names without understanding their purpose and use.⁴

The vitality of a right understanding of the three offices of Christ, without which a proper understanding of Jesus’ title “Christ” is impossible, is evidenced by question thirty-four of Calvin’s 1541 Geneva catechism.

Q. 34. What is meant by the name ‘Christ’?

A. By this title his office is still better expressed—for it signifies that Christ was anointed by the Father to be ordained King, Priest, and Prophet.

As Reformed theology developed beyond Calvin, the requisite magnitude of the three offices to a right understanding of the meaning of “Christ” continued to be stressed in confession and catechism.⁵

Most recently, the power of this classic Reformed dogmatic formulation has been recovered by the New Catechism Committee of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in their proposed First Catechism. Set within a recital of the covenant, questions nineteen through twenty-one explain how God sought to redeem his far too often rebellious people, first through kings, priests, and prophets, and then through the Messiah who was the fulfillment of each of these offices.

Q. 19. Did the people keep their covenant with God?

A. No, they turned away to worship other gods and did not love each other as God commanded.

Q. 20. What did God do when these people kept turning away?

A. Although God judged the people, they were not left without hope. God sent them prophets to speak God’s word. God gave them priests to make sacrifices for their sins. God called kings to protect the needy and guarantee justice. At last God promised to send the Messiah.

Q. 21. How did God keep that promise?

A. God sent Jesus to be the Messiah. Another word for Messiah, which means “anointed one,” is Christ. Jesus

is called the Christ, because God anointed him to be the Savior who would rescue us from sin and death.

Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Christ, the anointed one, because his ministry, in both his state of humility and his state of exaltation, was the true fulfillment of God's redemptive intent in the Old Testament offices of priest, prophet, and king.

The Two-sided Nature of the Three Offices of Christ

Essential to Calvin's formulation is his holding together the two-sided reality of these offices. Even though Christ is the *true fulfillment* of each of the Old Testament offices, and hence Christ's work was not merely personal nor accidental, the offices themselves stand on their own, and through Christ we are invited to participate in them. Note how Calvin expresses this in commenting on the priestly office:

Now Christ plays the priestly role, not only to render the Father favorable and propitious toward us by an eternal law of reconciliation, *but also to receive us as his companions in this great office [Rev. 1:6]*. For we who are defiled ourselves, yet are priests in him, offer ourselves and our all to God, and freely enter the heavenly sanctuary that the sacrifices of prayers and praise that we bring may be acceptable and sweet-smelling before God (emphasis mine).⁶

Because Christ has become our true and effective priest, prophet, and king, we are compelled out of our gratitude and love to throw ourselves into his ministry. More properly stated, once we receive the benefits of Christ's three-fold office, we directly become participants with Christ within his offices. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) states this well in its thirty-second question, logically extended from the thirty-first:

Q. 31. Why is he called Christ, that is the Anointed one?

A. Because he is ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be *our chief Prophet and Teacher*, fully revealing to us the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption; to be *our only High Priest*, having redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and ever interceding for us with the Father; and to be *our eternal King*, governing us by his Word and Spirit, and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us.

Q. 32. But why are you called a Christian?

A. Because through faith I share in Christ and thus in his anointing, so that I may confess his name, offer myself a living sacrifice of gratitude to him, and fight against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life and hereafter rule with him in eternity over all creatures.

As Christians, we *share* in Christ's anointing! We, then, participate with Christ in his messianic ministry and rule, even to the point of ruling *with him* in eternity. Otto Weber, in his wonderfully helpful *Foundations of Dogmatics*, expands upon the vital linkage of faith and praxis inherent in the *munus triplex*:

The doctrine of the "threefold office" of Christ is a dogmatic conception. At the same time, and in this we go beyond Calvin, it is an ethical conception. For this "for us" always means that the Community itself participates in what the One on whom it is dependent is and was the Proclaimer. It cannot pass man's misery by when it knows that One who as a priest took upon himself all the perversion and distress of man. It cannot be complacent about the arbitrary rule of the mighty when it knows the One who is the King. It does not prolong his work. But it follows him. Because he has done everything, it does its part.⁷

In simpler terms, because of Christ's love and work for us, *we thrill to engage the world with Jesus Christ!*

The vital importance of the 1946 edition of the ordination prayer should, at this point, be clear. In ordination, pastors (and elders and deacons) are set apart to a particular office that is derivative of Christ's threefold office. Pastors preach the Word, administer the sacraments, and bear rule in the Church because Christ has already preached the Word, instituted the sacraments, and ruled the Church—and as the living Lord, he maintains and fulfills these ends in the present. Pastors, then, *participate with Christ*, and churches, then, engage the world *with Christ*. This is the two-sided nature of the three offices of Christ.

Biblical-Exegetical Issues Pertaining to the Royal Office

Although the priestly office of Christ has been poorly neglected in contemporary ministry,⁸ it is the royal office of Christ that has proved most controversial. It must be admitted that there are many cultural barriers to a clear understanding of this doctrine (we live in a democracy, not a monarchy; kingship can be viewed as antiquated, patriarchal, etc.). For the remainder of this article, however, I will focus on the key biblical-exegetical issues and pitfalls, especially as they are set within the modern scholarly context.

Classically, the biblical-theological exposition of the doctrine of the royal office has been largely founded upon the New Testament's reappropriation of a handful of psalms, today commonly referred to as the "royal psalms," which are in some way "fulfilled" in the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ.⁹ For example, note how the writer of the book of Hebrews draws together lines from Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4.

Christ did not glorify himself in becoming High Priest, but (God) did, saying to him,
You are my Son

*Today I have begotten you;
as he says in another place,
You are a priest for ever,
after the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 5:5-6)¹⁰*

Rather straightforwardly, and along the lines of their New Testament reappropriation, Psalms 2 and 110 were held to be “messianic” psalms which anticipated the future reign of the Messiah. Since they provided a view of the ideal king, they also provided one of the clearest theological foundations for understanding the royal office in God’s economy. In the same vein, when Calvin describes the spiritual nature of Christ’s kingly office he suggests that Psalm 2:9, Psalm 45:7, and Psalm 110:6 each prophetically reference none other than Jesus Christ.¹¹

Although the messianic interpretation of Psalms 2, 45, 72, 110, and others, remained commonplace well into the twentieth century, as early as 1811, the German scholar Wilhelm de Wette launched a strong challenge to the simple messianic understanding of these psalms. De Wette argued that Psalms 2, 20, 21, 45, 72 and 110 were originally composed neither by King David nor for the coming Messiah, but instead for various historical kings of Northern Israel or Judah.¹² If this were the case, then how could it be maintained that the royal psalms described the “ideal” king? Perhaps they, individually, reflected contemporary propagandistic views of particular kings. At the same time, de Wette did allow for a later reinterpretation of these psalms in the New Testament that could, in some ways, be considered “messianic.” However, the messianic reinterpretation of the psalms had little or nothing to do with their original compositional purpose.

Increasingly, as archaeological finds were unearthed throughout the ancient Near East, comparative data was brought to bear on the interpretation of these psalms. In 1914, another German scholar, Hermann Gunkel, published a monograph that argued the correct context for a clear understanding of the royal psalms was not, first, their canonical context, but their original socio-historical context.¹³ Designating Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, and 132 as royal psalms, Gunkel made three forceful arguments. First, the royal referents within the psalms referred to *bona fide* historical kings of Northern Israel or Judah. Second, the psalms were not composed for some future messianic figure. And third, elements of royal hyperbole which had led others to believe that the psalms had to be messianic, simply mimicked contemporaneous royal propaganda (with its unseemly bravado) observable in artifacts unearthed in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

For example, that a psalmist could address a human king in Psalm 45:7 as “god” (the correct translation is “your throne, O god,”), seemed to be at odds with Israel’s strident monotheism. For this reason, most nineteenth century theologians maintained that the psalm had to refer to the Messiah, the only being that could, besides Yahweh, be referred to as “god.” Gunkel correctly pointed out, however, that in ancient Babylon King Hammurabi was attributed a divine lineage and called the “son” of the god

Marduk, and that the Egyptian Pharaoh was not only considered the Sun god’s son, but was actually referred to as “Good god.”¹⁴ Other examples and exegesis could be cited. Suffice it to say that Gunkel successfully demonstrated that there was nothing unusual or atypical in the biblical royal psalms once they were properly compared to other ancient Near Eastern materials. During the course of this century, the ever-burgeoning archaeological record of text and artifact overwhelmingly supported Gunkel’s argument, now almost a century old.

Whereas the early reformers could point to the exalted language of the royal psalms as a key indicator of their messianic thrust, since Gunkel the elements of royal ideology, consonant with royal ideologies throughout the Ancient world, became the great stumbling block for many scholars, theologians, and pastors. Of course the stumbling block is removed if one holds to a strong view of the canonical context of the royal psalms—a stance most compatible with the Reformed tradition’s view of the nature and authority of Scripture. And yet, many of the exegetical resources available to lay person and pastor do not interpret the texts within the canonical context and, instead, attempt to privilege certain “voices” in Scripture over others. For this reason, it will be expedient to briefly outline the two dominant theological assessments of the royal psalms post-Gunkel.

Modern Theological Appraisals of the Royal Psalms

At the risk of oversimplifying, there are basically two camps of interpretation when it comes to the theological assessment of biblical royal ideology in general, and the royal psalms in particular. In part, the disagreement between the camps is an outgrowth of what at first might seem to be two different perspectives on the nature of kingship found in 1 Samuel.

On the one hand, 1 Samuel 8 suggests that God acquiesced to Israel’s petition to have a king “like the other nations” because of their persistent rebellion. Yahweh spoke to Samuel:

Obey the request of the people in its entirety; for they have not cast off you, but they have cast off me from being king over them, consistent with all of their actions from the very day I brought them out of Egypt up to this day, abandoning me and revering other gods. . . .(1 Samuel 8:7-8).

Read alone, this passage suggests allegiance to a human king was a clear rejection of Yahweh’s own kingship and rule over the tribal league.

On the other hand, the next three chapters of 1 Samuel, chapters 9-11, present a very different and even promonarchical evaluation. According to these chapters, the rise of Israel’s monarchy was a gracious and loving gift from God in the face of a devastating Philistine threat.

Yahweh uncovered the ear of Samuel one day before Saul arrived, saying:

Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him as ruler over my people Israel. He shall deliver my people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have observed the suffering of my people, indeed, their outcry has reached me (1 Samuel 9:15-16).

Since the royal psalms name and celebrate the human king as Israel's savior, they are consonant with this unabashedly positive and salvific perspective on kingship. Thus, the royal psalms are usually theologically evaluated together with texts like 1 Sam 9:15-16 as espousing similar royal ideology.

Although it is hardly surprising that there was some theological ambiguity, even ambivalence, to the institution of human monarchical rule in Israel's memory, many scholars have privileged the seemingly antimonarchical texts over the promonarchical texts. Accordingly, scholars of the first camp argue that pagan royal propaganda from Israel's surrounding environs was superimposed upon the more democratic and theocratic traditions of Israel. For example, in 1975 George Mendenhall scorned the development of human kingship among the Hebrews in his often-quoted *Interpretation* article: ". . .the cultic/political system of Jerusalem during the Monarchy had nothing to do with the Yahwist revolution and was actually completely incompatible with that religious movement."¹⁵ One could hardly voice a stronger claim that Israel's desire for kingly rule was tantamount to apostasy.

Although Mendenhall represents the extreme, other scholars have followed his bifurcation of royal ideology from true Yahwism. More recently this view has been articulated by Rainer Albertz in his historical survey of Hebrew religion.¹⁶ Such historical appraisals continue to influence the discipline of modern biblical theology. The proponents of the "polarities-and-tensions" biblical theology movement, at best, view royal theology and Yahwistic faith as authentic bipolar voices within the biblical tradition.¹⁸ Others consider the royal theology of Jerusalem to be an idolatrous departure from the true biblical faith.¹⁸

In marked contrast, scholars of the second camp stress that within the full view of Scripture, the first camp's negative assessments of royal ideology are simply shortsighted. This has been forcefully stated by J. J. M. Roberts:

. . .the implications of such a stance are profound, because many of what have been taken to be central biblical themes owe their existence or their peculiar biblical shape to the imperial theology first developed in the Davidic-Solomonic court and then transmitted and elaborated in the royal cult of the subsequent Judean court.¹⁹

If one uncritically accepts the viewpoint of the first scholarly camp, one must at least wonder when, in view of

New Testament claims that Jesus was the Davidic Messiah, royal theology, foundational for biblical messianism,²⁰ was delivered of its idolatrous connotations. Or, is one to conclude that biblical messianism itself is a paganization of authentic Yahwism? Such an assessment would not only be contrary to the theological development of the royal office within the canon, but it lies well beyond the bounds of the church historical and the church ecumenical. Unfortunately, too many pastors and presbyters have uncritically accepted the argumentation of the first camp, and because of this, have not fully appreciated the necessity in God's economy for the royal office.

Key Theological Issues In The Royal Psalms

Since there is such an affinity between the content of the biblical royal psalms and the general royal literature of the ancient Near East, the preponderant theological issue has been whether there is anything unique or even "of God" in these psalms. In fact, the recognition that the verbiage of the royal psalms compares synonymously with that of the surrounding cultures of the biblical world effectively chiseled an ever-widening gap between the royal psalms of the Old Testament and their reapplication in the New Testament, raising the question whether the New Testament's appropriation of these psalms was, in fact, theologically valid.

Most importantly, since several royal psalms have classically served as primary biblical underpinnings for the doctrine of the royal office of Christ, does their similarity with pagan ideologies of other cultures undercut the doctrine itself? That is, are the royal psalms so culturally conditioned that it is, in the least, unwise to construct a theological program for the modern church upon them?

The informed answer to both of these questions is "no." However, an informed answer must take into consideration the unique character of the royal psalms of the Hebrew Psalter. Once their distinctiveness is fully comprehended, it is no longer possible to make hasty generalizations and simply lump the royal psalms together with other royal ideology in the ancient Near East. Moreover, it is precisely their distinctiveness that allows the royal psalms to thoroughly and intelligently undergird the biblical-dogmatic formulation of the royal office for the contemporary church.

The Unique Character of the Biblical Royal Psalms

While it is true that the language of the biblical royal psalms is consistent with the language (metaphor and simile) of royal literature in the ancient Near East, the royal psalms significantly stand alone in one way. Unlike the royal inscriptions of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia, *the biblical royal psalms never include the personal name of a historical king of Northern Israel or Judah!* This radical dissimilarity provides key evidence in support of the theological importance of the royal psalms within Israel's own development, their reappropriation in the New Testament, and their theological pertinence to the classical

office of kingship itself, rather than a particular holder of that office. This observation explains why the New Testament writers could reappropriate the royal psalms and apply them to Jesus. Since the royal psalms of Scripture espoused the ideal of the office of kingship, and since Jesus was the fulfillment of that ideal, the connection between the two is not only comprehensible but necessary and profound.

At the same time, even prior to the New Testament's application of the royal psalms to Jesus, the office of kingship was applied more broadly than to singular fulfillment in one particular individual. The unique covenant promised to King David in the royal psalms (Ps 89:25; see also 2 Sam 23:5 and 2 Sam 7) is extended by God to the whole Hebrew people in the exile:

Incline your ear and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast and sure love for David (Isaiah 55:3-4).

In this passage, God promises to make a royal covenant with the *entire people* of Israel. In other words, God invited them to *participate in the royal office* that continued to exist in his economy, despite the fact that historical kings had long been obliterated from the thrones of Israel and Judah. In the same way, it is my conviction that all original references to historical kings were removed from the royal psalms so that, just as the entire community of Israel was able to pray the psalms as their prayers, in the same way even the royal psalms could be sung and prayed as the community's prayers. As they did this, they discovered themselves to be participants in the royal office itself, initially constituted by God and eventually, and finally, fulfilled and clarified in Jesus Christ.

Summary

The classical formulation of the *munus triplex* was founded upon the New Testament belief that 1) Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment of the true royal office and that 2) it was God's plan to fulfill that office rather than abrogate it. Christ's fulfillment of the royal office at the same time beckons our participation with him in it. When we participate in the work of any of the three offices of Christ, *we engage the world with Christ!*

Until recently, many biblical scholars have called into question point two above. They have viewed the royal ideology expressed in the Scriptures, and especially in the royal psalms, to be an idolatrous move away from God's economy. However, once the texts are rightly understood, there is little justification to these claims. Rather, already in the biblical period the royal materials, particularly the royal psalms, went through a process of democratization so that the entire community might participate in this essential office.

All of this lends strong support to the suggestion made at the beginning of this article that the PC (USA) return to its

deep biblical theology in its ordination services. For bearing rule in Christ's church means not only discipline, but care and concern for matters of justice and healing. If we can step up to God's invitation, we will, as a church, provide a radical and compelling alternative to the materialistic and power-laden anarchy of our times.

Christ is our King. We are given the privilege of bearing rule with him. May we embrace and fulfill this awesome privilege and call.

¹*The Book of Common Worship Approved by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Office of the General Assembly, 1946) 229-30.

²See D-1.102 "The power that Jesus Christ vested in his Church, a power manifested in the exercise of church discipline, is one for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing. It should be exercised as a dispensation of mercy and not of wrath so that the great ends of the Church may be achieved, that all children of God may be presented faultless in the day of Christ. Ó

³See John Frederick Jansen, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Work of Christ* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1956) 36ff.

⁴John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed., John T. McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1.494.

⁵See the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) question 31, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) paragraph 43, and the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) question 23.

⁶*Institutes*, 1.502.

⁷Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics* (trans. by Darrell L. Guder; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 2.174.

⁸Andrew Purves, "The Ministry of the Priesthood of Jesus Christ: A Reformed View of the Atonement of Christ," *Theology Matters*, Vol. 3, No. 4, Jul/Aug 1997.

⁹For Psalm 2 see Acts 4:25-26, and 13:11, Hebrews 1:5a, and 5:5; for Psalm 18 see Romans 15:9; for Psalm 45 see Hebrews 1:8-9; for Psalm 110 see Matthew 22:44, Luke 20:42-43, and Acts 2:34-35.

¹⁰All scriptures are provided with the author's own translation.

¹¹*Institutes*, 1.499-501.

¹²W.M.L. de Wette, *Commentar über die Psalmen* (Heidelberg: J.C.B. Mohr, 1811) 4-8.

¹³H. Gunkel, "Königpsalmen," *Preussische Järbucher* 158 (1914) 42-68.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵G.E. Mendenhall, "The Monarchy," *Int* 29 (1975) 166. See also *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973) 195f. See also A. Alts' earlier treatment, "The Monarchy in the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah," *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989) 241-259.

¹⁶The depth and consequences for Yahweh religion of the change represented by the kingship theology sketched out here can hardly be overestimated. *Here a theology invaded the official religion of Israel, with all the backing of state support, which not only had completely different roots but also ran quite counter to what had constituted Yahweh religion from its beginnings....* The theology propagated by the court theologians attempted to make the king a comprehensive guarantor of salvation for Israel. According to its understanding, the king of Israel mediated not only Yahweh's political and historical action in the world of nations and his action of blessing in nature and society, but also his proximity in worship; in other words, in this view all the essential aspects of the relationship between the wider group and God, creaturely, political and cultic, run through the king and find their unity in his person. But what would then become of the immediate relationship between Yahweh and Israel which had grown up in history before the formation of the state? *Originally the kingship theology was completely alien to this history* (italics mine). R. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period* (OTL; 2 vols.; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 1.121-22.

¹⁷P.D. Hanson, *Dynamic Transcendence: The Correlation of Confessional Heritage and Contemporary Experience in a Biblical Model of Divine Activity* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row,

1986) 102f. See also J.D. Levenson's lengthy critique of the polarization of the Mosaic and Davidic covenants in *Sinai & Zion: An Entry Into the Jewish Bible* (New Voices in Biblical Studies; New York: Winston, 1985) 99-101.

¹⁸W. Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 104f, and *To Pluck Up and To Tear Down* (International Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 5-7. For a more balanced assessment see "The Epistemological Crisis of Israel's Two Histories (Jer 9:22-23)," *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (ed. P.D. Miller, Jr.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 270-295, and "Duty as Delight and Desire" (Preaching Obedience That Is Not Legalism), *Journal for Preachers* 18.1 (1994) 3.

¹⁹J.M. Roberts, "In Defense of the Monarchy," *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (eds. P.D. Miller, Jr., P.D. Hanson, and S.D. McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 377-378.

²⁰See J.J.M. Roberts, "The Old Testament's Contribution to Messianic Expectations," *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (eds. J.H. Charlesworth, J. Brownson, M.T. Davis, S.J. Kraftchick, and A.F. Segal; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 2-51.

²¹See Scott R.A. Starbuck, *And What Had Kings? The Reappropriation of Court Oracles Among the Royal Psalms of the Hebrew Psalter* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1996).

efforts at Christian education curriculum are entertaining and engaging but eclectic, theologically unsystematic and

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unfocused. More than once I have desired to come up with a way that would pass on the faith in a manner that was focused,

by Stephen Eyre

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We are preparing to celebrate the 145th anniversary of our church. Our theme for the event comes from Psalm 145, "One generation will commend your works to another . . . they will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty. . . ."

Passing on the faith from generation to generation has been an essential dynamic of the Judeo-Christian heritage for 4,000 years. The Passover celebration begins when a child asks "What do these things mean?" This question then opens up the annual re-telling of the story of the salvation of Israel in order to nurture the renewal of faith for the young through the centuries.

For some 70 generations the Christian church has been doing just that, passing on the faith, from convert to convert and from generation to generation. As in Israel, so in the church, some generations have done a better job than others of passing on the faith

As we approach the end of the second millennium of the Christian era, I wonder how well we are doing passing on the faith? From reviewing curriculum for children and youth every couple of years with Christian education committees, I know that there is great thought, work and money put into the effort of passing on the faith. From denominational groups and inter-denominational groups, there is a multitude of material published with outstanding quality: wonderful graphics and multi-colored layouts. The curriculums today use the hands-on, learner-involved methods. The materials provide well developed teacher helps that make the publications easy to prepare and easy to use.

But the whole effort seems to me to be missing something. I seldom see a graduate of the Sunday School, Vacation Bible School system that has a grasp of the essential doctrines of the Reformed faith. Most current

systematic and clear. Historically the Reformed faith has developed the catechism for just such a purpose. Both the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Shorter Catechism were developed to provide a means of instructing the young within the church. And yet as I have explored introducing catechisms into Christian education programs, I have come up against the twin barriers of archaic language and an educational tool that was developed in another historical/cultural context. The Heidelberg Catechism was written in Germany in the sixteenth century while the Shorter Catechism was written in seventeenth century England. Even motivated theological students have trouble bridging those barriers! How can I expect young children to make it past such challenges!

I was glad to learn that a new children's catechism was being developed entitled, The First Catechism, and I was eager to get my hands on it. I was a primed and eager consumer.

On first glance, I looked to see how concise the questions and answers were. This is important because our children, shaped by the TV, are not eager to do extensive memory work. Then I looked to see how long the entire catechism was. Too many questions would no doubt be a turn off, as well. I was pleased to see that both questions and

answers were indeed concise and to the point. The length was promising. There are 56 questions and answers. In contrast the Heidelberg Catechism has 129 and the Shorter Catechism has 107.

Next I noticed its user friendly approach. It takes a personal and direct approach from the very first question: Q.1 “Who are you?” with the answer, “I am a child of God.”

Then I looked through it to see if the classic essentials of a catechism were there: the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer. Both were. I noticed that the Apostles’ Creed was not, although that wasn’t necessarily a problem. The Heidelberg Catechism does include the Apostles’ Creed and the Shorter Catechism does not.

Next I read through the catechism looking for tone and overall structure. It impressed me as being highly relational. While the first two questions articulate what it means to be a child of God, the third question affirms the essential role of grace in a relationship with God. Q. 3 “Do you have to be good for God to love you?” A. “No, God loves me in spite of all I do wrong. God’s love is a free gift that I do not deserve and cannot earn.” The emphasis on the priority of relationship is continued in the way sin is defined, in Q. 10 “What is sin?” A. “Sin is separation from God, because we have closed our hearts to God.”

On through the definition of the church, the sacraments and prayer, there is a warm comforting undertone of God’s loving care. The very last question wraps up grace, care and love with a resounding conclusion. Q. 56 “Why does our prayer end with ‘Amen’?” A. “‘Amen’ means ‘so be it’ or ‘let it be so.’ It expresses our complete confidence in God, who makes no promise that will not be kept and whose love endures forever.” Such a theme of relational warmth in a theological document strikes a cord with me. I love the first Q. and A. in the Heidelberg Catechism and seldom can read it without misty eyes. Q. 1 “What is my only comfort in life and in death?” A. “That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ who at the cost of his own blood . . .” What can be more caring or profound than that?

Next I looked to get perspective on the structure and development of the First Catechism. It begins with a question of personal identity and relationship to God (1-5) and then moves on to God as creator and the creation (6-8).

The next three questions address the definition and consequences of sin (9-11). The next series of questions deal with God’s “helping” work in dealing with sin through Israel including the Ten Commandments and it articulates their covenantal rejection of his help (12-19). The concept of Jesus as Messiah comes next with a look

at his identity, ministry, crucifixion and ascension (20-27).

The catechism then moves to the person and work of the Holy Spirit (28-31), and then follows a section on the church addressing the definition of the church, the gospel, the work of the Spirit, worship and the sacraments (32-41). The final section addresses prayer by means of an expansion of the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer (42-56).

As a whole, in this structure we have an articulation of the system of the Christian faith with an emphasis on the love of God.

While I like the personal and loving tone of the First Catechism, I am troubled by its failure to include a moral dimension as part of that loving, personal relationship. Because of the absence of the moral dimension, it fails to hold together as an internally integrated, consistent system of the classic Reformed understanding of a personal relationship with the graceful holy God.

The Moral Dimension is Absent

The absence of the moral dimension of a personal relationship can be seen in the First Catechism’s definition of sin. Q. 10 “What is sin?” A. “Sin is separation from God, because we have closed our hearts to him.” Certainly separation from God and closing the heart is one dimension of sin. But sin also includes disobedience to the commands of God.

The classic Reformed confessions address this issue immediately. Q. 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism “Where do you learn of your sin and its wretched consequences?” A. “From the Law of God.” Q.14 of the Shorter Catechism defines sin as “. . . any want of conformity unto, or transgression of the law of God.” The biblical concept of sin from Adam and Eve’s disobedience to Revelation’s account of the judgment upon the human race, is that closing of the heart and disobedience to the laws of God are part and parcel of the same dynamic and cannot be separated from each other.

The loss of the moral dimension of sin in the First Catechism can be seen in the way the 10 Commandments are handled. The Shorter Catechism includes the preface to the Ten Commandments which the First Catechism does not. Q. 44 of the Shorter Catechism asks, “What does the preface to the Ten Commandments teach us?” A. “The preface to the Ten Commandments teacheth us that because God is the Lord, and our God and Redeemer, therefore we are bound to keep all his commandments.”

While the Ten Commandments are included in the First Catechism, in contrast to the Heidelberg Catechism and the Shorter Catechism, they are glossed over. Both the Heidelberg and the Shorter Catechism give the Commandments and then provide an explanation of each of the Commandments and what keeping each means. The

First Catechism does not. There is no explanation of what the Commandments mean or what they require of us. This places us in a situation in which sin is vaguely defined as “separation from God because we have closed our hearts to him.”

When I compare the way the Lord’s Prayer is handled with the Ten Commandments, I suspect something is askew. Like the Heidelberg and Shorter Catechism, the First Catechism includes an expanded exposition of each petition of the Lord’s Prayer. Why follow the historical tradition with the Lord’s Prayer and not do so with the Commandments?

The absence of the moral dimension of a personal relationship with God can be discerned, as well, in that there are no references to the Word of God; either as a means of revelation or as a standard of human conduct. No where in the First Catechism can I find anything like Shorter Catechism’s Q. 2: “What rule hath God given to direct us in how we may glorify and enjoy him?” A. “The Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only rule to direct us in how we may glorify and enjoy him.” Nor Q. 3 “What do the Scriptures principally teach?” A. “The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.” Nor Q. 39 “What is the duty which God requireth of man?” A. “The duty which God requireth of man is obedience to his revealed will.”

This loss of the moral definition and dimension of sin and absence of a reference to the Scriptures as the Law of God introduces a fog into the catechism. Reading it through the first time or two I had a sense of something missing but I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was. It was when I took a good look at the definition of sin and what it didn’t say that I understood my discomfort with the whole document.

Role of Jesus Christ is Unclear

I am especially concerned about what the fog of this catechism does to the role of Jesus Christ in the lives of our children. The saving work of Christ and the daily benefits of living the Christian life become ambiguous. This is seen in the First Catechism’s handling of the work of Christ. Q. 25 “How did Christ prove to be our Savior?” A. “He sacrificed his life for us by dying on the cross. He showed his victory over death by rising from the dead. He removed our guilt and gave us new and unending life with God.” What is wrong with this? Doesn’t it say that he died for us and removes our guilt? Yes, but that is not enough. No where in this statement is there a reference, explicit or implicit, to atonement for sin. Christ died to pay for our disobedience to God, which includes both breaking his commands and closing our hearts to him. The atonement is a central doctrine of the Christian faith. However, it vanishes into the fog because of the inadequate exposition of sin that permeates the entire document. There is nothing like Q. 40 of the Heidelberg

Catechism in the First Catechism, Q. “Why did Christ have to suffer “death?” A. “Because the righteousness and truth of God are such that nothing else could make reparation for sins except the death of the Son of God.”

I’m all for our children understanding the wonderful grace of God. But before we can understand grace we need to know something about sin. If we alter the concept of sin, we alter the concept of the savior, as well as, the entire redemptive theme of the Scriptures.

Looking at the First Catechism as a system, it gets off on the wrong foot from the very first question. Again, Question 1 is “Who are you?” with the answer, “I am a child of God.” It does sound warm and affirming. But this beginning will not lead us to a biblical or Reformed understanding of the faith. Our fundamental identity, from a biblical perspective, is that we are made in the image of God with the privilege of becoming children of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

When we start the way the First Catechism does, we obscure the distinction between generation and regeneration. I am not naturally born into the family of God. I am not naturally a child of God. I cannot naturally call God my Father. I am born from above, born supernaturally, reborn, beyond sin and the judgment of God, into the new reality of the eternal family of God only when I believe in Jesus Christ.

The First Catechism’s lack of clarity on sin naturally leads to the loss of a Reformed doctrine of adoption: it implies that either we are naturally born into the family of God or that we are regenerated through baptism. Both are wrong. Certainly we want our children to feel cared for by God and to know that they belong to him. But we are doing them a disservice if we do not help them to understand that embracing the benefits offered to them in baptism can only come to them as they repent from sin (which includes disobedience to God’s Law) and express a personal faith in Jesus Christ as their savior.

Conclusion: First Catechism Inadequate

It is important that we develop a contemporary tool that helps us pass on the Christian faith and the Reformed faith from generation to generation. The First Catechism is not it. The user friendly approach of concise answers, a limited number of questions and an emphasis on the love of God don’t make up for its deficiencies. The First Catechism articulates a biblically defective understanding of sin. It makes no reference to Word of God as a guide to conduct, (or revelation for that matter). There is no need for repentance unto life. There is nothing about regeneration. There is no need for a doctrine of adoption, or justification or sanctification.

The amount of biblical and theological content in a first catechism must be carefully limited so as not to overwhelm our children. But there must be clarity about

the Christian faith and what is required of our children to believe and to obey. Even if such doctrines as repentance, justification, sanctification and effectually calling aren't spelled out in a First Catechism, the catechism needs to be written in such a way that they are implicit and will make sense when the children are old enough to understand them. The way the catechism is now written, I don't think that will ever happen.

What is there about this First Catechism that prepares children for a biblically-faithful and Reformed understanding of the Christian faith? What is there about the First Catechism that will allow us to pass on the biblical faith of the church from generation to generation? Regretfully I must say there was nothing I could find.

*Editors note: The Special Committee to write a New Presbyterian Catechism was created by the approval of Overture 94-26 presented to the 206th General Assembly in 1994. The Committee was appointed by Robert Bohl, Moderator of the GA. The Catechism will be brought to the 210th GA in 1998 which may recommend that it be included in the *Book on Confessions* or used as a church study document. Copies of the Catechism can be found on the Presbyterian Church (USA) web site: www.pcusa.org or by writing PCUSA, 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, KY 40202.

The Special Committee to write a New Presbyterian Catechism will also bring a youth/adult catechism to the 210th General Assembly for their action. The final draft of this is scheduled to be completed by February 1 and should also be available on the internet.

Renewal in the Mainline Churches

by Susan A. Cyre

There is the hint of desperation in the air among some evangelicals in the Presbyterian Church. Since the General Assembly approved that Amendment A be sent to the presbyteries, there has been a wringing of hands over the future of the church. In spite of a majority of the presbyteries approving "Amendment B" that is now part of the Constitution and sets the standard of chastity in singleness and fidelity in marriage for ordination; in spite of many of the liberal staff leaving their posts at denominational headquarters; in spite of the last General Assembly's passing a resolution condemning partial birth abortions; in spite of the many "successes" for biblical Christian faith, many pastors and lay people feel a weariness at the battle and a desire for it all to be over. . . soon.

It's time to pause and reflect. As the book of 1 John admonishes us, it is time for us to "test the spirits" that are

filling us with weariness. It's time for us to reflect on how we have gone about the work of renewal in the church.

The Paradigm for Renewal is the Plumbline

In the past, the argument can be made, that our strategy for renewal has been the seeking of fairness and justice. The assumption was that leadership in the church should be modeled after a table where all the various ideological positions are represented. Evangelicals were willing to concede that process theology, liberation theology, feminist theology, and the others, got a place at the table. Based on fairness and justice, however, biblical theology also deserved a place at the table. The strategy was that the orthodox "deserve" a place at the table; it's only "fair" that the biblical position be represented.

The goal was to negotiate and argue for fairness until the biblical position received at least one place at the table. The long term strategy was that having negotiated one place, we would then set about negotiating a second place and a third until we had the number needed to usher in renewal.

Many of the representation requirements for national denominational committees were based on this fairness principle. While the objective of providing for representation of geographical, gender and other concerns was a legitimate goal, many of the groups chosen for balance came to the table representing their own theology.

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In the language of today's radical theologies—they came to give voice to their own experience of the divine. For example, some writers argue that radical feminism became entrenched in mainline denominations as a direct result of representation quotas. Women who supported radical feminist ideology were selected for leadership to fill representation quotas.

The language of the table paradigm is "consensus decision making," "common ground," and "win-win outcomes." Efforts are made to reach decisions which reflect everyone's perspective of truth around the table. The 1994 General Assembly's Response to the Re-Imagining conference used this table model where every view of the truth was affirmed. Its response affirmed that

“conference presentations and rituals used language, including the term ‘sophia,’ in ways that imply worship of a divine manifestation distinctly different from ‘the one true God.’” Then, in a win-win style, they also affirmed the conference saying, “some found the use of ‘sophia’ as a name for God to be liberating.”

The paradigm of fairness and justice is especially suited to our American democratic model of government. It feels friendly and fair. However, what began in the church as a fairness movement, soon showed its inherent faults. Do principles of fairness mean that sophia is welcomed to the table? The Re-Imagining conference made it clear that there are a significant number of people in ordained and staff leadership who do not accept basic doctrines of the Christian faith: a monotheistic God, the Trinity, the fully-divine and fully-human Jesus, the authority of Scripture. Does everyone get a place at the table? Or are there boundaries and exclusionary principles which the church must recognize?

The table model is the wrong model for the church. It is based on postmodern assumptions about the nature of truth. The table, which is said to represent truth, is composed of everyone’s particular assumptions about truth. There is no absolute, divinely revealed truth. There is only a smorgasbord of personal perspectives about truth. No one theoretically can be excluded from the table. No one’s view can be judged right or wrong. Everyone must be welcomed at the table, according to postmodernism.

We are beginning to suspect something is wrong with the model of a table. Biblical truth, because of its exclusionary claims which reject opposing truth claims, is itself being denied a place at the table. You cannot have a harmonious, equally affirming table, when one person’s truth claims put all the rest under condemnation.

The paradigm for renewal in the church cannot be the table of relativism. The biblical model is the plumbline. God sets a standard and all are measured against it. It is an absolute measurement of Truth against falsehood. Every individual heart, every action, and every doctrine and teaching is judged by the same plumbline. The standard for the PCUSA is Scripture and the biblical truths expressed in our confessions.

If the language of the table is “win-win” outcomes, the language of the plumbline is “parliamentary procedure” where opposing truth claims are held up to the plumbline through the debate process. Then the vote is taken and if the process truly seeks to conform to the plumbline, truth—even given our propensity to sin—is likely to win and falsehood to lose.

A faithful church calls all of its members to live by the standard. The church must call those who fall short of the plumbline to repentance and if they refuse, the church must exercise discipline. A house whose walls are not straight as measured by the plumbline will not stand. The

crooked must be made straight. The Westminster Confession says, “Church censures are necessary for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren; for deterring of others from like offenses; for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump; for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel; and for preventing the wrath of God, which must justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.”

A Scriptural View of The Nature of Evil

In the midst of people’s weariness at the battle, there is often a desire to leave the “apostate” PCUSA and form a holier alliance elsewhere. But consider, first, the institution of the PCUSA is not apostate—our confessions, which are part of our Constitution, attest to the biblical Gospel. It is a few individuals in leadership who have sometimes fallen away from the Gospel. There are many people both in denominational headquarters and in congregations who are faithful servants of Jesus Christ as he is attested to by Scripture. True, there are some cracks in the walls, maybe many cracks in the walls, but the foundation is solid.

Second, to flee from a few sinful individuals who have influence in the denomination, denies the nature of sin and it denies our participation in sin. Evil hates the light for it exposes its evil deeds (John 3:20). As long as there exists one person anywhere, who challenges evil with the Gospel, evil will attempt to silence that voice. If those who reject the ordination of homosexuals as unbiblical, leave the denomination to find peace and piety somewhere else, it will not work. It is an unworkable strategy because of the nature of evil. Evil will seek you out. Oh, there may be 2-3 or 5 years while evil concentrates its efforts elsewhere but you cannot run from evil. In the end, it will find you and the battle will begin again.

Spiritual battles have their parallels in physical battles. In the 1930’s the world was tired from fighting in WWI and wanted only peace. It was willing to compromise and retreat in the path of Hitler. The world soon found, however, that evil would not be satisfied until it destroyed all good and gained the whole world. Evil will not stay within boundaries we establish. Its agenda is to destroy the Gospel wherever it is proclaimed—no place is safe.

The other aspect of sin that we have to acknowledge is our own affinity for it. Like a virus, we carry the germ with us. The holier church will not exist for long before someone’s son or daughter decides that they are homosexual and the desire to vindicate one’s self and one’s family will begin again. Or, as past PCUSA moderator, David Dobler, said in his presentation at the Gathering II in Dallas, when we finally destroy the idol of sexuality, we will latch onto another idol; its our nature.

We are to confront sin with the Gospel and allow the Gospel to transform it. It is our calling as Christians.

We Stand in Need of Repentance

We evangelicals also need to examine our own hearts, if we want to look for reasons why we have not been as successful as we hoped in the struggle.

*** We must see spiritual warfare as the norm, not the exception.**

The spiritual battle has been going on since the Garden of Eden (“I will put enmity between . . . your seed and her seed”) and it will go on until Christ returns and He inaugurates the New Heaven and Earth. This is not a battle which is distracting the church from its *real* ministry. *The battle over truth and falsehood is the real ministry of the church.* Everywhere the church goes, it is to proclaim the truth of the Gospel but it is always against a backdrop of some false beliefs. Whether the church goes to a remote village on some other continent or the mission district of one of our cities or General Assembly meetings, it is always to proclaim the Gospel against the false belief system that is gripping people’s lives. And, people often don’t let go of their false beliefs easily or quickly—Scripture attests to that. Calvin expressed the long-term nature of spiritual warfare when he said, “peace is not the norm, the battle is.”

*** We need to love our neighbor enough to struggle for them**

Dobler told the group in Dallas that we’re like a family whose house is on fire and we can’t leave our sister or brother in the burning house; we have to rescue them. After Dobler’s presentation, one pastor privately asked, “yes, but what if that brother is a pyromaniac, bent on burning the house down?” Yes, indeed, some of the folks in the PCUSA almost seem to have a pyromaniac streak—they are bent on destroying themselves and the church. Yet, isn’t that the nature of sin? Doesn’t it mean death and destruction—to ourselves, our relationships and everything we touch. If Jesus Christ is patient and long-suffering with us, shouldn’t we be with others? Isn’t Jesus Christ the only one who says when enough is enough? Christ is the judge; we are not.

Like Ezekiel, all Christians and especially ordained officers, are charged as watchmen. If we do not call people back, their blood is on our head for we have allowed them to trample the blood of the covenant. And, Ezekiel does not say that we can give our admonition once and shake the dust off our feet. Ezekiel spent his life being a watchmen and so must we.

*** We need to trust God and not just fight “winnable battles.”**

Too often we have fought only “winnable” battles. Our strategies are based on outcomes more than on what it means to give a faithful witness to Jesus Christ. How often have we been silent because in our appraisal of the

situation we concluded that we could not win the day? How often have we been silent because we strategized that if we did not let folks know where we really stood on an issue, we might be more effective later on? Do we compromise the truth, compromise our witness to Jesus Christ in order to do his will more effectively later? Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego knew that that was an unacceptable strategy. Even though they had risen to be governors of Babylon and were certainly in a position to help their fellow Hebrew slaves, they knew they could not do God’s will by bowing their knees to another god.

God delights in taking the weakest people in the most hopeless of situations and bringing the victory. Imagine a poor shepherd telling the Pharaoh of Egypt to free the Hebrew people. Imagine a young shepherd boy telling a Giant, “You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts.” Imagine Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in fifty-two days. Imagine a child born in a stable that redeemed the world.

We should be more concerned about being faithful to our calling and less concerned about winnable outcomes. Our calling is to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ, the outcomes are his.

*** We need to give a consistent witness to Jesus Christ**

How can we say that the issue of homosexual ordination is an issue of upholding the Gospel when we are silent on abortion? How can we deny that people can have sexual relations with whomever they want, or worship sophia if they want, acts which to a non-believer appear benign, and then be silent when a women kills her own child in abortion. Where is the outrage in the evangelical community over abortion? Why have we allowed our mandatory health and pension dues to pay for abortions during all nine months of pregnancy for any reason including sex selection.

Either human beings are autonomous and free to make their own choices to worship whom they want, have sexual relations with whom they want, and kill their unborn child if they want, or, we belong to God and every area of our lives must conform to his will. Either we are not our own or we are—we cannot have it both ways. We cannot pick and choose our issues according to what is popular or winnable. We must stand up for the whole Gospel wherever it is attacked or denied.

*** We must be concerned to vindicate the name of Christ.**

When we entertain talk of splitting the church and dividing the assets, we have a mistaken view of the church. The church has a responsibility to vindicate the honor of Christ. That admonition should not be taken lightly by us. If we try to leave the church and form a holier church, we leave those who deny the Gospel free rein to trample the name of Christ. If the issues we are facing in the church are not issues that deny the Gospel

then we should in fairness respect one another's personal preferences. If the issues, however, are an attack on the name and work of Jesus Christ, then how dare we walk away in silence to let the false gospel be proclaimed in the name of the "PCUSA: the church of Jesus Christ." Do we care so little about the honor of that sacred name?

*** We must give God thanks for all his blessings.**

We must be careful to see the victories that God has won and give him the praise and thanksgiving. When we despair, we are not giving God his honor. We are worshiping other gods. The Book of Confessions lists "despair" as a violation of the first commandment: to have no other gods. Loving and serving the true God means that we simply are not in the business of despairing. Also listed as sins under the first commandment are: carnal security, tempting of God (setting time limits on renewal), and discontent and impatience at his dispensations.

Honoring the living God, means we are able to see the small and great victories he brings. It means we wait patiently under his dispensations and do not despair. Have we given thanks for the passage of Amendment B?

If we are his church, then as faithless as *some people* are at times, we are in covenant relationship with God and with his people. And, we cannot walk away from that anymore than we can walk away from a troubled marriage. It is not that we have blinders on to the troubled situation we face, but rather we have unyielding hope in the one who is head of the Church and Lord of all creation. And, we cannot tempt God by imposing our time limit on restoration. God is God. His timing is perfect. We need to humble ourselves, willingly and obediently wage the battle for the Gospel, and rest in God's power.

God is doing a great work in our denomination. God has called us to be on the front line of a battle that is raging not only in our denomination but in the world. He called us to be on the front line not to destroy us but to edify us; not to shame us but to purify us; not to hurt us but to glorify us. We should not shrink from our calling. We should see these days as a privilege in which the world might come to see our devotion to the living God.

of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him" (Book of Order G-2.0200). This implies that a hierarchy of authority governs the life of Presbyterians.

Study of the Confessions

Study 2: The Authority of the Confessions

by Rev. Theresa Ip Froehlich

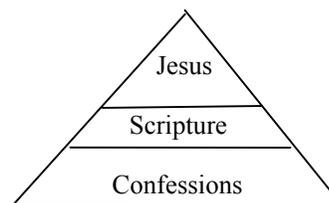
People are faced daily with life decisions that require them to make choices based on the sources of authority operative in their decision-making framework. For instance, a teenager pregnant out of wedlock makes choices about the baby by asking these questions: What will my parents think (parental authority)? How do my girlfriends handle their crisis pregnancies (peer authority)? Is abortion a socially acceptable option (cultural authority)? What does the Bible say about my responsibility to and for this new life (scriptural authority)?

The final decision made by this teenager reflects her prioritizing of these various sources of authority. The source of authority with the highest priority wins and determines which option—abortion, adoption or keep the baby—she chooses. We all function with a hierarchy of authority that governs our life choices.

By the same token, the church of Jesus Christ makes its decisions and directs its action according to its source of authority. In the Presbyterian Church (USA), its members acknowledge three sources of authority, namely Jesus Christ, Scripture, and the Confessions. "These confessional statements are subordinate standards in the church subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word

Hierarchy of Authority

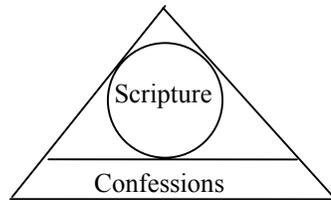
At first glance, this *Book of Order* provision appears to suggest a hierarchy of authority which might look like this:



This understanding of the hierarchy presents a few problems. First, it dissociates the authority of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, from the authority of Scripture, the Written Word of God, thus creating a false dichotomy between the two sources of authority. Second, it subtly suggests that Scripture is a lesser source of authority than the person of Jesus Christ and implicitly denies the fact that Scripture is indeed the very Word of

God (2 Timothy 3:16). Third, it minimizes the authority of the confessional statements since Scripture is presumed to be void of divine origin.

Technically, the Bible is *norma normans* and the Confessions are *norma normata*. While both norms are authoritative, the Confessions carry derivative authority because they are derived from Scripture which has innate authority as the very Word of God. The following diagram more closely represents the hierarchy of authority that the Reformed tradition espouses:



The triangle represents the trinitarian God who has revealed himself as Father, Son and Spirit through the body of Scripture which provides humans with a window into God who, apart from self-revelation, is not knowable by humans. In developing Reformed theology, the Reformers began with Scripture as the starting point and ended with Scripture as the final authority, thus the Reformed tenet of *sola scriptura*. Scripture is the written revelation that reveals the Revealer Jesus Christ. The Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, and the Inscripturated Word, the canonical Scripture, are in agreement, rather than in argument, with each other.

The principle of *sola scriptura* is preserved when the Confessions and Scripture are identical in doctrinal content. As subordinate standards, the Confessions summarize Scripture; they also affirm and testify to Scripture. The Confessions are judged by Scripture and their authority depends on whether or not they are in agreement with Scripture.

Common Misunderstandings

The church embraces the Confessions as authoritative standards only to the extent that it accepts the authority of Scripture as final. A church will minimize or disregard the authority of the Confessions when it is skeptical of the final authority of Scripture or when it pits the authority of Jesus Christ against the authority of Scripture. As a result, our view of the relationship between Jesus Christ (the Incarnate Word) and Scripture (the Written Word) determines our view of confessional authority. Throughout the centuries, professing Christians have fallen victims of several common misunderstandings regarding the relationship between Jesus Christ and Scripture.

First, some Christians believe that Jesus Christ, (the one Revealed in Scripture) and Scripture (the Revelation of Jesus Christ) are in competition, sometimes even in contradiction, with each other. For instance, in a report presented to the 177th General Assembly (1965), the drafting committee of the 1967 Confession included the following statement:

This section [on the Bible] is an intended revision of the Westminster doctrine, which rested primarily on a view of inspiration that equated the Biblical canon directly with the Word of God. By contrast, the preeminent and primary meaning of the Word of God in the Confession of 1967 is the Word of God incarnate. The function of the Bible is to be the instrument of the revelation of the Word in the living church.

Second, some teach that faith in Jesus Christ can be realized apart from faith in his words, faith in Scripture, and faith in a particular doctrine taught in Scripture. Using the words in John 20:31, “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” The apostle John clearly states that Scripture has been written for the express purpose of accomplishing personal faith in Jesus Christ. One cannot profess a subjective faith in the person of Jesus Christ without simultaneously embracing the doctrinal truth about Jesus Christ revealed in Scripture.

Third, a common yet unspoken belief in the modern American church is that one can profess faith in the person of Jesus Christ without rejecting teachings and religions that contradict the Christological truth revealed in Scripture; that one can say “Yes” to Jesus Christ without saying “No” to other false saviors and false lords. This is a universalist mindset that believes all religions are equally valid pathways to God.

In Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples two key questions: “Who do people say the Son of Man is” and “Who do you say I am” (Matthew 16:13-20). The history of religion in the region boasts of allegiance to Baal in the Old Testament times, veneration of Pan and nymphs during the Greek era, and emperor worship during the Roman era. Today a Muslim shrine stands tall on the cliff. Against the background of multiculturalism and against the backdrop of vast and varied religious traditions, the Lord Jesus called on his twelve apostles to express their conviction about his Messiahship and to declare their personal and exclusive loyalty to him.

The disciples confessed their personal (subjective) faith in Jesus as the Christ not only because of their personal (subjective) experience with him in flesh and blood, but also because they recognized him as the Messianic fulfillment of Scripture, the objective standard that governed their subjective experience of faith. Their confessional statement is a credible and trustworthy statement because the Christ they confessed matches the Christ of the Hebrew Scripture. This once again points to the finality of scriptural authority. This also confirms that the Confessions are authoritative when the Christ of the Confessional statements matches the Christ of the Scripture.

Jesus’ View of Scripture

Since the confessional statements derive their authority from Scripture and Jesus Christ is the Person revealed in and by Scripture, it would be instructive to study Jesus' attitude toward Scripture.

First, Jesus regarded Scripture as authoritative for his own life. In his encounter with the tempter (Matthew 4:1-11), Jesus answered each of Satan's seductions with "It is written." He submitted his actions to the authority of Scripture.

Second, Jesus regarded faith in Scripture as an indispensable pathway to personal faith in him. Jesus confronted the Jews with their unbelief in the Hebrew Scripture: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?" (John 5:45-47). In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:31), Jesus regarded Scripture as the sufficient authority for faith.

Third, Jesus regarded himself as the fulfillment of, rather than the replacement of Scripture. Jesus clearly stated: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17-20).

Fourth, Jesus regarded obedience to Scripture as an essential mark of faith. He exposed the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law for breaking the command of God and nullifying the Word of God for the sake of their tradition (Matthew 15:3-6).

Calvin's Teachings

John Calvin, the father of Presbyterian theology, wrote extensively on the final authority of Scripture (*Institutes* Book I), reflecting the same attitude toward Scripture as Jesus. The following is a summary of his teachings:

Scripture is the source and the standard for sound doctrine (Ch. VI.2). Scripture is the self-witness of God (Ch. VI.2; John 5:39), therefore it is the very Word of God (Ch. VII.5). The authenticity and authority of Scriptures do not depend on the approval and acceptance by the church, because "it is utterly vain . . . to pretend that the power of judging Scripture so lies with the church that its certainty depends upon churchly assent" (Ch. VII.2). Scripture is self-authenticated by God the Spirit. ". . . [the] highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it. The prophets and apostles do not boast either of their keenness or of anything that obtains credit for them as they speak; nor do they dwell upon rational proofs. Rather, they bring forward God's holy name. . . . For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's heart before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit" (Ch. VII.4).

The Holy Spirit and Scripture

The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, inspired the writing of Scripture. The same Holy Spirit illumines these words of God to us today so that we may accurately interpret them and personally appropriate them into our lives as a step of personal faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, the Holy Spirit plays an indispensable role in the inspiration process (the writing of Scripture), the interpretation process (the writing of the Confessions), and the appropriation process (the personal coming to faith, 1 Corinthians 12:1-3). However, insofar as the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, the word of the Holy Spirit is the same Word as Scripture.

A common trend in the modern church is to attribute to the Holy Spirit every novel interpretation of Scripture or every cultural adaptation of Christian standards. The result is that the Holy Spirit becomes the convenient rubber-stamp for all novel ideas including those that violate scriptural standards. Calvin warned against this devious use of the Holy Spirit with these words:

" . . . those who, having forsaken Scripture, imagine some way or other of reaching God, ought to be thought of as not so much gripped by error as carried away with frenzy. . . . I should like to know from them what this spirit is by whose inspiration they are borne up so high that they dare despise the Scriptural doctrine. . . . For if they answer that it is the Spirit of Christ, such assurance is utterly ridiculous . . . the apostles of Christ and other believers of the primitive church were illumined by no other Spirit. Yet no one of them thence learned contempt for God's word . . . [Isaiah] teaches that under the reign of Christ the new church will have this true and complete happiness: to be ruled no less by the voice of God than by the Spirit" (Ch. IX.1).

Calvin thus affirms a particular relationship between the Spirit and Scripture. First, there is an inviolable unity between the Holy Spirit and Scripture: the Spirit who inspired the writing of Scripture centuries ago is the same Spirit who illumines Scripture today for us. Second, the Holy Spirit witnesses to, in and through Scripture; but the same Spirit does not witness apart from or above Scripture. ". . . [we] ought zealously to apply ourselves both to read and to hearken to Scripture if indeed we want to receive any gain and benefit from the Spirit of God" (Ch. IX.2; Ch. IX.3). Third, the litmus test of whether or not a teaching originates from the Spirit of Christ is by measuring it against the apostolic teachings as recorded in Scripture (Ch. IX.1).

Conclusion

As believers in Jesus Christ and as members of a confessional church, Presbyterians live according to three sources of authority: Jesus Christ, Scripture, and the Confessions. There is a particular order of priority to these sources but they are not in competition with or in

contradiction with each other. The Reformers began with Scripture and ended with Scripture because they accepted Scripture as the very Word of God, the self-revelation of God. Scripture is self-authenticated and authoritative by virtue of the fact that its author is God. Jesus Christ himself accepted Scripture as authoritative and did not pit his own authority against scriptural authority. Though subordinate to the authority of Scripture, the Confessions are authoritative in as much as the Confessions are in doctrinal agreement with Scripture.

Questions

1. What are the common sources of authority that govern our lives as followers of Jesus Christ? How are these sources prioritized?

The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes eight clergy and two lay people, six women and four men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

2. Think of an important life decision you had to make. What sources of authority governed or guided your decision-making?
3. What is the place of personal experience in the hierarchy of authority?
4. What is the relationship between:
 - (a) Christ and culture;
 - (b) Scriptural authority and cultural authority;
 - (c) Scriptural authority and ecclesiastical authority.
5. Calvin wrote: “[God the Spirit] is the Author of the Scriptures: he cannot vary and differ from himself” (Calvin’s Institutes, Book I, Ch. IX.2). What does this teach about the timelessness of doctrinal truth?

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